
Wheelchair-Accessible Taxicabs

Taxicab service is a useful transportation option to have available. The flexibility of taxis' schedules and routes can facilitate spontaneous trips and allow mobility outside of transit system hours and coverage areas. However, access to taxis is limited for people who use wheelchairs. A **wheelchair-accessible taxi** is a taxi that allows a person who uses a wheelchair to ride as a passenger while sitting in the wheelchair. While some taxis in Massachusetts are wheelchair-accessible, most are not. This brief describes strategies that community organizations and human service agencies in Massachusetts can use to help make wheelchair-accessible taxis available to their consumers.

Background

Some cities and towns have wheelchair-accessible cabs, others have no taxis at all, and some have a few taxis but none that are wheelchair-accessible. Availability varies widely from one town to the next because taxis are largely regulated at the municipal level. Cities and towns can regulate the taxi industry within their borders, such as by limiting the number of cabs allowed to operate, setting pricing structures, or requiring cabs to carry a set level of liability insurance coverage. Municipalities issue medallions, which give the holders the right to operate a taxi. Cities and towns can also adopt regulations or offer incentives around wheelchair-accessible vehicles. For example, in 1991, the City of Boston required that ten percent of all cabs be wheelchair-accessible.¹ Since 1994, the

City of Cambridge has issued a total of eight wheelchair-accessible taxi medallions to local companies that agree to provide accessible service 24/7.

Availability of wheelchair-accessible cabs depends not just on the policy but also on the implementation. Enforcement of regulations can be challenging. Cab companies may not send their wheelchair-accessible vehicles onto the streets, or may find it more profitable to wait at the airport for nondisabled travelers who like to use these larger vehicles for their suitcases. While using wheelchair-accessible vehicles for nondisabled trips is a good strategy for efficiency when no customers with wheelchairs are requesting cabs, these vehicles need to be available for riders with wheelchairs when they need them or else the vehicles are not serving their purpose.

Although regulation of taxis falls largely within the scope of municipalities, the federal Americans with Disabilities Act

¹ National Council on Disability. *The Current State of Transportation for People with Disabilities in the United States*. June 13, 2005.

www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/current_state.htm

(ADA) does address taxi service for people with disabilities. The ADA prohibits discrimination in taxi service. Thus, if a person with a disability can ride in a taxi, the taxi driver cannot refuse service because of the disability. If a rider who uses a wheelchair is able to transfer from the wheelchair to the vehicle, the driver cannot refuse service and must help store the wheelchair in the trunk or backseat if requested. Taxi drivers cannot increase the fare for people with disabilities or refuse to transport service animals.

Vehicle Characteristics

What makes a vehicle accessible to a rider varies by passenger, but federal standards dictate what counts as accessible under the ADA. The ADA does not require taxi companies to purchase wheelchair-accessible sedan-type vehicles. If a taxi company is purchasing a van seating fewer than eight people including the driver, then the ADA requires the van to be accessible unless the company is already providing equivalent service to riders who need wheelchair-accessible vehicles. To qualify as ADA-accessible, vans must adhere to the guidelines developed by the United States Access Board and promulgated by the U.S. Department of Transportation. For example, vehicles that are 22 feet long or less must have at least 56 inches of overhead clearance.² When purchasing a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, an organization should ensure that it meets ADA standards.

² Easter Seals Project Action and the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association. *The Americans with Disabilities Act and You: Frequently Asked Questions about Taxicab Service*. August 2007. Download from www.projectaction.org

Riders in wheelchairs enter the vehicle through the side in some models and through the rear in others. Most wheelchair-accessible taxis are created by converting vehicles that were not originally built to be wheelchair-accessible. An exception is the MV-1, which was specifically designed to be wheelchair-accessible as soon as it rolls out of the factory.

Besides wheelchair ramps or lifts and securements, additional accessibility features can help ensure that all riders have a successful experience. For example, New York City has explored software to make fareboxes and credit card payment systems accessible to riders with visual impairments.³

Barriers and Challenges

Municipalities have implemented regulations and incentives around wheelchair-accessible vehicles because cab companies have generally not independently chosen to provide this service. According to the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Foundation, wheelchair-accessible service incurs additional costs over standard service, causing taxi companies to be reluctant to provide it without government intervention.⁴ For example, the vehicles themselves cost more than standard sedans and often have lower gas mileage, and insurance companies may charge higher rates to cover these vehicles. Some companies have found or believe trip length to be shorter for wheelchair-accessible trips, which would lead to

³ For example, see www.lighthouse.org/news/press-releases/vacca

⁴ Christie et. al. *Assessing the Full Cost of Implementing an Accessible Taxicab Program*. March 1, 2010. www.tlpa.org/costcalculator/report.pdf

lower revenues and tips for drivers. Because of these real or perceived⁵ costs, many taxicab companies have chosen not to invest in wheelchair-accessible vehicles without incentives.

The power of incentives varies by the structure of the taxicab company. Companies whose drivers are employees have more control over their employees' workloads and can implement incentives more easily than companies that hire drivers as independent contractors.⁶ Incentives that benefit taxi companies will be successful if the taxi company is able to pass those incentives along to the individual drivers who make the final decisions about whether to pick up riders who use wheelchairs.⁷

What Community Organizations and Human Service Agencies Can Do

Community organizations and human service agencies can take action to help make wheelchair-accessible taxicabs available and to ensure that taxi service is affordable for consumers.

Making Wheelchair-Accessible Taxis Available

While taxi companies and municipal governments have the most power to make accessible cabs available, community organizations and human service agencies can be a partner in this effort. Following are some strategies that

you can consider implementing to help your consumers access wheelchair-accessible taxis.

1. Partner with municipal leaders

Cambridge is a leader among municipalities in terms of providing wheelchair-accessible taxis. The city licenses 256 cabs, of which eight are wheelchair-accessible. Cambridge started with four cabs but found four to be insufficient. Originally, the city offered taxi companies a free medallion for a wheelchair-accessible vehicle if the company paid to convert one of its existing vehicles. However, no taxi companies participated, so instead Cambridge allowed companies to apply for a medallion to operate a wheelchair-accessible taxi and awarded four medallions. Residents called the taxi company directly to request the wheelchair-accessible vehicle. However, Cambridge soon realized that riders could more easily get a taxi if they only had to call one number. Consequently, Cambridge issued an RFP for joint dispatch and awarded the contract to one cab company that fields all calls about wheelchair-accessible taxi rides and communicates with the other companies to assign drivers.

The Cambridge Commission for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD) and the Council on Aging (COA) co-administer the Accessible Cambridge Taxicab Program. In addition, CCPD works closely with the Cambridge License Commission, which is the office that regulates all taxis for the city. For example, CCPD staff attends the License Commission's monthly meetings with taxi industry representatives. As part of the License Commission's taxi school for new taxi drivers, CCPD and the COA jointly present a ninety-minute training on

⁵ For a brief critique, see Koffman. *Local Practices in Developing Coordination Partnerships with Taxicab Companies*. NCHRP, Research Results Digest 366. onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/nchrp/nchrp_rrd_366.pdf

⁶ Christie et. al., *Assessing*

⁷ National Council on Disability, *The Current State*

customer service for seniors and people with disabilities. When taxi companies purchase new accessible vehicles, the License Commission refers them to CCPD for inspection to ensure that the vehicles meet ADA standards. If riders with disabilities have complaints about taxi rides, they call CCPD, and CCPD staff refers the complaint to the License Commission for investigation and discipline if appropriate.

2. Partner with your transit authority

In 2008, the Cape Cod Commission developed the Coordinated Human Service Transportation Plan for Cape Cod. One of the needs that the plan identified was accessible taxi services, as no wheelchair-accessible cabs served Cape Cod. The only options available were ambulances and chair cars, both of which are extremely expensive. Based on this information, the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA) applied to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for funding to provide wheelchair-accessible vehicles to transportation providers.

The FTA awarded New Freedom funds to CCRTA, which CCRTA used to purchase seven wheelchair-accessible Dodge minivans. CCRTA reached out to the transportation providers they already contracted with, but the taxi providers declined to participate, saying the liability would be too high. Instead, three transportation companies that provide human service trips for CCRTA worked with CCRTA to develop the program. Of those, only one had the resources and capacity to meet the contracting requirements: the Habilitation Assistance Corporation (HAC). HAC is a for-profit company based in Southeastern Massachusetts and on Cape Cod that provides day habilitation among other

services, and also provides transportation services under the name Access Express. Access Express was already operating a wheelchair-accessible taxi in Plymouth and had the capacity to manage dispatch and provide service across the Cape.

However, HAC warned CCRTA that operating a taxi service for the entire Cape would be very complicated since the Cape consists of many towns, each of which has the power to regulate taxis and set rates within its borders. HAC noted that riders of its Plymouth taxi service always call for a cab and never hail the vehicles on the streets, and suggested that CCRTA pursue a livery model instead. Livery vehicles provide a similar service to taxis, but are not allowed to accept street hails and are less heavily regulated. CCRTA agreed as long as HAC set rates that were comparable to or cheaper than taxi rates.

The Cape's accessible livery service was launched in November 2012. The service operates seven days a week from 5 AM to 2 AM and can provide accessible transportation on and off the Cape. The program offers Cape Cod residents and visitors with disabilities another mobility option. For example, one rider uses the livery service to go out to lunch after Sunday morning church service, when CCRTA services do not operate. When vehicles are not in service for wheelchair-accessible rides, HAC uses them for human service or paratransit trips.

While the CCRTA model does not use actual taxicabs, Rhode Island provides an example of how a transit authority can partner with transportation providers to offer wheelchair-accessible taxi service. Starting in April 2012, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) used

federal transit funds through the New Freedom program to purchase thirteen vehicles and distribute them to taxi companies around Rhode Island. Unlike the CCRTA approach, RIPTA uses actual taxis that can be hailed from the street or requested by phone.

As transit authorities, both CCRTA and RIPTA were able to get federal transit funding to help pay for their programs. In addition to access to transportation funding streams, transit authorities have an advantage in that they may be able to offer taxi companies an extra incentive to participate. The ADA requires transit agencies to provide accessible origin-to-destination transportation to riders who are unable to use mass transit services due to a disability. Some transit agencies contract with taxis to provide these ADA trips. Transit agencies could contract out these trips to taxi companies that have wheelchair-accessible cabs to provide revenue during times when taxi hails are low.⁸

3. Educate the public and policymakers

Community organizations can play an important role in stressing the importance of wheelchair-accessible taxis to consumers' lives. These organizations can help consumers find opportunities to share this message with policymakers or educate the public about why wheelchair-accessible taxis are an important part of a transportation system. National organizations such as United Spinal and the National Council on Independent Living have promoted this issue in the past. Community organizations can also promote the importance of training drivers on customer service, passenger

sensitivity, and safety for passengers with disabilities.

4. Identify creative solutions

Organizations can work with their consumers and their existing programming to identify and implement creative approaches to meeting the mobility needs of people who use wheelchairs. For example, if a consumer owns and drives a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, that consumer could offer rides by volunteering with a volunteer driver program or through Time Trade Circle, a network of community members who barter services with each other.

Making Taxis Affordable

Wheelchair-accessible taxis are not useful if riders cannot afford to use them. To help seniors and people with disabilities increase their mobility, many communities offer taxi vouchers that give eligible riders a discount on trips. Riders can use these vouchers on any taxi, not just wheelchair-accessible taxis.

Around Massachusetts, Councils on Aging in a number of cities and towns offer taxi vouchers. In addition, a community-based organization in Western Massachusetts runs its own taxi voucher program. The Jewish Federation of the Berkshires serves the needs of the Jewish community in the Berkshires. Recognizing the lack of transportation options for seniors, donors in the Jewish Women's Foundation, which operates under the auspices of the Federation, developed the Jewish Transportation Network. Based on a similar program in New Orleans, the Jewish Transportation Network offers taxi vouchers to seniors age 60 and older who are Jewish or who participate in the Federation's hot meals program. The

⁸ Christie et. al., *Assessing*

Federation has run the program for four years and has developed relationships with two cab companies that accept the vouchers.

Other Issues

As you partner with or advocate to the taxi industry, you may encounter some issues that the industry is currently facing in Massachusetts. Although not directly linked to accessibility, the issues of insurance regulations and ridesharing applications are hot topics and thus may arise in your discussions. Safety concerns also emerge from time to time. This section offers a brief introduction to each issue.

Insurance

A *Boston Globe* investigative series in spring 2013 highlighted the low insurance rates required of taxis by Massachusetts state law.⁹ Cabs must be insured for up to \$20,000 in bodily injury per person, and \$40,000 total per accident. This amount falls far short of costs that can result from serious accidents. Some municipalities have higher requirements, and taxis that operate in those towns carry more extensive coverage. Driver training and regular vehicle inspections can also help prevent accidents.

Ridesharing and Livery Applications

Entrepreneurs have seen an opportunity to use smartphone technology to help people find rides, and new companies such as Hailo, Uber, Lyft, and others are entering the market in cities across the country. Each offers an app that users download to their smartphones and then use to arrange transportation:

- Hailo (hailocab.com) is an app that links users to taxicabs. Users can request a wheelchair-accessible cab. Hailo is currently available in

eleven cities worldwide, including Boston.

- Uber apps (www.uber.com) let users summon livery vehicles; an Uber TAXI option allows users to summon taxicabs. Uber handles the payment, charging riders' credit cards directly. While Uber's pricing scheme is available online, the company increases prices when demand is high. Since Uber does not provide rides but instead matches riders with drivers, the company says it is not subject to regulation as a transportation provider. Some municipal authorities, like the Cambridge License Commission, disagree and have initiated litigation against Uber.
- Lyft (www.lyft.me) is an app that matches riders with locals who have their own cars. The app calculates a suggested donation, but riders can choose to pay more or less. When driving for Lyft, drivers attach pink mustaches to their cars. Lyft does not partner with taxis.

⁹ Globe Spotlight Team. An empire built on ambition and a very hard line. April 1, 2013. *Boston Globe*.

In some cases, the taxi industry has complained that apps that connect riders with drivers outside the taxi system are unfair competition. In addition, some government officials have expressed concern that the lack of regulation could endanger riders or leave riders vulnerable to price gouging.

Safety

Unfortunately, individuals seeking to commit crimes sometimes pose as taxi or livery drivers. If hailing a cab from the street, riders should make sure to use only clearly-marked taxi cabs. If using a livery service, only use a service that you specifically called to your location.

Conclusion

In London, 100 percent of taxicabs are wheelchair-accessible.¹⁰ While Massachusetts is far from that level, local communities can take steps to make more wheelchair-accessible cabs available. Regulation, incentives, pilot programs, partnerships, and voucher programs can all help people with disabilities access taxis – and taxis can help individuals participate in community life.

This is the fourth brief in the Massachusetts Community Transportation Series. This series is released by the MassMobility Project, which is funded by a Federal Transit Administration grant to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services' Human Service Transportation Office.

Reference: Rachel Fichtenbaum. (2013) *Wheelchair-Accessible Taxicabs*. Executive Office of Health and Human Services' Human Service Transportation Office, Quincy, MA.

For additional briefs, resources, and information related to community transportation in Massachusetts, please visit www.mass.gov/hst.



¹⁰ www.the-london-taxi.com/london_taxi_accessibility