

Transportation

A Key to Independence

It's easy to take transportation for granted. A few years ago, I offhandedly complained about my daughter's school program to a friend who taught special education in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and she responded to me that "transportation rules everything in Montgomery County." That was a novel thought for me and I was somewhat surprised since I had lived in the District of Columbia for most of my life where transportation to school was usually by foot or public transit, unless one rode the special education school bus. However, I have come to realize that my friend was right, transportation does rule everything.

In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act (the "ADA") became law. The inability to access to certain services by a person with a disability (as defined by the ADA) is considered discrimination under this law. One of the provisions of the ADA is that public entities that provide fixed route transportation services must also provide complementary paratransit service for individuals unable to use the fixed route system.

Because of some physical disabilities, my daughter uses a motorized wheelchair and does not travel independently—yet. She uses Metro Access, the shared ride, curb to curb paratransit system in the greater Washington, D.C. area. This service is for people with disabilities who can't use

fixed route transportation. We initially decided that my daughter would use Metro Access to travel alone to and from the college campus where she attends school, once she could successfully use a cell phone for emergencies. That hasn't happened for a combination of reasons.

In an effort to promote and improve my daughter's use of the transportation system, she traveled with an assistant for several months (funded by her Medicaid New Directions Waiver). Her assistant came to our house, rode the bus with her to school and returned home with her. Unfortunately, Metro Access was a difficult system to manage even with this arrangement. Her afternoon trips were sometimes more than two hours with Metro Access. If driven by car, even during rush hour, the trip should have only taken about 30 minutes. The drivers sometimes dropped her off on the wrong side of campus, despite having specific instructions to drop her in front of the building she needed to enter. The ride was also uncomfortable because some vans didn't absorb the bumps in the road well and sometimes the vans were too hot or too cold. Plus, it was costly to pay her assistant for this time.

We next came up with a compromise idea for travel. We hired an assistant who met her at the campus and stayed until she safely got onto the bus after classes. We

requested a “subscription” through Metro Access which proved to be more reliable than daily trip requests. A subscription can be requested when a rider is going to (or being picked up from) the same place at the same time every day. We also managed to get to get a dedicated driver assigned to her subscription service, through the help of a friend who is a seasoned Metro Access rider. This worked beautifully, until two weeks later, when Metro Access dropped the driver’s company due to a contract dispute. We were back to square one. However, we decided to continue using Metro Access and it marginally worked with many exceptions including the day when the driver asked my daughter if she minded if he pulled over to take a quick nap! She told him it was ok, and later asked me, “What else could I say?” Many times the trips continued to be late and drivers ignored instructions from my daughter.

Complicating the issue of accessing transportation is the problem of finding cell phones that are accessible to people with physical disabilities. We tried finding cell phones that my daughter could use through voice activation. We tried several, and even a “Blue Tooth” (earpiece), but nothing worked reliably because the technology would not consistently recognize her voice commands. We now have another cell phone that operates using pre-programmed phone numbers by pushing 2-4 large buttons. We attached it to the arm of her wheelchair with Velcro and have trained her to use it. So far it works.

In the mean time we have sent several complaints to Metro Access about the various problems, and received in response free rides for Metro Access—one pass per infraction. Finally, our friend, the seasoned Metro Access customer, suggested that we attend a meeting at the downtown headquarters of the Washington

Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the organization that runs Metro Access. Our friend suggested that we bring up our complaints during the meeting. We did this and actually met several managers who promised to help us resolve the problems we were having. Going to the meeting was a helpful strategy, but has by no means fixed the systemic problems of Metro Access that we and others have experienced. See the *Washington Post* article of June 7, 2007 (*Service for Disabled Is Troubled*, page A01).

Indeed, there are mechanisms available to consumers to address concerns and learn more about the system. There are Customer Service Representatives who will discuss concerns and seek solutions. There is a Customer Bill of Rights. There is a telephone line and email address where complaints can be filed and investigated (although I didn’t receive an investigation of my complaints until I attended the meeting). There are monthly operations performance reports that can be downloaded, and there is the MetroAccess Subcommittee of the Elderly and Disabled Transportation that meets monthly and is open to the public, which I attended and discussed my complaints. And, there are lawsuits.

Our experience with Metro Access has been an eye opener. This experience was frustrating and certainly has not added to my daughter’s sense of independence. She was ignored, disrespected, picked up and delivered late, and treated in general like a second class citizen. Fortunately for her, she had a back up system with our family van, but what about the thousands of others who have no choice but to depend on MetroAccess? Will these types of experiences lead to independence through employment as envisioned by the ADA?

Resources

- **MetroAccess** (except complaints—see below): The main number for anything concerning MetroAccess is 301-562-5360. This includes obtaining an application for services, speaking to a customer service representative, obtaining travel training and making reservations. More information about MetroAccess is available on their web site: www.wmata.com/metroaccess. Click on “accessibility” from the left menu, then click on MetroAccess Paratransit.
- **MetroAccess Subscriptions:** Subscriptions are available for people who have the same trips (identical routes and pick up and delivery times) several days a week. This allows the rider to have the trips booked in advance, without calling in a reservation for each trip.
- **MetroAccess Complaints:** Call 202-637-0128 or email complaints to: csvc@wmata.com
- **MetroAccess Consumer Advocate:** 301-562-4659
- **MetroAccess Subcommittee of the Elderly and Disabled Transportation:** This Advisory Committee meets on the first Monday of every month at 4 p.m. This committee addresses issues that are specifically related to the MetroAccess service. These meetings are open to the public, and time is devoted in each meeting for public comment on any aspect of the service. All are welcome to attend. Unless otherwise specified, meetings are held in the Meeting Room on the ground floor of the Jackson Graham Building, 600 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001.
- **Accessible Cell Phones:** We have had mixed experience with these accessible cell phones. Here is a couple that we have found. This is not an exhaustive list, there are others to explore.
 - www.jitterbug.com
 - www.fireflymobile.com

Nicci Jones and Joan Christopher