

Research Brief

TCRP Report 163: Strategy Guide to Enable and Promote the Use of Fixed-Route Transit by People with Disabilities

ADA Paratransit Eligibility Determinations

The process used to determine eligibility for ADA paratransit services can be used to enable and promote the use of fixed-route transit. The research identified four approaches for doing this.

Emphasize Ability and Travel Options Rather Than Limitations

Develop an eligibility determination process that stresses ability rather than disability. Instead of screening people for eligibility based on functional limitations, focus the process on identifying the abilities of applicants and then assisting them to use most appropriate transit services.

- **Adopt process goals and develop a mission statement that reflect this approach** (e.g., “to identify abilities of applicants to use fixed-route transit services” rather than “to determine if applicants qualify for ADA paratransit service.” Make these new goals known to staff and to the public.
- **Develop public information about the full range of accessible transportation services.** Include information about ADA paratransit as one accessible transportation option.
- **Develop a Transportation Resource Center** and provide information about all travel options available to applicants for ADA paratransit eligibility.



Transportation Service Brochures and Pedestrian Safety Gear at Seattle Metro Transportation Resource Center (Photos courtesy of TranSystems)

- **Call the process a “Transportation Assessment,”** rather than an ADA Paratransit Eligibility Assessment, which better reflects broader goals.
- **Rephrase questions in application forms to emphasize ability** rather than limitations. Instead of starting with “Why can’t you use the bus?” start by asking if they currently use the

bus or have in the past. If no, ask why they don't use the bus. If yes, ask about the conditions that make it possible to use the bus for those trips.

- **Use letters of determination to emphasize abilities** (e.g., "Our determination found that you are able to use fixed-route transit except when the following conditions exist...").

Thorough Determination Processes That Identify When Applicants Can Use Fixed-Route Transit

A growing number of transit agencies are including in-person interviews and functional assessments in the eligibility determination process to better identify when applicants are able to use fixed-route transit services. The research found that processes that rely on paper applications alone are able to make broad determinations of eligibility, but do not provide the detail needed to understand when, and under what conditions, people with disabilities might be able to use fixed-route transit. A survey conducted in 2012 as part of the study found that 48% of agencies surveyed use in-person interviews



Physical Functional Assessment in Pittsburgh, PA (Photo courtesy of ACCESS)

The literature and research suggest that about one in three applicants for ADA paratransit eligibility are able to use fixed-route transit for some of their trips.

and 37% use functional assessments. The more detailed information obtained from interviews and assessments is then used to identify when individuals can use fixed-route transit services. This information is then included in letters of

determination and individuals are encouraged to use fixed-route transit when they are able. Interview and functional assessment costs were found to range from \$50 to \$200, with typical costs running \$100 to \$150 per applicant. Case studies suggest, though, that these costs are more than offset by the benefits of increased travel by fixed-route transit.

Link the Process to Travel Training Programs

Many transit agencies provide information about travel training as part of the eligibility determination process. This is sometimes done by including information about travel training in application packets. Agencies that conduct in-person interviews often discuss travel training services with applicants as appropriate. While travel training cannot be required, and determinations of eligibility must be based on current, not potential, abilities, it is a good practice to ask applicants if they have successfully completed travel training to use fixed-route transit services. If so, the specific trips that they have learned to make can then be identified and made part of the determination. It is also a good practice to use the ADA paratransit eligibility determination process to identify potential to learn to use the fixed-route transit system and to suggest and offer travel training. **TriMet in Portland, OR, and Valley Metro in Phoenix, AZ,**

house their ADA paratransit eligibility determination processes and travel training programs in the same facility. This allows them to more easily get travel training services started for applicants who express an interest in participating in the programs. **Intercity Transit in Olympia, WA**, uses Travel Trainers to conduct functional assessments. In this way, the applicant is introduced to travel training as part of the eligibility determination process

If efforts are made to link travel training and eligibility determination programs, it is important to communicate to potential applicants that participation in travel training will not result in denials of ADA paratransit eligibility. Some transit agencies have noted that applicants can be reluctant to express an interest in travel training, or to even provide information about past travel training, if they have heard that it will impact their eligibility for ADA paratransit services. Public information should stress that travel training is designed to expand travel options, not to limit use of ADA paratransit.

Locating eligibility determinations and travel training in the same facility can benefit both services. Using travel trainers to assist with determinations, particularly for applicants with cognitive disabilities, can also benefit both programs.

Implement Trip Eligibility

Identifying the conditions under which applicants can use fixed-route transit and communicating these in determination letters can, by itself, encourage some to use fixed-route transit when they are able. For riders with little fixed-route transit experience who may not be inclined to begin using these services, it may be necessary to proactively apply conditions of eligibility to trips that are requested or are currently being made. Applying conditions of eligibility to specific trip requests is known as “trip-by-trip eligibility.”



Mobility Specialist at Seattle Metro conducting an on-street review of paths-of-travel and recording the information using a hand-held GPS device.

Responsibility for determining if a particular trip can be made by fixed-route transit rests with the transit agency, not riders. It would not be appropriate to make applicants conditionally eligible, require that they identify the specific trips that they cannot make on fixed-route transit, and limit their eligibility to trips that they identify. Doing this would require individuals to attempt to make trips on the fixed-route transit system without knowing if there are barriers that will cause them to be unable to complete their trips. Instead, transit agencies can review specific trips requested by riders using the conditions of eligibility established for those riders. **Seattle Metro** and the **Port Authority of Allegheny County (ACCESS)** in

Pittsburgh, PA, have developed the most advanced approaches for doing trip-by-trip eligibility. Both agencies use in-person interviews and functional assessments to identify riders who can sometimes use fixed-route transit. After sending letters of determination, both agencies follow-

up with personal telephone calls to explain decisions to applicants granted “conditional eligibility.” Both then review trips requested or made by riders with conditional eligibility. These reviews are conducted outside of the trip reservation and scheduling process. If the reviews, which include on-street assessments of paths-of-travel when needed, indicate that trips can be made by fixed-route transit, riders are contacted in person and provided with information on how the trips can be made by bus or train. ACCESS also offers to have a staff person accompany riders on the first trip. Information indicating that these trips can be made on fixed-route transit is then added to rider records so reservationists and scheduling know this if riders call to request paratransit for these trips in the future (Seattle Metro allows the requests but then follows up with riders to ask why they did not use the bus or train). In Seattle, implementation of trip eligibility enabled 7.5% of trips by conditionally eligible riders to be made on fixed-route transit rather than ADA paratransit by the fourth year of the program. In Pittsburgh, trip eligibility has enabled about 15% of trips by conditionally eligible riders to be made on fixed-route transit rather than on ADA paratransit.

Important Considerations Before Using This Strategy

It is important to ensure that fixed-route transit services are accessible and usable by persons with disabilities before the ADA paratransit eligibility process is used to direct people to these services. If this is not the case, the eligibility process could inappropriately conclude that applicants can use fixed-route transit when, in fact, the services are not really accessible and usable.

Meaningful public involvement is also important before significant changes to eligibility processes are made. The goals and benefits of promoting greater fixed-route transit use through the eligibility process should be discussed and the specific approaches for doing this should be developed with community input.

It would be disingenuous at best to suggest through the eligibility determination process that people with disabilities should be using fixed-route transit services if those services are not truly accessible and usable by riders with disabilities.

Information in this Research Brief was taken from *TCRP Report 163: Strategy Guide to Enable and Promote the Use of Fixed-Route Transit by People with Disabilities*. It presents one of the strategies suggested in the report—using the ADA paratransit eligibility process to promote fixed-route transit use. More information about this, as well as other strategies, is contained in *TCRP Report 163*. Copies of the report are available from TRB at www.trb.org.