Accessible Transportation in Emergencies – Pocket Guide

Essentials & Key Points

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Essentials & Key Points

### Essentials of Maintaining Accessible Transportation:

- Service changes during an emergency for any transportation mode (not just ADA paratransit) affect persons with disabilities and older adults.
- Maintaining transportation access also helps prevent potential social isolation and worsening health outcomes for these populations.
- Organizations with paratransit service have to address eligibility qualifications and processes for service to persons with disabilities.
- Maintaining paratransit services and critical demand responsive services for older adults at levels reflective of normal service profiles helps maintain access and mobility even when fixed-route service is reduced.
- Technology used to adjust seating parameters in vehicles can be useful during some emergencies but should still be able to meet customer demand.
- Scheduling additional bus runs or services can be useful in maintaining service capacity during emergencies that necessitate social distancing or schedule variances.
- Coordination with other neighboring transportation organizations can help identify alternatives for customer rides if service capacity is nearly full.

Continuity of Services:

- Temporarily reducing service to core services (such as a core fixed-route network) can be facilitated by adjusted service parameters and through advanced planning.
- Riders will notice when there is less service available during an emergency, making it more difficult for them to complete their trip.
- When service demand is lower, being overstaffed can be a short term issue; however, subsequent rebounds in demand need to be anticipated for staffing needs.

Customer Perspectives:

- Transportation service is a critical resource for persons with disabilities and older adults during emergencies for access to goods, services, and friends and family.
- Some customers may choose not to travel during an emergency out of health and well-being concerns if they feel it is not safe to travel with others.
- Providing PPE and recognizing safety needs during the emergency (e.g., vehicle cleaning) helps increase customers confidence in safety of the service.
- Persons with disabilities need normal communication procedures in place for accommodating their needs (e.g., requesting boarding assistance, wheelchair securement). Customers should still be able to communicate their accommodation needs during emergency service periods.
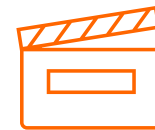
Agency Action Steps

Scale service changes to minimize impacts for persons with disabilities and older adults:

- Ensure there is not prioritization of ADA paratransit trip requests based on trip purpose (which is not allowable); customer needs for travel must be respected in all cases, especially for paratransit.
- Proactively build in services used by high-need riders (e.g., persons with disabilities, older adults) to core route networks/services used as the default in emergencies.

Implement appropriate safety procedures and policies for the emergency:

- Account and mitigate for any potential negative impacts on persons with disabilities and older adults that would result from safety-related measures implemented for the well-being of personnel and rides.
- Proactively address the needs of riders with the adoption of safety requirements (e.g., social distancing, alternative boarding), including assistance with boarding, wheelchair securement, or to/from the door.
- Recognize that practices effective in fixed-route services may not be possible in paratransit and other services for people with disabilities and older adults
- Explore alternative methods to conduct eligibility assessments remotely or grant temporary eligibility status for new paratransit applicants over a certain period of months.

Maintain an organizational culture supportive of transportation employees:

- Ensure safety of employees to maintain the strength of the service. Staffing shortages will make it hard for providers to meet remaining travel demand during the emergency.
- Have clear and consistent communication about safety measures to employees to foster trust in the measures; this should also include feedback mechanisms for staff.
- Retain staff through the emergency as much as possible; this is preferable to losing staff before emergency conditions subside and service returns to more normal levels.
- Find work alternatives (e.g., delivery services, working from home) to both help morale and maintain service capacity.
- Prioritize distribution of safety equipment and needed health-services for employees of the organization.
- Provide assistance for employees (hazard pay, childcare, etc.) to help morale and continued service delivery.

Emergency Management is:

- A continuous process by which agencies manage all hazards to avoid or reduce the impact of disasters resulting from the hazards.
- An all-phase effort. Mitigation and preparedness phases are vital for minimizing and/or removing hazards prior to an incident response and recovery.

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Roles & Keys to Success

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Keys to Success

Planning:

- Emergency response plans and continuity of operations (COOP) plans help establish what different departments and staff members do during the different emergency phases.
- Internal players are key in coordination planning and should include in different areas of the organization (e.g., accessibility coordinators, service planners, comm. staff).
- Remote systems for some staff positions are useful in some emergencies; planning can include needs for home office set-ups, data plans, network capacity, and key staff.
- Agency recovery plans help determine indicators and decision criteria for re-establishing normal service.
- Lessons learned should be documented in after action reports during the recovery phase.

New and Temporary Services:

- Transit scheduling systems are well-suited for direct transportation services but may not be as adept for some incidental use services (e.g., deliveries).
- For delivery services, policies and parameters need to be set on capacity and timing limits needed to ensure safe delivery of food and/or packages.
- Fleet uses for different incidental use types (e.g., passenger trips vs. goods delivery) should be separated while being flexible in how vehicles are used.
- Isolated vehicles with solo rides may be necessary in some incidental use cases (e.g., medical trips).

Relationships and Partnerships:

- External players key to coordination during emergencies may include community organizations, local governments, various state departments, and several others.
- Developing strong relationships with partners prior to an emergency helps overcome coordination issues during the event and identifies needs and resources of partners.
- Identifying existing community-based groups and programs for people with disabilities and older adults can help planners know where populations are located, their main destinations, and specific service needs.
- Collaborating with local partner organizations can help improve understanding the needs of persons with disabilities and older adults in order to prioritize access to emergency-period services.

Communication and Engagement:

- Communication using multiple channels and methods is critical to effectively let customers know how their service is affected and any new service options now available.
- Strong communication with local community leaders and organizations is key to understanding local issues while also getting feedback and input on service needs from these customers.
- Technology used in communication is not a substitute for communication directly with the customer (in person or over the phone) or through community representatives.
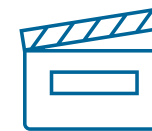
Agency Action Steps

Foster and sustain mechanisms for internal and external communication:

- Regularly coordinate with other organizations to be kept up to date about partnership opportunities. Coordination efforts take time and may be difficult to handle during emergencies; being in touch with partners during non-emergency times is important for communication.
- Communicate through key individuals plugged in to the needs of persons with disabilities and older adults.
- Remember that word-of-mouth communication for indirectly reaching individuals is often most effective.

Use emergency management strategies for long-term planning and financial sustainability:

- Ensure that resources and protective measures that respond to the emergency are compatible with the needs for persons with disabilities and older adults.
- Collaborate with local stakeholder organizations with similar goals that could help provide partial funding support.
- Establish agreements with local or state emergency management agencies for support; having MOUs established in advance can help activate available funding from partners.
- Identify an emergency management lead for centralized management. Particularly for large transportation organizations, a lead partner in emergency management can help to streamline focus areas for transportation provision.

Implement service changes focused on better service for higher-need customers:

- Proactively determine the highest need areas as part of emergency mitigation planning; this can include continued service provision to these places (e.g., dialysis centers, adult day care centers, local community center services).
- Prevent inequitable service reductions by proactively building in services used by high-need riders as the service default during emergency situations (e.g., highly important routes built into the core route network).
- Target incidental use services to primarily benefit and increase access for persons with disabilities, older adults, and other high-need populations in order to respond effectively to community need.
- Prioritize rider needs in vehicles used for service delivery and accommodations to use the service.

Enduring Changes can:

- Institutionalize lessons learned and maintain useful practices beyond the emergency event.
- Apply best practices to future emergency events or periods of different service demands.
- Continue relationships, working groups, or coalitions to coordinate community needs and resources.
- Maintain accessible transportation practices as a result of new or temporary policy changes.