# ACB Group Discussion

# Designing Paratransit from the Ground Up

## Background & Introduction

Paratransit, as it operates in the majority of communities across the country has been around for decades. It is based on a model that includes transit agency or contracted service provider owned vehicles, driven by employee drivers who provide trips that are booked at least one day in advance and delivered to passengers in a shared-ride model. But what if we could design paratransit from scratch? What would it look like? How would it work?

This group discussion will begin with the definition of a few key terms and an overview of the current state of paratransit, will summarize a number of factors, some of which are creating opportunities for change and others which may be pushing against innovation, and then end with a conversation about the attributes that are most important for passengers and why those things matter. The goal is to create a working description of how paratransit might look if we could design it from scratch, knowing what we know today.

## Key Terms

* ADA Paratransit – Origin to destination transportation service for people with disabilities who are unable, because of a disability or disabling health condition, to independently access, board, ride and exit public transit for some or all trips. ADA paratransit is required to be provided when and where fixed-route public transit service is available.
* Fixed-Route Public Transit – Includes primarily local bus and light rail service. Does not include commuter bus or rail service or specialized services such as microtransit or general public dial-a-ride services—although all of these services are required to be accessible.
* ADA service area requirements – The ADA requires service to be provided within ¾ of a mile of local fixed-route transit routes and around light rail stations. The law also requires service in other areas that are completely surrounded by areas where paratransit is available. (The law does not specify how large these “pockets” must be before transit is not required to serve them. Paratransit service is only required to be provided at the same times and on the same days of the week as fixed-route transit is provided.
* ADA Paratransit Fares – May not exceed twice the fare for a comparable trip on fixed-route transit.
* Advanced Reservation Service – ADA paratransit is required to be made available on at least a next-day basis. Transit agencies are permitted, but not required, to offer service on a same day basis.
* Shared-Ride Service – ADA paratransit is typically shared-ride service, meaning that vehicles can divert to pick up or drop off other passengers while on route.
* Origin to Destination – Term refers to the legal intent of ADA paratransit, which is to get people from covered origins to destinations. Depending on the person’s ability to access the vehicle independently, service can be provided either as curb-to-curb or door-to-door service.
* Curb-to-Curb Service – The passenger must meet the vehicle at the nearest curb adjacent to their pick-up address and exit the vehicle at the nearest curb adjacent to their drop-off address. Drivers are generally not required to provide assistance beyond entering and exiting the vehicle.
* Door-to-Door Service – The driver must meet the passenger at the outermost door of the building where the passenger will begin their trip and must drop the passenger off at the outermost door of the building where the passenger will end their trip. Drivers are required to provide reasonable assistance, including guiding by the hand or arm, pushing a mobility device, carrying small packages, etc.
* Hand-to-Hand or Door-Through-Door Service – Service where a driver provides any level service beyond the outermost door of any passenger pick-up or drop-off location. This level of service is explicitly not required by the ADA, and only a handful of transit agencies provide it.

## Traditional Paratransit Configuration

* Service Area – Within ¾ of a mile around local bus routes and light rail stations. Transit agencies often include many small pockets which are slightly outside these boundaries.
* Service Hours – Paratransit operates at the same times and on the same days of the week as fixed-route service operates. For simplicity, paratransit often has the same start and end times throughout the entire service area—even if those hours are more generous than the hours operated by some transit routes.
* Service Level – Curb-to-curb with door-to-door available upon request or need
* Trip booking requirements – Day before travel. Most transit agencies allow reservations to be made up to 7 or 14 days before travel as well as the creation of “standing” or “subscription” trips, which are trips from the same place, to the same place, at the same time, on the same day or days of the week. Some transit agencies allow same day trips on a space available basis.
* Service Model – Service is typically provided in accessible vans and minibuses and is shared. Some systems also deploy smaller minivans, but there is still an expectation that trips must be shared at the provider’s discretion. Some agencies also use taxicabs, and a handful use a limited number of Transportation Network Company (TNC) vehicles (Uber, Lyft, Uzurv, etc.) to cover trips that cannot be efficiently covered with the agency’s fleet of vans and minibuses. The use of these alternative providers is at the agency’s discretion—occasionally with rider permission.
* Who provides the service? – Most service is provided with employee drivers. About 2/3 of paratransit drivers work for private companies who are under contracts with transit agencies. Many of these drivers are represented by Collective Bargaining Agreements.

## Challenges Facing Traditional Paratransit

* **High cost**
  + **Vehicles, technology, facilities and equipment**
  + **Rising labor and insurance costs**
  + **Volatile fuel cost**
  + **Demand increasing as the population ages and lives longer**
* **Unhappy customers**
  + **Requirement to book ahead and share the ride**
  + **Must manage a pick-up window and uncertain trip length**
  + **No stops along the way**
* **COVID-19 Related Safety concerns**

## Tailwinds – Opportunities for Change

* Growing pain associated with the status quo
* Advancements in technology supporting paratransit
  + Highly accurate and stable Geographic Information Systems
  + Scheduling and dispatch software
  + Mobile technology for GPS tracking and communication
  + Customer-facing service payment and management platforms
* Increasing customer utilization of mobile devices
* Expanding availability of TNCs and other flexible fleets
* Coming advent of autonomous vehicles

## Headwinds – Challenges Pushing Against Potential Change

* ADA and transit regulations which favor the status quo
  + ADA language requiring advanced-reservations, shared-ride service has evolved to represent the definition of paratransit rather than minimum requirements
  + Formula-based transit funding is tied to shared-ride service
  + Language in the new transit spending bill penalizes systems that use service models and technologies that reduce employment opportunities for transit workers. This includes TNCs and automation.
* Most transit industry leaders rose through the ranks. They are not coming from other industries. So the culture tends to be conservative regarding change.

## Where to Go From Here

* Some agencies beginning to experiment on smaller scale demonstrations.
  + On-demand alternatives to paratransit
  + Opt-in approaches to supplemental/marginal ADA paratransit services
* COVID-19 presents an opportunity to expand these efforts when COVID-19 related issues can be addressed.
  + Concerns about safety
  + Vehicle and staff availability
  + Managing or reducing service cost
* Ultimate goal is to demonstrate and then expand new service approaches.

## Questions for Discussion

1. When thinking about traditional paratransit, what do you like and why?
2. When thinking about traditional paratransit, what do you wish was different and why?
3. If you had to choose, which of the following is most important and why?
   1. Booking your trip at least a day ahead and going straight to your destination
   2. Being able to request a trip last-minute but having to share your ride
4. If you had to choose, which of the following is most important and why?
   1. Receiving a ride which might be shared on an agency or provider owned vehicle that is driven by a driver who is wearing an agency or provider issued uniform and badge
   2. Receiving a direct ride in a vehicle which meets your needs, but which is not an agency or provider owned vehicle, and which is being driven by a driver who is not an employee of the agency or its provider
5. Rate the importance of each of the following attributes
   1. Being able to request a trip closer to the time you actually need to travel
   2. Being able to accurately predict the amount of time on the vehicle—even if the trip is shared
   3. Being able to ride alone (no trip sharing)
   4. Being able to make a short stop along the way
   5. Receiving a trip in a vehicle that has agency branding and an employee driver
   6. Being able to use a mobile app or website to book, change, cancel, check on and pay for trips