



May 24, 2021

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

As a nation, we face significant challenges to achieve accessible, equitable transportation among diverse populations. The 26 percent of American adults with a disability have limited transportation options, impacting their access to healthcare, education, jobs, and their ability to contribute to our economy and communities. The results are stark: unemployment and poverty levels are twice as high for those with disabilities as those without. The need for solutions is only growing more urgent, as the U.S. wheelchair-using population is expected to grow 120% by 2022, and the elderly population is projected to reach record levels by 2030.

Traditional accessible transportation options such as rail, bus, paratransit, and retrofitted vehicles have not equitably served the mobility needs of people with disabilities, seniors, and underserved populations. Most existing options are rife with extensive advance planning requirements, inaccessible related infrastructure, and long and wasteful wait times as well as trips — all at significant cost. Nor have they kept pace with technological advances.

New technologies are clearly improving transportation services and [data suggests on-demand transit technology can be a key tool for advancing equity](#)¹. On-demand services with sophisticated routing and dispatch capabilities have improved efficiency and reduced costs for

¹ Via, "New data suggests on-demand transit can be a key tool for advancing equity", <https://ridewithvia.com/resources/articles/new-data-suggests-on-demand-transit-is-essential-for-equity/>

transportation providers and customers. Importantly, a number of transit agencies and cities across the country have utilized this technology to launch shared on-demand public transportation (also referred to as microtransit) options that complement existing transit and provide an equitable and accessible transportation solution for all people, including those with disabilities. And yet, while on-demand microtransit services have improved mobility, funding challenges have made it difficult to expand or launch new services.

As Congress and the Administration craft major infrastructure legislation, the moment has come to harness innovations in transportation to dramatically improve equitable services in public transportation, particularly for those with disabilities, seniors, and underserved populations by: **(1) Increasing investment in on-demand microtransit while ensuring accessibility in those and any other future transit services; and (2) Creating a federal grant program to bring innovation to ADA paratransit services.**

- 1. Increasing investment in on-demand microtransit while ensuring accessibility in those and any future transit services.** With increased funding for on-demand microtransit, we recommend requiring the inclusion of wheelchair accessible vehicles so that those with disabilities can receive equitable service, ensuring accessibility training for drivers, and ensuring apps and technologies are fully accessible for all. To sustain accessibility and to keep pace with technological advancements, integrating a robust review process would yield continued service improvements and budgetary savings. The Federal Highway Administration's [‘STEPS to Transportation Equity’](#) framework² could serve as a model. As the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) mandates paratransit service only along fixed transit routes, the addition of microtransit service along fixed route lines shall not reduce the number of households that are able to access a transit system's ADA paratransit services. Further, we urge additional investment in paratransit services offered by public transit authorities operating across the United States.
- 2. Creating a federal grant program to bring innovation to ADA paratransit services.** Congress should invest in a dedicated funding stream and specific program that would employ new technologies in paratransit services. Section 3006(b) of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act established a discretionary pilot program to improve the coordination of transportation services and non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) services. A similar program could be created to focus on innovation in ADA paratransit. Examples of innovative solutions that this program would incentivize include:

² Federal Highway Administration, *Travel Behavior: Shared Mobility and Transportation Equity*, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/otps/shared_use_mobility_equity_final.pdf. This framework includes: Spatial, Temporal, Economic, Physiological, and Social barriers. It is also useful to consider the STEPS model enhancements outlined in the Shared-Use Mobility Center's [“Equity and Shared Mobility Services - Working with the Private Sector to Meet Equity Objectives”](#) report. To incentivize STEPS Reviews, technical assistance and grant funding should be made available periodically to localities.

- a. **Dynamic routing:** Paratransit services often use outdated methods for dispatch and routing. Software that automates these functions can help reduce wait times, trip lengths, and cost.
- b. **On-demand capability:** The majority of paratransit services require booking a trip one day prior. Without a same-day service solution, disabled Americans have no way to address urgent healthcare or other needs that arise. As recently called for by the [National Campaign for Transit Justice](#)³, every paratransit service in the nation should offer an on-demand option.
- c. **App-based booking and payments:** Most paratransit riders are currently not able to track the status of their ride and are given 30+ minute pick up windows which result in gross uncertainty about driver arrival times. The use of app-based trip booking could complement existing booking methods and help riders track and plan their trip.
- d. **Integrated mobility services:** Transit agencies are beginning to create integrated services that bring fixed route buses, on-demand microtransit, and paratransit services together on one platform so that mobility is a more seamless and convenient experience for all riders.

As Congress and the Administration seek to improve transportation accessibility and deliver equitable economic security to people with disabilities and diverse communities until a universal accessible vehicle platform is developed and deployed, we encourage the federal government to accelerate the transition to responsive transit. We urge you to invest in fully accessible transit that advances economic and social mobility.

Sincerely,

American Association of People with Disabilities

American Council of the Blind

Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation

Easterseals

National Council on Independent Living

National Disability Rights Network

Paralyzed Veterans of America

United Spinal Association

³ National Campaign for Transit Justice, *Transit Justice Principles*, <https://transitjustice.org/about/transit-justice-principles/>