

## **Comments to the Governors Commission for the Reform of Community, Social Service and Paratransit Transportation Services**

On behalf of the over 11,000 individuals coping with multiple sclerosis in the Commonwealth, the Greater New England Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society appreciates the opportunity to comment on existing barriers and offer recommendations to improve community and paratransit transportation.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic, often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system. The progress, severity, and specific symptoms of MS differ among individuals and are unpredictable. Some people experience muscle weakness, poor balance, poor coordination, spasticity, tremors, paralysis, vision problems and mild to severe cognitive issues. As many people with MS are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50 they rely on paratransit transportation to get to work and medical appointments; to run errands and attend school. Some people with MS are mobile and able to get around by using the fixed route without too much difficulty. Other days they need to use The Ride due to weakness, fatigue, loss of balance and coordination. MS consumers with severe functional limitations must always rely on non fixed route transportation.

### **Barriers/Issues**

- Some fixed route stations do not have elevators and the platforms may not line up with the subway door entrance. More customer service agents are needed to assist consumers using wheelchairs who are not able to press elevator buttons. Buses have limited room for wheelchairs even though the vehicles offer a lift system. Other barriers include inadequate accessible parking (especially for vans), and proper bus/subway shelters.
- Scheduling and route limitation in the RTA's cause difficulties as consumers can not always cross over to a different city or town within the RTA or can do so only one way.
- Consumers have experienced the following problems with The Ride: late arrival for pick up; not being picked up; long wait times to transfer; waiting outside in inclement and severe weather conditions; and communication issues with the dispatchers. Due to a lack of seats, consumers have experienced safety issues as they had to remain on their on their wheelchairs or scooters without proper restraints to secure the adaptive equipment.
- Some towns do not offer The Ride or MBTA service. There is only transportation through local Councils on Aging for older consumers for grocery shopping, local medical and other appointments.

### **Solutions/Recommendations**

- A statewide one stop toll free call center/hotline with TTY & accompanying website for all disabled consumers would greatly improve coordination and utilization of existing resources. Many people do not know about existing resources and how to access them.
- Regions and metropolitan areas outside Boston should purchase accessible van taxis to supplement the limited public options and provide some subsidies for very low income consumers.
- Increase the cost of The Ride for consumers e.g. \$2.00 to \$ 3.00 to address the revenue issues. Improve coordination for consumers working or regaining employment.
- Ensure that vehicles are filled to capacity and purchase larger vehicles to transport additional passengers. Offer financial incentives to add accessible taxis to provide transportation options.
- All curb cuts, sidewalks and crosswalks must meet accessibility standards in local communities on all fixed routes.
- The MBTA RIDE in person assessment must allow for flexibility for disabilities like MS that fluctuate but are progressive and change over time. The assessments must factor in a physician's comments. This process needs to be transparent as soon as possible as the unknown about the in-person assessment is causing much concern that consumers are going to lose their services.