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Why Paratransit Doesn't Have to Be So Expensive

Efficiently transporting people with limited mobility is a challenge. Some promising new approaches are being tried.

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In an era of scarcity for transit systems, there is growing pressure on paratransit, the expensive programs for transporting those with limited mobility, to operate more efficiently. A new study from New York City's [Citizens Budget Commission](#) (CBC) and reforms underway in other cities suggest that the goals of operating more efficiently and better serving those who need additional assistance getting around need not be at odds.

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) spends more than \$70 per paratransit trip and has high per-capita paratransit usage. As a result, the MTA subsidized its Access-A-Ride service last year to the tune of \$256 million.

One thing the CBC recommends to reduce costs is for Access-A-Ride to stop automatically providing door-to-door service. Many customers are not wheelchair-bound and, where appropriate, the vehicle could transport them to a convenient subway or bus stop, where they would receive free rides. The CBC estimates that the change would save as much as \$22 million annually.

But far more savings could be realized from better matching vehicles to the needs of riders for each trip. Instead of automatically transporting customers in vehicles that can accommodate those with the greatest challenges, taxicabs and other for-hire vehicles could be used for many trips. Providing the least expensive appropriate vehicle would save a projected \$126 million annually, according to CBC. Partnerships between transit systems and ride-hailing companies to do that are underway in the Washington, D.C., and Boston areas.

That's a particularly welcome development for Boston, whose famously cash-strapped Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) has been finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the cost of its paratransit system, known as The Ride. Paratransit cost the system more than \$100 million last year, and the per-trip subsidy was over \$45. In comparison, the MBTA provides a 61-cent subsidy for the average subway trip.

As of earlier this month, many MBTA riders can get subsidized transportation from Uber or Lyft instead of waiting for The Ride. The rider pays the first \$2, the MBTA picks up the next \$13, and



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the rider is responsible for any additional cost. As acting MBTA General Manager Brian Shortsleeve told the Boston Globe, "Customers are going to get reduced fares and shorter wait times. And the MBTA is going to get much lower operating cost on these trips."

There are some wrinkles to iron out. Wheelchair-accessible ridesharing vehicles can be hard to find, and ramping up accessibility will require enhanced training for drivers. But Uber has been partnering with taxi companies to provide more accessible vehicles, and the company's Boston general manager has publicly proclaimed the goal of making transportation reliable and convenient for everybody.

That, of course, is also the mission of public transit, one that addressing fiscal problems by compromising service for customers with the greatest challenges would violate. But the research from New York City's Citizens Budget Commission and the kinds of reforms just enacted in Boston show that there are a number of ways for paratransit systems to provide those riders with service that is both better and less expensive.