



# TECHNOLOGY HELPS PARATRANSIT SERVICES GO LEAN

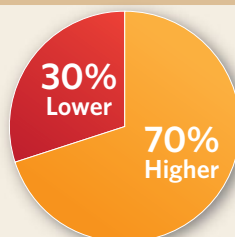
**While 70 percent of respondents saw ridership increase, fewer plan to buy new vehicles next year and many have had to reduce service to meet tighter budgets. In many cases, software, mobile data terminals and other technologies are helping agencies streamline services.**

>By CLAIRE ATKINSON, Senior Editor

**R**ESPONDENTS TO *METRO MAGAZINE'S* annual paratransit survey transported more than 11 million passengers total in 2009. Seventy percent said they saw an increase in passengers over 2008. This trend continues from *METRO'S* 2009 survey, in which 65 percent of respondents reported an increase in passengers over the previous year. Of the 2009 total, about 27 percent use wheelchairs, on average.

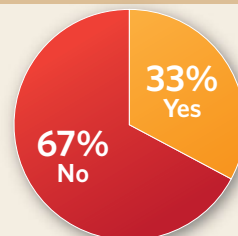
Participants in this year's paratransit survey answered an online questionnaire. Our thanks to all who responded. To be included in next year's survey, please send an e-mail to [info@metro-magazine.com](mailto:info@metro-magazine.com).

## RIDERSHIP ON THE RISE



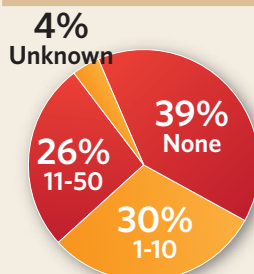
Most agencies saw an increase in the number of passengers transported in 2009 versus 2008.

## DO YOU INTEGRATE PARATRANSIT WITH FIXED-ROUTE SERVICE?



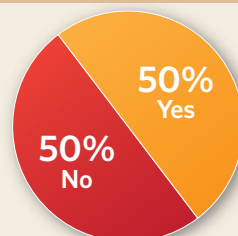
About one-third of respondents said they do not integrate paratransit routes with fixed-route service.

## PLANNED 2011 VEHICLE BUY



The largest percentage of respondents plans no vehicle purchases for the next year. Last year, 35 percent of respondents planned no new vehicle purchases.

## REQUIRE IN-PERSON INTERVIEW FOR CERTIFICATION?





GO BG Transit runs both fixed-route and door-to-door paratransit service with its 22-vehicle fleet.

## AGENCY INNOVATES TO AVOID DENIALS

Donna Tooley, manager of transportation for Community Action of Southern Kentucky dba GO BG Transit in Bowling Green, Ky., says that meeting demand during peak hours is her agency's biggest challenge in providing paratransit service. To meet that challenge, Tooley says the agency has picked up some pinch hitters.

"While we have both full-time and part-time drivers, some of the office staff are also certified as drivers, so that gives us some additional flexibility if you have an unusual demand," she explains. This way, the agency avoids having to hire additional drivers and is able to maintain service levels at all times, including when drivers have unplanned absences due to illness or family emergencies, particularly when other drivers had already scheduled vacation time.

### FAST FACTS

**Agency:** Community Action of Southern Kentucky dba GO BG Transit  
**Location:** Bowling Green, Ky.  
**ADA riders transported in 2009:** 6,893  
**Total vehicles:** 22

"You can't be overstaffed, you can't afford that," Tooley says. "Then to avoid denials, you can't be understaffed. So, that's the flexibility we found with our part-time drivers and having office staff that are trained and certified to drive in an extreme peak situation."

GO BG Transit operates 22 vehicles, 12 of which are dedicated to paratransit.

The agency is also in the process of transitioning to computerized routing software, which Tooley says will improve efficiency. "Once you set the parameters up correctly, it can just, within a matter of minutes, run through the whole day's requests for trips the following day and

### PARATRANSIT VEHICLE SNAPSHOT

On average, about 23 percent of riders use a wheelchair or scooter and 92 percent of agencies' vehicles are wheelchair accessible, survey respondents report. About 61 percent of respondents had 100-percent wheelchair accessible fleets.

About one-half of all paratransit vehicles in service in 2009 were buses 25 feet or longer. About one-quarter were small buses (25 feet or shorter), another quarter were vans, and a small percentage were taxis or sedans.

In last year's survey, about two-thirds of respondents had plans to purchase new vehicles, with most looking to add between 11 and 100 vehicles to their fleets. This year, those numbers remain steady, but slightly fewer are planning to add to their fleet numbers in 2011.

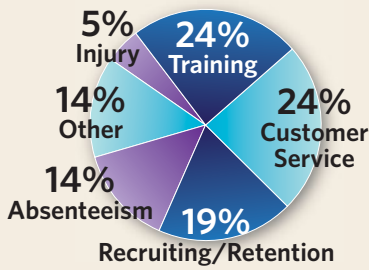
available vehicles," she explains. "Because there's a map in it and because you've geo-coded all the addresses, it will be able to very swiftly figure the fastest, most efficient route and put the most trips that are feasible on one vehicle. It will also capture a lot of data for reporting that we presently capture manually."

## LARGE OPERATOR STREAMLINES SERVICES

In 2008, the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) was listed as the 43rd largest

# Paratransit

## BIGGEST DRIVER-RELATED CONCERN

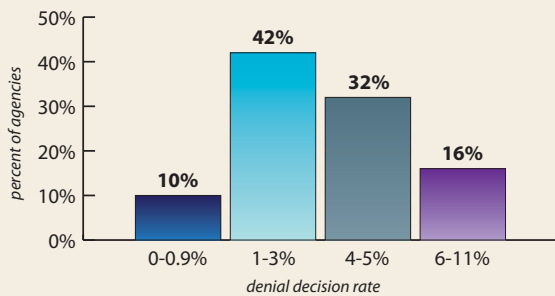


Other driver-related concerns noted in the survey results included an aging workforce, variation in operator performance and safety.

## TRIP DENIALS

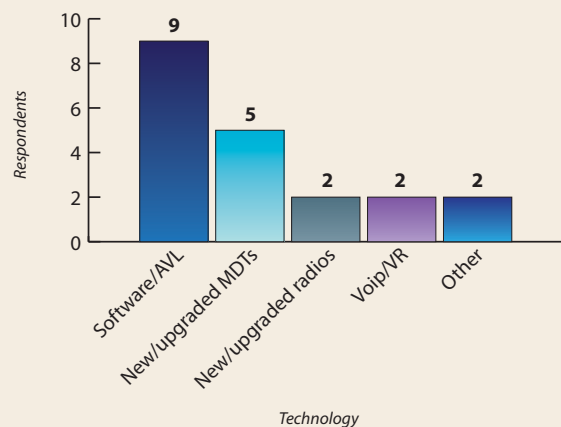
Almost all agencies report zero trip denials; the remaining 27 percent report trip denial rates of 1 percent or less.

## APPLICANT DENIAL DECISION RATES



On average, about 3.6 percent of applicants for paratransit service are denied, agencies report.

## MOST ADD NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN LAST YEAR



Sixty-three percent of respondents added new technology at their operations in the last year, with software named the most common upgrade. Other improvements include interactive voice response systems to confirm trips with clients.



UTA has had paratransit on offer to Salt Lake residents since 1988, with services exceeding ADA requirements. This year, service was limited to the three-quarter mile rule.

paratransit agency by unlinked passenger trips and passenger miles in the American Public Transit Association's 2010 Fact Book.

Despite the agency's large size, it still faces similar challenges in providing paratransit service as those faced by smaller agencies. In his survey response, UTA spokesman Gerry Carpenter says, "Riders have different expectations of the service and do not like the policies or limitations. So the biggest challenge is explaining the service structure and limitations."

To address this challenge, Carpenter says UTA met with representatives of local agencies and advocacy groups. "We're trying to partner with other government agencies, non-profit organizations and private agencies that provide transportation services to the elderly and the disabled so that we can find a common solution that works for everyone and that require the full burden of providing transportation to fall on one agency," he says. "We are the primary provider, but we're not the only provider."

This particular challenge came to the fore recently after UTA, which had exceeded Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements throughout its history, finally had to cut paratransit service to conform to the three-quarter mile rule and eliminated a discounted monthly paratransit pass.

"But, with the recession and budget constraints we faced, we have, effective May 1, reduced our service origins and destinations within three-quarter miles of a fixed bus route or a train station. And so, we've taken some heat for that, from both the media and activist groups," Carpenter says. "One of the challenges that we face is how do we continue to provide service in the face of continual growth and demand with budgets that have been decreasing?"

UTA has been communicating with riders — to ease the tran-

### FAST FACTS

**Agency:** Utah Transit Authority  
**Location:** Salt Lake City  
**ADA riders transported in 2009:** 490,517  
**Total paratransit vehicles:** 150

# Paratransit

sition to the change and help customers understand UTA's role in providing paratransit — through newsletters, person-to-person contact, travel training programs and eligibility programs.

## IOWA AGENCY WORKS COOPERATIVELY

**Boone County Transportation** serves the rural community of Boone, Iowa, and operates 15 20-passenger buses and two vans, all of which are wheelchair accessible. In 2009, the agency transported 9,754 riders, a 3-percent increase over the previous year, Executive Director **Patricia Reed** says.

Paratransit ridership has been growing over recent years, Reed says. "I think with the aging of the population, we're going to see more and more of that," she notes.

Boone County Transportation has implemented routing software to boost efficiency and better serve residents, Reed says. She has been with the agency for a year and brings experience from her past positions at other transit agencies in different areas of the country.

"Because of the costs and because of the cuts that we've taken from FTA funding, we didn't have a choice. We're actually doing more trips with fewer vehicles and fewer drivers," she says. "During our peak time we're doing approximately eight rides per hour, and during non-peak, anywhere from 2.5 to 4.4 rides per hour."

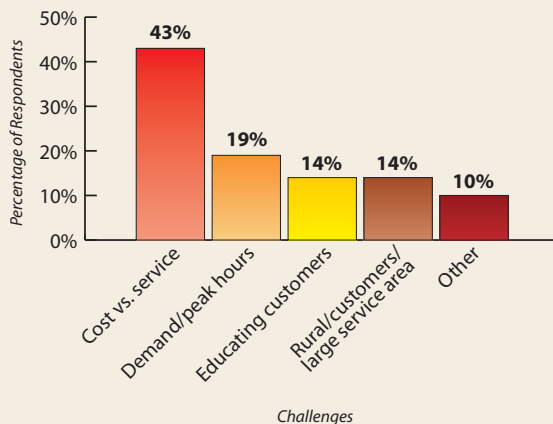
Boone County Transportation contracts services through the **Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA)**. HIRTA is organized under an Iowa Chapter 28E Agreement to serve as the public transit service provider for the **Iowa Department of Transportation's** Region 11, providing paratransit service to seven counties through contractors, like Boone County Transportation.

One of the benefits of membership in HIRTA, Reed says, is sharing knowledge among the various transportation providers and pursuing joint grant opportunities. "We work together as partners and say, 'there's funding here, let's go after it,'" she explains.

The cooperative arrangement also ensures that services in the seven-county area are not being doubled up.

One of the agency's challenges, Reed says, is educating the public on paratransit service and communicating that although Boone County provides door-to-door transportation, the service is not similar to calling up a taxi. In order to spread that message, "It was going out to the different services, agencies and senior citizen high rises, and getting the word of mouth out," Reed says.

### BIGGEST CHALLENGE: STRIKING A BALANCE



Close to half of respondents say that maintaining service levels in the face of budget cuts is the biggest challenge they face in providing paratransit.

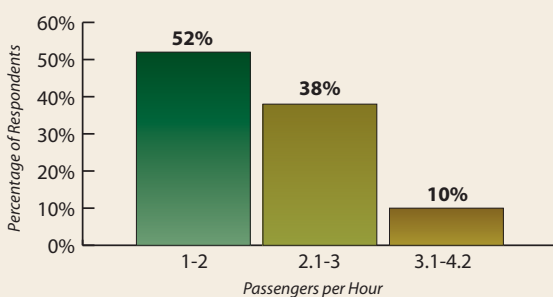


#### FAST FACTS

**Agency:** Boone County Transportation/HIRTA  
**Location:** Boone, Iowa  
**ADA riders transported in 2009:** 9,745  
**Total vehicles:** 17

Through participation in a multi-contractor transportation authority that serves seven counties, Boone County Transportation is able to share knowledge and grant opportunities.

### PASSENGERS PER HOUR



Agencies offering paratransit service provide rides for an average of 2.2 passengers per service hour, according to survey results.

"When I came here, no one in our community really knew what we did. So, we're advertising, putting out radio ads, just a lot of getting out there on the streets, going to community events, going to different agencies when they have open houses, and telling them what we're all about and what we do."