



Photo courtesy DART

Paratransit Survey: Customer Service a Growing Concern for Operators

For its ninth annual paratransit survey, capturing a snapshot of the industry, METRO received responses from 88 paratransit providers from 36 states across the U.S. and one system from Canada. Respondents answered 22 questions about their fleets, ridership, concerns and innovations.

FLEET NUMBERS DIP

There are a total of 3,851 vehicles represented in this year's survey results, with the smallest fleet comprised of two vehicles, and the largest fleet coming in at 324 vehicles. The average fleet size is 51 vehicles, down significantly from last year, and the

median is 31.

Twenty-six percent of respondents reported having mid- to full-sized vehicles (more than 25 feet in length) in their fleets. Small vehicles made up half of fleets, a sizable decrease from the 69% reported in last year's survey. A breakdown of bus sizes for all fleets can be found in Figure 1 (see page 18). Vans accounted for 17% of all fleets, which is about the same as the total reported in our 2011 survey, and taxis comprised 6%, continuing a possible downward trend, reflected by the 7% total in 2011 and 9% in 2009.

Survey showed demand down slightly from last year, but still high, with nearly two-thirds seeing an increase. More operators reported customer expectations and behavior as hurdles to providing good service. Scheduling software comes in handy and travel training saw a slight bump.

>BY NICOLE SCHLOSSER, Senior Editor

2013 PURCHASES

Slightly more than half of operators surveyed plan to buy new vehicles next year, up a bit from last year's 48%. The total number of vehicles on order is 514. Nearly one-third of respondents do not plan to purchase vehicles in 2013 (Figure 2), and no

carriers reported plans to procure more than 100 vehicles in the upcoming fiscal year, signifying a small increase from last year's 44%, without plans to buy more vehicles.

RIDERSHIP STILL GROWING

Sixty-three percent of operators cited an increase in their 2011 ridership numbers, averaging 8%, while 37% responded with decreases, which averaged at 5% (Figure 3). While the increase reported is down by a hair from last year's 66%, the trend of increasing demand continues, as was made clear in many of the write-in responses we received. No respondents reported ridership staying the same from 2010 to 2011. Four operators stood out with significantly high increases, ranging from 30% to 73%.

SCHEDULING TECHNOLOGY

As with last year, the majority of car-



Tampa, Fla.'s Hillsborough Area Regional Transit (HART) cited an 18% increase in ridership and implemented real-time scheduling to handle the uptick. Like many others, HART's top concern is customer service.

Photo credit: HART

riers, at 57%, claimed they did not utilize any new technology in 2011. Nearly one-fifth of operators implemented scheduling and dispatch software to more efficiently meet rising demand and improve productivity. One operator, Davenport, Iowa-based River Bend Transit, even created a separate staff position devoted entirely to scheduling trips. A handful of providers chose automatic vehicle location and to upgrade their IVR/call systems.

Additionally, respondents cited investing in cost accounting software, accepting online reservations and taxi swipe card technology.

PRODUCTIVITY AND BILLING

The most common response, at 74%, for calculating productivity, among both those operators using contractors and those that don't, was the use of a passengers-per-revenue-hour formula. Carriers that bill per hour average 2.16 passengers, about the same as last year's 2.12. Twelve respondents commented that productivity is tracked by total vehicle hours, and only one carrier claimed to not track productivity.

Regarding billing, slightly more than half of respondents reported using contractors, with 70% billing per hour and 30% billing per trip.

FIGURE 1: FLEET NUMBERS- PARATRANSIT VEHICLE TYPES

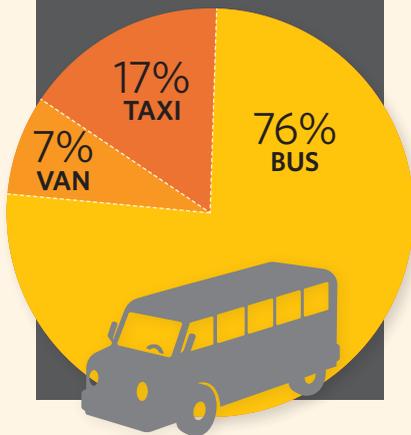
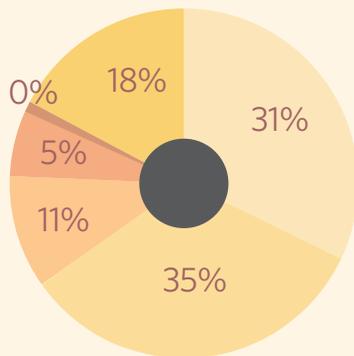


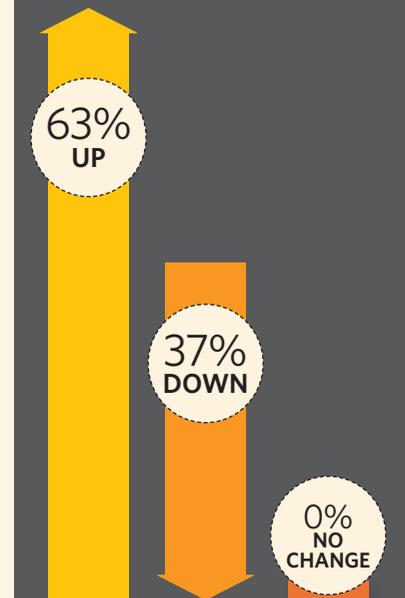
FIGURE 2: 2013 PURCHASES



- 31% Zero
- 35% 1 to 10
- 11% 11 to 25
- 5% 26 to 100
- 0% 101+
- 18% Not yet determined

Slightly more than half of operators surveyed plan to buy new vehicles next year, up a bit from last year's 48%. The total number of vehicles on order is 514.

FIGURE 3: RIDERSHIP



While the increase reported is down by a hair from last year's 66%, the trend of increasing demand continues.



FIGURE 4: LIFT USE

22% The mean percentage of ridership that uses wheelchair lifts.

DENIALS AND REPORTING

Eighty percent of operators surveyed responded to the question, “Do you require in-person interviews in order to become certified?” Half of respondents do not require in-person interviews. The rate of denial decisions averaged approximately 4%. More than two-thirds of carriers report trip denials, and only one percent do not have a denial policy.

NO-SHOWS

Up slightly from last year, 92% of

operators responded that they have a “No-Show” policy, 2% do not have a policy on no-shows but are considering one, and 5% do not have a “No-Show” policy and are not considering implementing one.

Operators that either have the policy in place or are looking into it commented that the policy helps cut costs, keeping the no-show and last-minute cancellation rate low, and improve service. One carrier only recently began enforcing its “No-

Show” policy.

TRAVEL TRAINING

Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported having a travel training program in place, slightly more than last year, and 16% are planning to create one.

Reasons for having the program included easing demand on the paratransit system by shifting some riders to fixed routes, improving customer service and having a small service area. “Some ADA passengers can and are willing to



Stillwater, Okla.-based Oklahoma State University - Stillwater Community Transit is serving its growing ridership by offering travel training, which highlights real-time arrival information in an app.

OKLAHOMA STATE U. PARATRANSIT SERVICE KEEPS PACE WITH RIDER SPIKE

With a 45% paratransit ridership increase from 2010 to 2011, Stillwater, Okla.-based **Oklahoma State University (OSU) Stillwater Community Transit** is challenged to keep up with growth and is using a real-time arrival app and an extra vehicle to help.

Despite dealing with the significant rider influx, OSU is still working on growing its service to benefit the community outside the university, **Tom Duncan**, manager, transit services, OSU, says.

Because OSU receives federal funds to offer fixed-route and paratransit service, the university extends complimentary paratransit service to the community as well as to students, faculty and staff. “We wanted to share our benefit with our entire community,” Duncan says.

OSU paratransit recently received a donation from **Clean Energy** to add an MV-1 to its fleet as a supervisor and back-up paratransit vehicle to help drivers accommodate higher ridership and improve on-time performance.

Additionally, OSU has been able to get route supervisors and some standby drivers to help cover increased demand.

In a university setting, Duncan says, many ADA-approved

riders who could use paratransit use the fixed-route system instead most of the year because they value the independence it provides them. However, during the extreme summer weather, they turn to paratransit, spiking the demand even more. OSU’s next-day scheduling policy helps with that.

“We ask our customers, if the forecasted weather is going to be outside of your tolerance, to schedule a trip and cancel it as needed,” Duncan says. “We try to get them adjusted to having a back-up plan in place. They can change it at the last minute.”

One advantage to running paratransit and with travel training, in particular, is that in a university setting most riders are younger and more familiar with using apps and other electronic tools. OSU takes advantage of that by offering to train riders to use its mobile app and website, which feature real-time arrival information, as part of its travel-training and trip planning for paratransit riders.

“Of course, not all generations are up to speed and want to do that,” Duncan says. “Definitely our college students do quite a bit.”

OSU also teaches riders how to use its printed schedules to access route information, familiarize themselves with its bus stops, board buses and pay fares.

Additionally, OSU’s paratransit fleet is about 98% CNG. Only two vehicles are gasoline-powered, providing a significant cost-savings in fuel and maintenance, which it reinvests back into its program. In particular, Duncan says, OSU is looking to invest in replacement vehicles for its shuttle program to and from Tulsa and to replace its two gasoline-powered paratransit buses with CNG-powered cutaway buses.

ride the fixed-route buses if the buses are handicap-accessible and if they know how and where to catch the bus," **Tanya Fleming**, paratransit coordinator of Pine Bluff, Ark.'s **Pine Bluff Transit** says.

Providers that are looking to implement a program cited long-term cost savings and more freedom for their riders. A few providers said they do not have formal travel training programs, but either have one staff member on hand to offer travel assistance or do training sessions at senior centers. Additionally, Providence, R.I.-based **Rhode Island Public Transit Authority** is partnering with community-based agencies that are providing travel training and working to develop a common statewide curriculum and train-the-trainer course, with materials and assistance for the travel trainers. When asked why their agency was considering starting a travel training

program, one operator simply said, "Everything helps."

The most-cited obstacle to offering the program is cost.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

Once again, the biggest challenge operators are facing is funding. Forty-one percent cited this as their primary hurdle to providing service, and nearly every respondent who listed money as a difficulty linked it with demand, which was the second-highest ranked challenge at 32%. Those two challenges were linked almost exclusively with customer service as the top concern for 37% of respondents, a new development from previous surveys.

While last year's responses regarding challenges centered on drivers being expected to provide more assistance to customers, responses this time around were focused not only on

the expectations of customers, but of their behavior as well. Many operators made comments indicating that they had difficulties with customers not being ready on time to be picked up or having different expectations of the service, "not understanding what Shared Ride is," as one provider put it. Dealing with Medicaid was also listed as getting more difficult.

Other challenges operators are dealing with include environment (7%) staff performance (6%) and ADA enforcement (5%).

Finding and keeping the people right for the job were second- and third-place concerns that underscored the top worry over providing good customer service. One-quarter of carriers listed recruiting, and retention and training came in at 22%. (Figure 8). Other concerns included injury (15%), safety (1%) and absenteeism (1%).

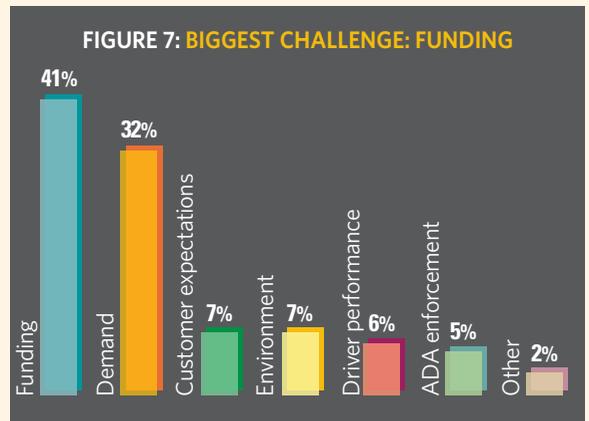
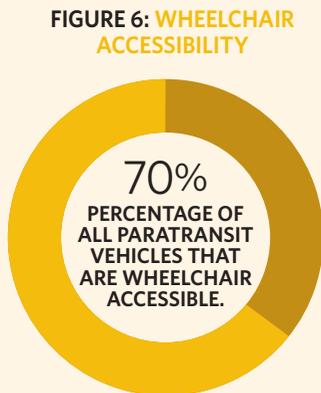
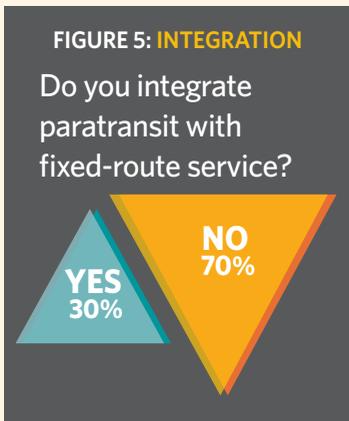


FIGURE 8: WHAT IS YOUR TOP CONCERN?

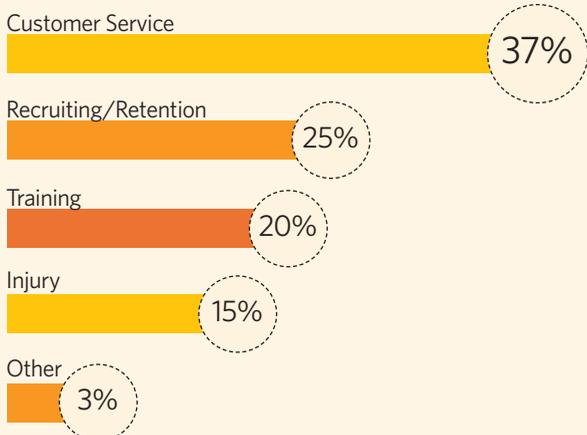


FIGURE 9: TECHNOLOGY UPGRADES

