Forty percent cite these factors as their top daily obstacles. Meanwhile, ridership continues to rise, with two-thirds of operators reporting increases. Some providers are turning to taxi service, travel training and scheduling technology, but driver-related issues such as customer service and wages remain tough to tackle.

BY NICOLE SCHLOSSER, Senior Editor
one van. The average fleet size is 47, about the same as last year, and the median is 23. Twenty-three percent of respondents reported having mid- to full-sized vehicles (more than 25 feet in length) in their fleets. Small vehicles comprised 40% of fleets, down from last year’s half. A breakdown of bus sizes for all fleets can be found in Figure 1 (see page 20.)

One significant change in this year’s surveyed fleet mix is that vans made up nearly half of all vehicles represented, at 43%, quite a bit more than last year’s reported 7%. Taxis accounted for 8%, just about in line with last year’s 6% and 2011’s 7%. Ninety percent of all vehicles represented are wheelchair-accessible, a sizable uptick from 2012’s 70%.

**TAXIS: PARATRANSPORT’S VALUABLE PARTNER**

Taxis have been a partner to paratransit services across the country for many years. Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro) has used taxi service to supplement Metro Access Services, its paratransit service, since it began in 1994. Access Services has used several taxi companies over the years, each meeting its standards for driver training, a background in sensitivity to working with customers with disabilities, and maintenance and upkeep of the vehicles.

Access Services covers Washington, D.C.’s eight different political jurisdictions, in addition to the federal government. Each of those cities and counties has its own level of taxi service, varying from a lot to none.

“We consider them to be valuable players in delivering quality service to our customers,” Christian T. Kent, department of access services assistant GM, Metro, says.

Several other transit agencies across the country have also supplemented their paratransit services with taxis, including California’s Orange County Transportation Authority, NYC Transit and Dallas Area Rapid Transit.

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The taxi service has helped Metro maintain its on-time performance standards. If a van that’s picking up customers in a pre-set itinerary is running late due to traffic or any other reason, the agency has the option to prevent further lateness by calling a taxi company and giving trips to them. If the taxi is in the same vicinity as the customer, it can pick them up and completely avoid lateness.

Operational flexibility is another benefit taxi service offers the provider. They can pick up customers in parts of Metro Access’ service area that are more remote. Additionally, in the cases of long-distance trips or those that take a long time to provide, it would be easier and more efficient to give them to a taxi rather than send a Metro Access van that already has other customers waiting on board, making everyone’s trip longer.

“That makes everyone else’s travel on the van a shorter and more direct ride than it otherwise would be,” Kent explains.

Taxi service can be a less expensive option depending how the operator’s provider agreement works, Kent explains. Some transit agencies pay a flat rate per trip for taxi service. Metro pays by the mile, which means longer trips are more expensive. The average cost per trip is $50. That cost represents all of the expenses that Metro Access has to cover to provide the service in addition to what the taxi company charges.

“We strike a balance between how many trips we operate by taxi and how long they are,” he explains. “Those are business decisions we make, taking into consideration efficiency, the customer experience and the cost.”

Rider feedback has been positive about taxis all along, Kent says. They say it feels like a more natural and basic form of transportation and like the convenience of the door to door service.

“Our statistics on the overall performance of the taxi operators has been excellent for many years,” Kent adds. “They’ve been great partners.”

Looking to the future, Access Services is working on adding taxi trips to take dialysis patients to their appointments and allow an open return in case a treatment is delayed. If possible, a taxi could take them home when they actually finish the treatment, preventing the customer from having to wait or change a reservation. In addition, dialysis customers would probably appreciate being able to call a cab when finished, because they’re tired, Kent says.

Customers would probably engage more directly with the taxi company for that service instead of the paratransit reservation system, he adds.
RIDERSHIP
Operators transported a total of 24.9 million riders in 2012. Sixty-seven percent reported increases, averaging 8%, which is the same as last year, while about one-third reported a decrease in service, with an average of 6%. The highest ridership increase reported was 54%.

TAXI SERVICE
We added some questions about taxi service this year after seeing more paratransit operators, such as San Antonio’s VIA Metropolitan Transit, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro) and MV Transportation, offering the service at its operations. Slightly less than one-third reported using a taxi service to supplement their fleets. Of that portion, about one-quarter found it helpful with accommodating demand. These carriers also shared benefits such as scheduling flexibility, meeting on-time performance goals, and serving rural areas.

“Taxis provide operational flexibility for scheduling uneven trip volumes and can help meet OTP goals when used to pick up customers with projected late trips on the day of service,” John Bodnar, ADA project officer, office of MetroAccess Service, Metro, said.

However, some challenges listed were having enough funding for the service, drug and alcohol testing compliance, and, as one carrier put it, “dealing with high risk medical trips such as dialysis centers.”

2014 VEHICLE BUYS
Nearly two-thirds of surveyed operators plan to purchase new vehicles next year, up about 10% from last year. The total number of vehicles on order is 829. While one-third of respondents do not plan to buy vehicles in 2014, (Figure 2), one operator reported plans to buy more than 100 vehicles in the upcoming fiscal year, and 7% plan to buy anywhere from 26 to 100 vehicles. The largest number of respondents, however, plan to purchase one to 10 vehicles next year. The top three paratransit vehicle manufacturers those surveyed are looking to buy from are Eldorado National, Champion Bus Co. and Goshen Coach.

PRODUCTIVITY AND BILLING
Of the slightly more than one-half of operators who use contractors to deliver rides the top two contractors they reported working with were MV Transportation and Veolia Transportation. About 60% of respondents reported their contractors billed by the hour, with 40% billing by trip. Only one carrier reported being billed by both hour and trip.

The average billing per trip came out to $21.43. The per-hour average is $37.34. Regarding productivity, carriers that bill per hour average 2.34 passengers,
up only a bit from last year, while carriers that bill per trip averaged 2.15 passengers.

ELIGIBILITY
Thirty-eight percent of respondents require in-person interviews for eligibility. The average percentage of denial decisions is less than 5%. About two-thirds report denials. Denials experienced as a percentage of trips scheduled is, on average, 1.82%. More than half had no denials as a percentage of trips scheduled.

NO-SHOW POLICIES
Nearly all respondents, at 96%, do have a no-show policy. Some reasons operators shared for considering no-show policies included, “to increase percentages,” “since eliminating a previous policy, the number of no-shows has begun to increase,” and “wasted time and fuel.”

WHEELCHAIR USE
We added some questions this year to more closely gauge wheelchair use in operators’ systems. The majority of operators, at 58%, responded that less than half of their paratransit riders use wheelchair lifts. Nearly one-third reported that about half use the lifts, and slightly more than 10% said most do.

Tablet use is not only rising in the general public, paratransit and human service transportation are also taking advantage of the convenience of the mobile devices. Android and Samsung tablets are now being used as Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs), Ryan Larsen, president, IntelliRide, a human service transportation division of Veolia Transportation, says. Many MDTs are now being deployed using Android and Samsung Galaxy tablets, which Veolia uses. The equipment is easy for drivers and other staff to use.

“Where don’t see somebody with a tablet of some kind? Everybody is pretty comfortable with that technology,” Larsen says.

Android tablets hit the human services transportation market a couple years ago, and have been a game-changer ever since, he adds. One benefit is that Google and Android provide an open source platform for the proliferation of web applications allowing providers to monitor customer service agents, or conduct accident investigations, giving a camera to a supervisor and sending them out with a Web app instead of having everything handwritten.

Tablets also cut costs on investing in equipment. A paratransit agency that has an older MDT may have four or five devices in the compartment with the driver. The Android eliminates that duplication of efforts, Larsen points out. For example, an application that records directly on that Android tablet could be used for the driver pre-tip inspection form.

“Everything is right there in the driver’s hands and you don’t have multiple applications and devices in the front of the vehicle,” he adds. “It’s one device, it’s affordable. As the device wears out, you just get a new version for literally pennies on the dollar for what you paid on all these others combined.”

Lack of durability was first seen as a major drawback, but that has not proven to be the case. The tablets are durable, Kent says, and in the rare event they do need to be replaced, it’s a straightforward process of getting a new one out into the field so the wiring isn’t as big a deal.

“Wiring harnesses under the older MDTs could be really cost prohibitive from a maintenance standpoint,” he recalls. “We stripped an MDT down (and) counted all the wires. In an older model it was like 146 wires had to be connected to get this thing in the vehicle. That’s pretty daunting for a mechanic and maintenance staff, if you’ve got 50 vehicles and you have to [install] all those and make sure they’re all operating correctly. You have to really be on top of your maintenance game. Androids are plug and play and inexpensive.”

Securing tablets in the vehicle is easy, using mounting equipment from RAM Mounting Systems, which makes the equipment for police cruisers, boats and now for Android tablets, according to Larsen. The tablets can also be locked if an operator is concerned that the device is going to walk away with staff.

Manufacturers and software developers are also responding to safety concerns agencies from agencies, Larsen says.

“What happens if a driver is looking at the screen while they’re driving? [Some] software manufacturing developers are creating feature functionality that prevents the tablet from operating while the vehicle is in motion. They use the native technology in the tablet, so when the vehicle starts moving it locks the screen.”
TRAVEL TRAINING

About 60% of respondents said they have a travel training program, while 20% do not, but are thinking of creating one, and 20% do not have a travel training program and are not looking into creating one, mainly due to a lack of resources. Reasons in favor of considering a travel training program ranged from aiming to mainstream some riders onto fixed route buses; reduce the number of rides on paratransit; making more riders aware that even though they have disabilities, they can ride regular fixed-route buses; reduce paratransit costs; and open up viable options for the elderly and individuals with disabilities.

“[This] would allow them to be more independent and save money in the process, to decrease riding cancellations due to passengers overbooking of trips,” one provider added.

Respondents reported, on average, that their travel training programs have been in place for about nine years.

In response to whether the program is being supported in part by any other organizations (nonprofits, senior or disabled advocacy groups, colleges or schools) about 42% said they received such support. Approximately one-third are supported by nonprofits or receive support from disabled advocacy groups, 14% get support from colleges or universities, about one-fifth cited Federal Transit Administration New Freedom Funds, and nearly 10% are supported by neighborhood or city paratransit programs.

When asked whether the program helped its operation cut costs by moving more riders to its fixed-route system, 61% said it did help. Half of those were able to quantify the amount of savings, reporting an average of 3.38% in savings.

Mike Whitten, executive director, Manchester, N.H.-based Manchester Transit Authority, commented that the system’s paratransit ridership has “definitely decreased,” adding that the June figures show paratransit is “down by 8% so we may be starting to see a plateau. We attribute the vast majority of this decrease to clients transitioning off paratransit and onto fixed route.”

Two-thirds of providers reported integrating fixed routes with paratransit services, which is about the same as last year’s 70%.

TECHNOLOGY

Slightly more than one-third of providers reported adding new technology to their operation, which is on par with last year. About one-fifth implemented scheduling and dispatch software, 15% added or upgraded AVL systems, 12% added IVR call systems and 8% adopted online booking.

Other technological innovations included mobile data terminals [see sidebar on p. 22], installing surveillance cameras on vehicles, new trip scheduling procedures, “brokerage of DAR trips to primary contractor with multiple other transportation companies sub-contracted to perform trips,” sharing metrics with drivers and electronic fare pre-payment.

CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

Recruiting and retention are still by far the top worries for surveyed operators, at 39%. Nearly one-quarter are concerned about customer service, a number that has decreased a bit from last year’s 37%. Another common concern, cited by 16% of respondents, is training. Injury came in at slightly more than 10%. Some other concerns carried shared were overscheduling, “driver blind spots,” wages, “too much passenger interaction” and the “increasing size of mobility devices.”

Costs and funding far outweighed any other challenges for operators; 40% selected these issues as the biggest challenge they deal with. One operator shared the fact that paratransit service “consumes nearly 50% of the agency’s funding.” In second place, one-fifth of operators selected demand. Limited resources, service area size, customer expectations were other common hurdles listed. One respondent replied that, “One of the biggest challenges in providing paratransit service is providing service within policy limits. There are many passengers that expect more from ADA providers, such as extended service times, no negotiation of one-hour scheduling window and additional help beyond the policies. Saying no to such requests often leads to the perception of bad customer service, and being perceived as irresponsible to the ADA community.”

Some less-cited problems included “securement and safety incidents and issues related to mobility devices and oversized passengers,” and “communicating with care providers, especially group homes with multiple staff members.”