

Develop Ridership Policies Before You Need To

Prepared by
Kansas University Transportation Center
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Ridership policies are often developed retroactively, after problems have arisen and have been resolved. But an agency need not wait until a problem arises to create policies. Rather, proactive adoption of ridership policies will set the ground rules for effective communication between the agency, drivers and riders.

Here are some policies to consider implementing at your agency.

Who can ride the bus? A fundamental element of any transit agency is knowing who you serve. The answers to the following questions will assist you in creating this policy.

- Is your service open to the general public or only to those with special needs?
- Do you transport children?
- If your agency transports children, do you require children to be accompanied by an adult?
- Are Job Access Program clients welcome to use your services?

Area of service. The area of service is the geographic area covered by your agency's bus routes.

- Do your routes cover an entire county or city?
- Will your agency cross state lines?

Scheduling. One of the areas of greatest frustration for transit agencies and their riders is scheduling rides. A ridership policy can eliminate confusion by clearly setting out the following details:

- when reservations will be taken;
- who will take reservations;
- how far in advance reservations need to be made;
- if there is a limit on the number of rides that may be made by an individual each day; and
- If changes in destination are allowed without notice.

Cancellations and no-shows. Sometimes a rider plans change and a pre-scheduled trip must be canceled. In the interest of convenience, ridership policies must clearly establish:

- how early a cancellation must be received to avoid a late fee;
- the cost assessed on a rider who fails to show up at the scheduled time, except in cases of emergency;
- a suspension policy for passengers who repeatedly fail to show up for scheduled rides within a certain period of time.

Days and times of operation. Clearly identifying the days and times of transit service is fundamental to the success of ridership policies. This list should also provide a clear statement of when service is not offered, including all public holidays observed by the agency.

Pick-up times and wait policies. Sometimes riders become frustrated when waiting to be picked up. Drivers can also get frustrated when they have to wait excessively long for riders. Part of this anxiety may be alleviated by letting your riders know:

- how long the driver will wait after arrival for the rider; and how many minutes you suggest the passenger be ready for pickup prior to the scheduled arrival of the bus. A good rule of thumb is 10 minutes.

Delays. Delays happen. They should not happen often, but they are sometimes unavoidable. Riders can plan for the inconvenience of possible delays and not miss appointments by scheduling arrival times earlier than their appointments.

Personal assistance to riders. Because your riders have special needs, it is important that your agency's ridership policies clearly specify the functions drivers are allowed to provide to passengers boarding or debarking the bus. These may include:

- assisting with coats and opening doors; and
- carrying groceries and packages (limited to one trip from the vehicle to the door per ride).

Agencies may wish to limit the weight that drivers may be asked to carry. Riders who need assistance beyond that, for example, passengers using wheelchairs who need help ascending a flight of stairs at their residence, may be required by your agency to have a personal care attendant to provide this assistance. But your agency must allow attendants to ride free-of-charge to assist passengers who need extra help.

Passenger assistance. Many riders rely on wheelchairs to assist them with mobility. Certain rules should be followed for the safety of those passengers, including:

- drivers may only assist riders on approved wheelchair ramps;
- under no circumstances should a driver assist passengers in wheelchairs up and down stairs;
- riders who use scooters may be asked by the provider to transfer to a vehicle seat. However, the ADA does not allow the agency to require the individual to transfer as a condition of receiving services

Conduct and hygiene. Transit providers should make it clear to all potential riders that inappropriate conduct will not be tolerated. Inappropriate conduct may include:

- intoxication;
- physical abuse;
- arguing and verbal abuse;
- threatening the driver or fellow passengers;
- use of foul language; and
- sexual harassment.

Some caution is in order. The ADA rules (49 CFR §37.5) provide that it is not discrimination to deny service to an individual because the individual engages in “violent, seriously disruptive, or illegal conduct.” A provider may not deny service because an individual’s disability “results in appearance or involuntary behavior that may offend, annoy, or inconvenience employees of the entity or other persons.” For example, a person who uses foul language as a result of Tourette’s syndrome could not be denied service on the basis of misconduct. An individual with a medical condition that produces uncontrollable body odor could not be denied service on the basis of “offensively poor hygiene.”

Also, your agency may choose to institute a policy denying service to those who have offensively poor hygiene. The policy should make it clear that the driver, with the approval of dispatch, may deny service or require the rider to leave the vehicle. If the rider is asked to leave the vehicle at a place other than his or her home, the driver must ask the dispatcher to make arrangements to transport this individual home.

- A policy prohibiting food, drink or smoking on vehicles is an appropriate way to ensure that riders have a pleasant and safe experience when being transported by your agency.

Generally, policies prohibiting food, drink, or smoking on vehicles are appropriate. However, under the ADA, transit providers are required to make reasonable modifications of policies and procedures in order to make their services program accessible. For example, an individual with diabetes may need to eat a snack at 3:00 each day in order to maintain appropriate blood sugar levels. If 3:00 falls in the middle of a trip, the transit provider would need to make an exception to its no food or drink policy in order to accommodate the passenger’s disability.

Pets and service animals. Only service animals should be permitted to ride on transit vehicles. Some transit agencies make exceptions for passengers who need to transport their pet to the veterinarian as long as the animal is contained in a pet carrier.

Bad weather. Passengers should be aware that service will not be offered when severe weather makes traveling unsafe. Cancellation of services should be made known to riders via broadcasts on local television and radio stations.

Fares. Ridership policies should clearly state the amount charged for each trip whether it is a fixed rate or based on miles traveled. In the case of complementary paratransit service only — a limit of twice the fare charged to fixed route riders for a comparable trip.

Grievance procedures. When a rider has any problem with the services provided, the following procedures should be followed to effectively resolve those issues.

- A rider with a grievance should inform the director of the agency, in writing or verbally, within a specific number of days of the occurrence, (if possible (five days is suggested));
- The director shall have a specific number of working days to respond to the complaint;
- If a resolution is not reached in a timely fashion, the rider can address his or her complaint to the agency's Board of Directors, who will make a final decision;

Upon the Board's decision, if the rider is still not satisfied, he or she may file an administrative grievance or legal action.

These are just some of the key elements that should be discussed in your agency's ridership policies. Other policies should be added as they become necessary to your transit agency. Ridership policies will improve the quality of transit services by minimizing conflict between riders, drivers and the agency.

Outline for Ridership Policies

Who can ride the bus?

Area of service:

Scheduling:

Cancellations and no-shows:

Days and times of operation:

Pick-up times and wait policies:

Delays:

Personal assistance to riders.

Passenger assistance:

Pets and service animals:

Bad Weather:

Fares:

Grievance procedures:

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