

## Reported Paratransit concerns with MV Transportation

- Washington D.C. –issues with timeliness of rides, riders stranded, GPS system malfunctions, increase in accidents when they took over, inexperienced drivers, rude dispatchers
- Dallas- when MV took over paratransit there was problems with timeliness of rides, rides not showing up, long waits on dispatch phone calls
- Gainesville , Fla.-riders filed a civil rights complaint with the federal Department of Transportation against MV because they did not provide rides at schedule times, there reservation system was not working properly and their vehicles were not safe
- Belchertown, MA paratransit riders forced the city to cut contracts with MV transportation because of poor treatment of disabled riders
- Chicago- MV transportation left riders at stop in order to make “on-time” goals

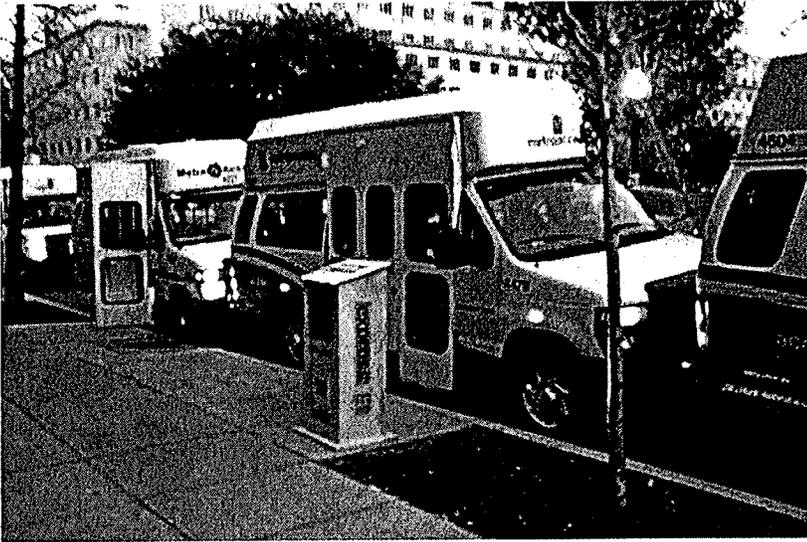
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## How MetroAccess, MV Transportation, and WMATA fail D.C.'s disabled riders

October 26, 2011 - 01:37 PM By John Hendel (Twitter @TBDOnFoot)



Vehicles at WMATA's front door on Monday. (Photo: John Hendel)

On Monday night, MetroAccess vans lined 5th Street NW in front of WMATA's Jackson Graham headquarters in Chinatown. You've seen the vans all over the District — the long white vans with the big MetroAccess signs, part of a fleet comprising 600 vehicles. Dozens of people with disabilities had arrived on this dark, chilly evening for the first of three town halls to determine whether MetroAccess will continue to contract with MV Transportation, the California-based company that helps Metro transport the two-and-a-half million people in the D.C. metro region who rely on the service every year, beyond 2013. The paratransit service has grown enormously over the half decade and it costs more than \$100 million to run every year. Yet no one seems happy with MetroAccess. The service is barraged with complaints from passengers, drivers, and others — and especially against MV Transportation, the

contractor that's controlled the service since 2005 and is expected to continue as its contractor through June of 2013.

"They really don't know who they're playing with," one middle-aged woman told WMATA's Accessibility Advisory Committee Monday night in a packed room, wheelchairs and canes visible everywhere. "I'm not a toy. If they're kept on as contractors I will own Metro. Believe it ... I'm a gravely ill woman and I have had enough."

Perhaps a hundred people filled the modest WMATA room in what was called a "listening session," where each MetroAccess rider had two minutes to speak about their experiences. One after another listed off their problems with the service — the rides are never on time, the GPS system malfunctions, the fare system is confusing, bad equipment in the vehicles, the dispatchers are rude and don't know the area, and more. WMATA reports more a daily MetroAccess ridership of more than 7,000 as of last June, and the sheer size was apparent in the crowd. By my count, more than 35 speakers voiced their experiences, and of all those, despite multiple expressions of gratitude that such a service exists at all, only one speaker said she was happy with the service. These MetroAccess riders, some who talked of being cancer survivors and deeply struggling people, offered emotional testaments on the failures of MV. In light of these emotions, how has MV Transportation continue to be contracted for MetroAccess services?

"It's kind of fun to beat up on the paratransit provider," Patrick Sheehan, the head of the Accessibility Advisory Committee, told me today when considering whether MV deserved all the ire. "I think MV's doing a good job. I think there are things they could be doing better ... The overall growth of the system has just been phenomenal."

Sheehan is right, and MetroAccess's rapid expansion has absolutely had an effect on how MV delivers and how everyone interprets their service. But even despite this, the devastating reactions to MV suggest a failure of communication throughout the system. The perception issue affects drivers as well as passengers. A union of MetroAccess bus drivers protested the long 13-hour shifts MV forces them to work earlier this fall, marching in front of the Hyattsville MetroAccess headquarters. "What happens if, God forbid, there's a fatality?" union president Wayne Baker told me when I joined the protesting drivers on August 29.

Baker and his fellow protesting drivers shared many of the town hall's concerns during their protest two months earlier, and I imagine the gratification he would have felt hearing the



multiple MetroAccess riders who expressed similar worries about how drivers fared under MV. I spoke with Baker today, and he tells me that there's been no change or progress with MV. The company still works its drivers 13, 14 hours, and more on occasion, and Baker told me he knows he needs to stay the course on the safety concern. Although some drivers like the overtime, they've told him how tired they get around the 11th hour and beyond and he fears "the potential danger of hurting someone." MV has not, according to Baker, engaged in any dialogue on the issue, and in response to the earlier protests, the California company simply released a statement saying it believes "discussions will continue to be productive" and that it's "optimistic" regarding the resolution.



Monday's MetroAccess town hall. (Photo: John Hendel)

"They work them like Hebrew slaves and pay them pennies," one woman who's ridden with MetroAccess since July told the committee. "I'm sick of the excuses."

Another woman talked about "the problem with the drivers working 13-14 hours" and how they can be "sleepy, irritable." Yet another mentioned the drivers need better benefits and salaries. The drivers expressed these same concerns during their protests, and neither passengers nor drivers seemed to feel the experience was safe. Sheehan told me that MV's situation with the MetroAccess drivers is "unacceptable" and "non-negotiable," something that his committee will want to raise as a safety issue. MetroAccess passengers uniformly lambasted the MV dispatchers, who apparently are "nasty," "have no respect," and are "arrogant," as different speakers said. Sheehan says that MV will have to "get that rudeness scale reduced" if it wants to keep the contract in 2013. Reservationists have a script to follow now, Sheehan told me, and complaints about their rudeness has dropped. Perhaps dispatchers should have similar scripts, training, and ways to monitor the communication. "From a contract point of view, these are the pain points," Sheehan said about dispatcher rudeness and scheduling. "The discussion needs to center around what the contract will look like in the summer of 2013." He advocates for more real-time data in the hands of customers so they know where their vehicles are and whether they'll be late.

Shortly after the MetroAccess union protest a month and a half ago, I spoke at length with a MetroAccess bus driver in his early 30s named Leslie about his experiences working for MV. He prefers not to give his full name but I've written about him before — online he's the vlogger known as MeanBlackDude and he's featured videos that advocate for people with disabilities in the broader D.C. metro region before. The idea of retribution from MV doesn't bother him because, as he asks, why should he fear anything if he's not bashing or defaming the company? But he does have his concerns.

"Internally we have a lot of problems with management," Leslie told me. "These work hours are killer, man ... I really love the job, but a lot of the politics are getting in the way."



Leslie has driven MetroAccess passengers for more than two and a half years. He grew up around D.C., in Southeast, elsewhere, and now lives by himself in Prince George's County around Suitland. His attitude toward his passengers and his job is sensitive, thoughtful, and careful, but he points out how MV Transportation doesn't respond to union grievances and has "questionable individuals." He wonders at how money is being spent, at how MV is cutting dispatchers' and drivers' hours and causing some drivers to ask others for money. "I would like for WMATA to look at where the extension money is actually being spent," Leslie said. "We're not seeing it in our offices." That concern is reflected in drivers' salaries as well as a lack of benefits like a 401K. "You'd expect \$14-15 an hour starting [salary]," Leslie added. "I could drive a fork lift and be at the same salary."

WMATA renewed its MetroAccess contract with MV Transportation on July 1, 2011 for the next two years and "represents more than \$216 million in annual revenue" for MV, according to the company. Sheehan isn't sure whether MV will get the next contract or not. He's not responsible for deciding in any way himself but says, although "it's not a sure thing," the incumbent tends to have the advantage. MV knows D.C. and has a "better chance than most," he estimates, and an even better one if they can address some of these passenger complaints. Sheehan imagines the next multi-year contract, running hundreds of millions of dollars, will have to be firmly decided by January of 2013 to allow for a six-month transition period. His other big question — should one giant contractor control MetroAccess in the new contract or should it be broken up into pieces? Both have their pros and cons, in his estimation, and Sheehan is at least glad that this new contract is seeking "stakeholder input," which hadn't happened in the past.

Yet for the last six years, hardly anyone reports being happy with MV Transportation. Often there's a disconnect between MV employees and MetroAccess drivers, according to Leslie. "We don't even get to see management, really," he remarked. They come in at 7 a.m. and leave at 3 p.m. while drivers are out on the road for 12, 14, 16 hours a day on the days they work. WMATA reports an on-time performance of 92% as of June, but Leslie has his doubts. "There's no way we're operating at 92%," Leslie said about the MetroAccess statistics. "My personal calculation is maybe 88%." His doubts were echoed in the repeated complaints from riders at the MetroAccess town halls this week. One woman said she had experienced 15 late trips since June ... and that in all those cases, the driver is more than an hour late. People reported riding around with MetroAccess drivers for two to three hours at times during their trips. No one seemed thrilled as they recounted their grievances. No one smiled.

Some grew angry that Metro senior management didn't make an appearance. Before long, these passengers would be out in the darkness, in the rain that had begun to fall and lining up to board the MetroAccess vans. Here in this meeting room, they hoped to find a voice, despite a microphone that repeatedly cut out, and what they wanted was someone to listen. One older man in a jean jacket and red cap stood up close to the end of the town hall with a message for WMATA and General Manager Richard Sarles.

"Why is Mr. Sarles not here today?" the man asked with emotion. "I have four letters for you — A.B.M.V. Anybody but MV. This is on his plate, and this is *not acceptable* that he is not here."

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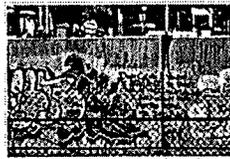
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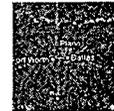
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## DART still struggles to get paratransit service completely on track



By Tom Benning  
tbenning@dallasnews.com

4:15 pm on November 17, 2012 | Permalink

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Complaints about Dallas Area Rapid Transit's recently revamped paratransit service remain as loud as ever, weeks after the agency acknowledged the main transportation option for its 11,000 elderly and disabled passengers wasn't up to par.

And while DART officials are confident they're finally on the road to solving things, many passengers who attended a DART paratransit meeting Saturday in Dallas expressed frustration that the kinds of problems plaguing the operation are largely unchanged.

Rides aren't on time or don't show up. Vehicles aren't always the best fit for the riders using them. And there are long waits on the phone lines, which get only longer if rides are delayed or if the vehicles are unsuitable.

"They tell me one thing and then they do another," said Charles Scott, a 77-year-old Dallas resident who uses a wheelchair. "You have to go through a whole lot of rhetoric for nothing at all."

DART officials have been open in apologizing and acknowledging the agency's missteps ever since its new paratransit contractor, Dallas-based MV Transportation, took over the service Oct. 1 from Veolia Transportation.

But even as the agency has scrambled to smooth out the problems – bringing in more experienced dispatchers, adding more suitable vehicles and reconfiguring the scheduling process – consistent and acceptable performance has proved fleeting.

"We're still dealing with the fallout from what didn't go right on Oct. 1," Doug Douglas, DART's vice president of mobility management, said in an interview before Saturday's meeting.

The paratransit service's on-time performance rate for the week starting Nov. 5 was 79 percent. That's an improvement from the 73 percent on-time rate during the disastrous first week of service in October, but it's well below the goal of having 95 percent of rides on time.

Phone calls on the reservation line during the week of Nov. 5 were answered within 3 minutes about 94 percent of the time and within 5 minutes 98 percent of the time. But on the "Where's My Ride?" line, the three-minute threshold was met only 64 percent of the time and the five-minute barrier, 80 percent.

But DART and MV Transportation officials said they've finally made some breakthroughs on the 2,700 rides provided each day.

MV Transportation hired on more of the local management team from the prior contractor, Veolia, to further expedite the transition, said Chris Langmayer, MV Transportation's regional vice president. And more importantly, scheduled routes were reconfigured last week to make rides more efficient.

Those changes helped boost on-time performance last week to nearly 90 percent, even though delays on the phone lines remained a mixed bag. And DART officials said the steady performance gave them hope that service would be top notch by the end of the year.

"We're seeing steady improvement daily, although it's not as great as we would like to see it," Douglas said. "But I'm cautiously optimistic. This week has renewed my level of confidence that ... we are on the full road to recovery."

And while complaints were plentiful at Saturday's meeting – with one woman, for instance, recounting that her son was abandoned at a gas station by a paratransit taxi driver – some in attendance thanked DART for the service and praised the agency for recent improvements.

Josephine Albert, a 76-year-old disabled passenger who lives in Dallas, said her rides have been on time, that the drivers and dispatchers have been friendly and that she would be happy with DART as long as they don't raise fares.

"I have had zero problems," she said.

But DART officials admitted there are many more passengers who haven't had quite that same experience. Douglas said the biggest challenge going forward – other than maintaining timely service – would be earning back the trust of passengers who've had a rough time.

"Our riders have long memories," said Douglas, who said there will be another paratransit meeting Dec. 1 in Garland. "Sometimes there's forgiveness. But when we continue to fail them, their memories revert back to when we've harmed them."



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## Riders sue transport company

By **JEFF ADELSON**

Sun staff writer

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Disabled Alachua County residents have filed a civil rights complaint against the company that local governments have charged with providing them with transportation.

The complaint, filed with the Federal Transit Administration against MV Transportation at the end of October, argues that the company's problems providing rides at scheduled times, taking reservations and keeping up its vehicles cause serious issues for disabled riders and amount to a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"Why as a transportation company do they have a problem with the wrong location, the wrong day or the wrong time?" asked Joan DeNicola, a board member of the Gainesville chapter of the National Federation for the Blind, which filed the complaint.

Gainesville pays MV about \$700,000 a year to provide paratransit service, which offers door-to-door scheduled rides for the disabled. The California-based company took over as the countywide Community Transportation Coordinator about three years ago, after city and county officials decided to end a contract with three local transit companies that had generated regular complaints from residents.

Riders filed similar complaints against those companies in 1999 and 2000 and have said similar problems exist with MV.

"They're unreliable, unprofessional, unsafe, uncoordinated, unorganized and often unresponsive," said DeNicola, who argued that the city and county should take direct control of the operation to provide better service.

MV Transportation is working to address issues brought up by its riders, said Nikki Freney, director of communications for the company. As part of this effort, the company has increased wages for drivers to attract candidates for all its positions, Freney said.

Since mid-October, the company has been on time for about 90 percent of its rides, Freney said.

"In some instances we have not provided the service that is needed there, but its not to say we haven't tried and we haven't reached out," she said.

"I think there needs to be a stronger partnership between (MV) and the government agencies," Freney said.

*Jeff Adelson can be reached at 352-374-5095 or [adelsoj@gvillesun.com](mailto:adelsoj@gvillesun.com)*

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