



**Testimony of the Public Advocate Letitia James  
Before the New York City Council Committee on Aging, the Committee on  
Transportation, and the Committee on Mental Health, Developmental Disability,  
Alcoholism, Substance Abuse and Disability Services – Oversight: Transportation  
Services for Seniors and People with Disabilities in New York City  
April 22, 2015**

New York City Transit—the State authority that operates the mass transit system in New York City—has an obligation to provide paratransit services to individuals with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act stipulates that these services must be comparable to the response time and level of service given to non-disabled passengers. I can tell you today that based on the complaints received by my office related to the Access-A-Ride program, New York City Transit has failed to live up to that obligation.

Providing reliable on-time paratransit services is undoubtedly a complicated enterprise; providing this service while keeping costs low is even more challenging. And yet this is exactly what we must do. The city's senior population is expected to grow by 30 percent in the next twenty years, and the number of New Yorkers with mobility constraints is also likely to grow. New York City must find a way to improve paratransit services at the very time when more people will be using them. The alternative is a city in which a large segment of the population is effectively cut off from venturing outside.

I know that many of my constituents are fed up with the existing Access-A-Ride program. My office has received 66 complaints about this service since I took office in January of 2014. My sense is that many others have similar issues but have become so used to them, so downtrodden, that they no longer take the trouble to report them.

Late pickups are the most common issue. One constituent, who had to wait an



hour later than their scheduled pickup time on both ends of the same trip, suggested that the program be renamed “Stress-A-Ride.” I remember early last year a senior visited my office and had to wait more than five hours for Access-A-Ride to pick her up. I was about to drive her home myself when Access-A-Ride finally arrived.

Constituents tell me that dispatchers are often rude and provide false information about when they can expect to be picked up. Some are dissatisfied with the Broker Services and instead insist on using Access-A-Ride vans. It is clear that the contractors hired by New York City Transit for these services must be held to a higher standard. This is especially the case of the Broker Services, which are expected to handle an increasing number of paratransit trips. The two Broker Services contractors, Medical Transportation Management and Corporate Transportation Group must be held accountable. If their level of service is not improved I insist that Transit not extend their contracts.

I want to commend New York City Transit for taking steps to control the costs of the Access-A-Ride program, and for instituting some promising new services.

Particularly I think that the Taxi Debit Card Program shows great potential to offset the high cost of operating paratransit buses—trips on these buses currently cost \$56 a ride. The Debit Card Program, a partnership with the TLC, allows customers to hail a taxi within Manhattan for the cost of a MetroCard swipe. They can hail a cab on the street or request a taxi through the TLC’s Accessible Dispatch program. They can also use an app called Wheels on Wheels, which also shows great promise.

Now that Green taxis are serving the outer boroughs, it is time to offer this service to eligible individuals in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. I am pleased that, according



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to the TLC website, the Commission is working to create an accessible dispatch program.

Meanwhile, I would like to learn the number of Access-A-Ride customers using this service today and the cost of the program. The cost is said to be lower than Access-A-Ride vans, but it would be useful to see exactly what the cost savings on a per-trip basis are. Of course, the city must move to increase the percentage of the taxi fleet that is wheelchair accessible. Currently only two percent of all yellow taxis are accessible.

I would also like to suggest that customers are able to use a smartphone app that would allow them to see the location of their Access-A-Ride van, to know how many stops it must make before reaching them, and to report issues related to late-pickups or other problems quickly and easily.

Finally, I want to commend the MTA and New York City Transit for working to make more of the subway system accessible for those with disabilities. The MTA is expected to meet its goal of making 100 "key stations" accessible by 2020. The 2015-2019 Capital Plan includes \$561 million for new elevators at 13 stations and another \$436 million to replace 46 elevators and 35 escalators. I hope that accessibility remains a priority in the coming years.

Thank you.