

Managing Bus Passenger No-Show Policies in Rural Kansas

The Problem

THE FLINT HILLS AREA Transportation Agency (aTa Bus) operates rural bus services and a small urban service in the Manhattan, Junction City, and Fort Riley County area in northeast Kansas. In pre-Covid times, the agency served about 300,000 riders annually, with 70 percent of operations along fixed routes and 30 percent for demand-response. In the mid-2000s, as ridership grew, trips to work overtook medical trips as the primary reason customers used the service. Concurrently, passenger no-shows and cancellations rose, representing roughly 25 percent of all trip bookings in 2006—as many as 30 to 40 rides on a given days.

At the time, aTa Bus allowed unlimited passenger subscriptions, that is, customers could book recurring inbound and outbound trips and schedule those trips a year or more in advance. Anne Smith, aTa Bus's executive director, was the dispatcher at the time. She experienced first hand the problems arising from customers reserving trips they did not



need, which tied up buses and drivers who could not respond to legitimate on-demand requests for service. As Smith put it, "that wasn't acceptable."

At the time, the options for addressing the problem, including wholesale suspension of riders, were not palatable and such drastic measures did not comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Moreover, the technology was not yet in place for aTa Bus's two-person staff to track and manage repeat no-show passengers.

Precise Definitions Inform Best Practices

SEEKING ANSWERS, SMITH found TCRP Synthesis 60: **Practices in No-Show and Late Cancellation Policies for ADA Paratransit**. The report documents current and innovative practices among U.S. transit agencies in the development and implementation of passenger no-show and late cancellation policies for paratransit programs. The report's authors completed 134 surveys with transit agencies, and consulted with FTA

officials to clarify survey findings and interpretations.

This report has served as an active reference document at aTa Bus since 2006. Smith credits the contents with helping to define a range of norms and practices that align with FTA and ADA guidelines for responsibly managing and reducing no-shows and cancellations. In general, the report's precise definitions and policy guidance have helped Smith to educate aTa Bus's board, local elected officials, and are used in new driver training.



For example, the report provides a working definition of what a late cancellation is, and is not. "Late cancellations can be considered a kind of missed trip as long as they are the "functional equivalent" of a no-show." Within the report, FTA clarifies that "cancellations made after 5 p.m. the day before service are not the functional equivalent of a no-show....," whereas cancellations made "1 to 2 hours before the scheduled pick-up" do qualify as a no-show.

Similarly, the report's citation of CFR guidance with respect to what constitutes a missed trip beyond the rider's control has helped Smith get everyone, including drivers, on the same page. "Having actual definitions from an authoritative source was a big deal," she said. "I wasn't making it up as I went along."

Smith has gone so far as to quote from Synthesis 60 in aTa Bus's rider handbook, making it clear that "a pattern or practice [of no-shows] involves intentional, repeated, or regular actions, not isolated, accidental, or singular incidents."

In addition to providing clear definitions of key terms, the report's survey data exposed aTa Bus to transit industry norms, such as common practices for advanced trip scheduling. In response to the survey question asking the maximum number of days in advance that trip requests can be made, 43.1 percent of respondents said 14 days. Subsequently, aTa Bus adopted the 14-day limit as its own policy.

Another challenge involves pick-up windows. In the past, aTa Bus adhered to a five-minute window, which had an adverse effect on no-shows. The survey indicates that 38.6 percent of transit agencies (a plurality of responses) rely on a 15-minute before/15-minute after pick-up window. That is now aTa Bus's policy as well.



Report Policies Lead to Measurable Improvement

BASED ON THE information and guidance in Synthesis 60, aTa Bus's total no-shows are now under 10 percent, compared with 25 percent from 2006-2010. Guided by the findings in the report, the agency now clearly defines a no-show as the cancellation of 20 percent or more of at least seven trips reserved in a given month. In line with the report's findings that software helps to capture, report, and manage no-show data, aTa Bus has deployed tablets on buses and uses spreadsheets to send written warnings to no-shows, followed by a series of escalating actions (leading up to suspension) that reflect best practices among many of the surveyed agencies.

Smith calls Synthesis 60 the "backbone" that has informed years of policies and practices to reduce no-shows and cancellations in a way this small agency can readily manage. ●

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