

For 10 years she has relied on it — and she's got a laundry list of complaints

THE RIDE users cite major flaws

BOSTON. A laundry list of complaints from users of the MBTA's disabled transportation service THE RIDE has prompted a City Council probe.

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After a doctor's appointment last year, 26-year-old Stacy Berloff sat outside in her wheelchair for more than four-and-a-half hours waiting for the MBTA's disabled transportation service to pick her up and bring her home.

She called the dispatcher several times asking when the van and would arrive, and each time she was told, "in five to 10 minutes."

As a result, Berloff was afraid to wait inside on this winter evening in fear of missing her only way home.

The van finally arrived but Berloff spent the next three days in bed, out of work and in pain because the cold caused her neurological condition to flare up.

Many people would have never waited for four hours, but instead hailed a cab or jumped on a subway.

Berloff doesn't have that luxury.

She has been confined to a wheelchair since age 18 and is forced to rely on the T's paratransit service, known as THE RIDE, to get to work, doctor appointments and social events.

As a RIDE user for 10 years, Berloff has a laundry list of complaints.

Frequently THE RIDE is more than an hour late, several times it has never shown up at all and almost every week her commute from her job near the statehouse in Boston to her home in Brookline takes her 45 minutes. Normal travel time is about 15 minutes.

In fact, on Oct. 30, the day a Metro reporter traveled with Berloff on THE RIDE, the van showed up 25 minutes after the scheduled pickup time, the driver failed to secure her wheelchair properly and her trip home from work took about 50 minutes.

"People with disabilities are treated like second-class citizens," Berloff said. "[The T] wouldn't do this to anyone else and get away with it."

Berloff is not alone.

Facts about THE RIDE:

- THE RIDE provides transportation to people with physical, cognitive or mental disability.
- THE RIDE operates 365 days a year from 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. and 62 cities and towns.
- RIDE customers are charged \$1.25 for a one-way ticket but the cost is actually \$25.50 each trip, according to T officials.
- There are 400 vans and cars in THE RIDE fleet operated by four different companies under contract with the T.
- Customers need to call the night before to set up a RIDE for the next day.
- A RIDE is not considered late under T policy until it is over 30 minutes late.
- Disabled commuters are required to fill out an application to use THE RIDE.

A group of RIDE users have united in their cause to get the T to clean up its act and revamp the service for the disabled. The Boston City Council is holding a public hearing next Thursday to investigate complaints by THE RIDE Advocacy project (RAP).

“At a time when the T is seeking increased fares and focusing on other projects, it’s important not to forget the needs of people with disabilities,” said Boston City Councilor Charles Yancey, who called for the investigative hearing after receiving repeated complaints. “I do believe this requires immediate public attention.”

RAP is calling on the T to hire an independent consultant to monitor the service and recommend changes because of what they call “systemic” problems in scheduling, driver training and reliability. Right now the T only has a consumer group that evaluates the service.



“What would the general public say if their commuter rail train was late every day?” questioned Kathy Roach, a blind RIDE user and member of RAP. “People with disabilities have been consistently marginalized because we have a disability. All we want to do is facilitate our daily routine and equalize the playing field. THE RIDE is supposed to do that and they’re not doing that at all.”

The group compiled a report, which will be released publicly next week, documenting 200 complaints from RIDE users taken over six months. Forty-two percent of the complaints cite late pickups, 18 percent concern scheduling problems and 11 percent address safety, such as drivers not securing wheelchairs properly.

According to MBTA records, from June 2002 to 2003, there were 493 complaints filed by riders concerning late pickups and 293 complaints filed for scheduling problems. This is a small percentage considering the T provided 1,178,119 rides to disabled commuters during that time, according to MBTA records.



Stacy Berloff (above) gets assistance on THE RIDE from an MBTA employee. THE RIDE provides transportation to people with physical, cognitive or mental disability.

All photos by Eric Barry

Pam Rogers, director of RAP, attributes the low number of complaints to frustration.

“People have given up,” Rogers said.

According to Bob Rizzo, the MBTA manager in charge of THE RIDE, the service has improved considerably in recent years but remains a work in progress.

With 60,000 registered users, approximately 1.3 million rides a year, a 400-vehicle fleet and a \$31 million budget, THE RIDE remains the most challenging mode of public transportation to provide, Rizzo said.

About 5,000 people take THE RIDE a day, making scheduling and timeliness a challenge in the traffic-plagued City of Boston, Rizzo said. Despite this, T statistics show that in 98 percent of the

cases the vehicle picks up the customer within 30 minutes of their scheduled time (according to T regulations, the driver is not late if they pick up the rider within 30 minutes).

“We have an incredibly good record considering the difficulty in providing the service,” Rizzo said. “Every day is a brand new schedule with 5,000 requests a day and we’re not turning anyone down.”

Although formal complaints to the MBTA don’t reflect the outrage of many RIDE users or signal a widespread problem, many disability advocates say the troubles with the service are well known.

Charles Vernon, a supervisor with the Massachusetts Commission on Disabilities, works for the state in placing disabled people in jobs. According to Vernon, people who rely on THE RIDE to get to work are many times unemployable.

“I can’t get them jobs because I can’t get them there on time,” Vernon said.

Loretta Williams uses the RIDE to travel to her job at Simmons College every weekday.

Luckily, said Williams, she has an understanding boss, because at least twice a week the RIDE is more than 40 minutes late.

Annemarie Martin, director of Boston’s Visiting Nurse Association, said it is common when taking care of patients to hear complaints about THE RIDE. The unreliability of the service is expected at this point, Martin said.

Attorneys with the Disability Law Center, a non-profit advocacy group, have been keeping a close watch on the T for years. The repeated complaints they receive from RIDE commuters may signal a violation in the federal Americans with Disabilities Act by the T, said Jane Alper, a lawyer with the law center.

“ADA laws and regulations say that the T is liable if a lot of people aren’t getting rides or if there a substantial number of untimely pickups,” Alper said.

At this point the Disability Law Center has not taken legal action because the records provided by the T only show a small percentage of late pickups.

“We’ve heard anecdotally for years about the problems with THE RIDE but on the other hand we are getting good statistics from the T,” Alper said. “People need to keep good records to prove T statistics aren’t correct.”

There are four companies under contract with the T to provide THE RIDE service and the contracts expire in June. According to Rizzo the T is seriously evaluating the companies, looking to upgrade the computer scheduling system and hoping to add Web-accessed RIDE requests beginning this summer to make the service more efficient.

“While we’re not perfect, we’ve come a long way,” Rizzo said. “It’s not the type of thing where you build it and it’s done. It’s a daily challenge.”

Missing important appointments is one thing, say many RAP members, but the lack of respect and the stress of relying on an unreliable service cuts even deeper.

“Disrespect for people with disabilities is at the root of this,” Williams said.

Karen Nurt, who is confined to her wheelchair with a form of muscular dystrophy, takes classes at a college three blocks away from her home. Every week she schedules THE RIDE to pick her up an hour before class begins and, according to Nurt, many times she is still late. Even more frequently she waits long periods of time outside alone after classes.

“Instead of concentrating on what I’m doing in class, I’m worrying about whether I’m going to be home on time for the person who comes to put me in bed at night,” Nurt said. “Sometimes I wonder if it would just be better to stay home and not have to worry about relying on an unreliable system.”