

Disabled riders blast MBTA vans

By CASEY ROSS

Despite reform efforts and a new scheduling system, the MBTA's van service for disabled passengers remains unsafe and woefully inconsistent, according to riders who tell of missed medical appointments and long waits in the cold.

"The biggest problem is the late pick-ups and being stuck places," said passenger Stacy Berloff, a frequent user of the T's "The Ride" service. "Lately it's been 45 minutes or so that they're running behind."

Interviews revealed several passengers' frustration with a system they say forces them to endure safety lapses and lengthy delays. Complaints from riders ranged from late service to frail safety restraints to poor scheduling that lengthens commuting times.

The complaints have become so regular that T officials hired independent consultants to examine the system and suggest improvements. The consultants will hold five public meetings in July and August to listen to riders' concerns.

Meanwhile, T officials say, reliability has been improving.

"Since July of 2004, on-time performance has been 97.1 percent," T spokesman Joe Pesaturo said, citing agency computer records. "There is room for improvement and we will continue to get that rate even higher."

The federally allowed definition for on-time service is within 30 minutes of a scheduled pick-up time - a window that disabled riders say is inappropriate. "If they drop me off at school a half-hour late, they don't see it as a problem, but it is a problem for me," Berloff said.

Advocates for the disabled said getting the T to focus on improving service has not been easy. Members of the Ride Advocacy Project (RAP), a group formed to lobby for reform, said they have been raising concerns for more than four years.

"We're not seeing tangible results yet," RAP member Linda Hillyer said. "We've had horrible

problems of people getting stranded or waiting an hour or two out in the cold."

Hillyer lauded the T for hiring an independent consultant, but she and several regular riders said change - especially safety improvements - can't come soon enough.

"Those seats will come crashing down on my lap," rider Kathryn Piccard said, pointing to fold-up seats above her wheelchair during a trip yesterday. "Sometimes, they also don't tie up (power wheelchairs), and if there's a crash, it could roll over and kill somebody."

T officials said drivers receive at least 60 hours of safety training and face stiff penalties for slip-ups. "If someone has a specific complaint, please bring it to our attention," Pesaturo said. "Discipline (for lapses) is severe and in a lot of cases results in dismissal." cross@bostonherald.com



CONCERNS: Riders including Kathryn Piccard, above, claim 'The Ride' is unsafe and unreliable. Staff photo by Patrick Whittemore