

# ***The RIDE Advocacy Project***

***RAP*** a project of ***Boston Self Help Center***

## **THE RIDE: UNRELIABLE, UNSAFE, AND UNFAIR**

**Prepared by the RIDE Advocacy Project (RAP)**

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THE RIDE is the MBTA's paratransit service. It provides transportation for people who cannot take a subway or bus because of their disabilities.

This report documents consumers' problems using THE RIDE — having difficulty scheduling rides and being subjected to inordinately long waits and late pickups. It points to the need for better training for drivers and dispatchers, the elimination of unsafe loading and unloading practices, improvement in its accommodation of people with various disabilities, and higher standards of vehicle maintenance.

*"My RIDE was two hours late. This put me in an unsafe situation. The building I was at closed at 9:30 p.m. THE RIDE did not come until 11:30 p.m. I am unable to move from the neck down. It was very cold outside. This was not safe or acceptable in any way."*

- A RIDE user<sup>1</sup>

*"I am hesitant to get a job even after finishing my Master's Degree because of THE RIDE being undependable."* - Billie Mulcahy

*"I try never to use THE RIDE if I can avoid it. It is always late. I miss appointments or work, or I am hours late getting home. It is too unreliable. . . . Also, the hours requested are rarely the ones given. I do not mean by a few minutes. I mean large differences."*

- A RIDE user

*"The complaint process is a joke! Yes, I get a form letter each time saying 'we're sorry' but nothing changes."* - Loretta J. Williams

*"Changing the MBTA is like turning around an ocean liner in a bathtub."*

- Long-time transportation specialist

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<sup>1</sup> Many people chose not to make their names public for fear of retaliation.

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to amplify the voices of people with disabilities who depend on THE RIDE, the MBTA's paratransit service, and to call for systemic change. Although the MBTA asks to hear from consumers about their problems with THE RIDE and generally responds promptly to individual complaints with a form letter, the conditions that lead to these complaints remain the same. We believe repeated problems will only be solved by institutional change.

THE RIDE is notoriously unreliable, at times unsafe, and deeply impacts the quality of life of those who use it. Those with jobs or doctors' appointments cannot count on arriving on time and may wait several hours to be picked up.

Friends, neighbors, and colleagues of RIDE users know that reliability is a huge problem with the service. Many agencies that serve people with disabilities and older people have first-hand experience of the problems with the RIDE's performance.

RAP worked with a variety of human service agencies to reach out to RIDE users. We gathered several hundred formal complaints, many of which cited multiple problems. This report amplifies the voices of people who desperately want and need THE RIDE to work more competently.

## RIDE PROBLEMS: CONSUMERS SPEAK OUT

An important caveat to this report: We do NOT blame drivers for the problems RIDE users face. Although consumers cite instances of drivers being rude or disrespectful, in most cases, the complainant sees these problems as stemming from a lack of training or an unreasonable schedule that the driver is trying hard to follow. We received several compliments about drivers. For example, one consumer wrote: "Excellent driver — very sensitive to everyone's disability needs, including complex seating arrangements to accommodate someone with a spinal cord injury."

### A. LATE PICKUPS

Imagine waiting for a bus or subway for an hour or two. Sure, it happens sometimes but generally because there has been a crisis: There is a medical emergency and the trains shut down. There is an ice storm and all vehicles, including MBTA buses, are crawling to their destination.

In our survey, late pickups are the chief problem cited. Forty-two percent of the complaints we received came from people who were late for their jobs, their medical appointments, or other activities essential to living a full life. Many people had to wait intolerably long times, sometimes in places where they didn't feel safe. Here's a sampling of what people reported:

*"My RIDE was over an hour late. . . . Dispatch gave me the run-around. I had two doctors' appointments that had to be canceled on this day." - A RIDE user*

*"THE RIDE was due at 11:15 and arrived at 12:00 p.m. when I was due at Kit Clark Senior Center. As a consequence, I had no lunch that day." - Joan Harris*

*“I waited outside in the cold for three hours until I got a RIDE pickup. I was very scared and cold.” - A RIDE user*

*“THE RIDE arrived almost four hours late. I kept calling; the dispatcher . . . assured me it would only be a half hour more. When the driver arrived . . . he said he had just been given the call. While I have never experienced a four-hour delay before this, I am very used to having them show up 15 to 30 minutes early for a pickup and leave me stranded for anywhere from an hour and a half to two hours [when it’s time to return home].”  
- A RIDE user*

This man turned in several similar complaints:

*“I have been working over 20 years, same place, same hours. . . . The pickup time given to me was at 8:10 a.m., 10 minutes after I’m supposed to be at my job. Subsequently, I was over an hour late.” - A RIDE user*

## B. SCHEDULING SNAFUS

Eighteen percent of the complaints fell into the category of “I requested a RIDE pickup, but none was scheduled for me,” as well as other scheduling problems. Here are examples:

*“[THE RIDE] is an inconvenience because a trip that should only take a short amount of time ends up taking up all of my day. . . . RIDEs [are] scheduled too close together. This doesn’t seem fair to think that the drivers can make it to a place that normally would take a half an hour to get to and give them 10 minutes [to do it]. The drivers seem stressed. . . .”  
- Anonymous complaint sent to the MBTA Office for Transportation Access and to RAP.*

*“RIDE buzzed 40 minutes early. . . . Driver did not read his schedule. Should’ve picked up another person in a wheelchair first. Instead I ended up going [from downtown Boston] right by my medical appointment into South Boston first.” - Karen Nurt*

## C. UNSAFE RIDES

Safety is an issue in all modes of transportation. For people with disabilities, the safety issue is cranked up several notches because we have physical vulnerabilities that the average subway or bus rider does not have. Eleven percent of the complaints focused on this issue. What is interesting about these complaints is that consumers generally do not blame the drivers for the dangers they encounter but attribute them to poor training or to unreasonable scheduling.

*“The driver kept shaking my [wheel]chair to make sure it was secure. I told him it could be done by checking the straps [that tied the wheelchair to the van]. I also told him that shaking chairs causes back pain. He apologized. Training problem?” - A RIDE user*

*“I am not able to sit in the back of THE RIDE since I have had several back surgeries. However, many times . . . [I] have arguments with RIDE drivers who do not have any choice [but to force me to sit in the back] since they have so many pickups.” - A RIDE user*

## D. OVERBOOKED / EXTRAORDINARILY LONG RIDES

The experience of not being in control is one that most people wouldn’t choose. Using THE RIDE often puts consumers in that unenviable position. You just don’t know what is going to

happen, when. And sometimes, you feel like you are stuck in a bad production of *Alice in Wonderland*. Ten percent of the complaints were in this category. Witness:

*“I asked for a 12:30 p.m. pickup. The night before I was given a 6:15 p.m. RIDE time. I called the next day and was told it was 5:45 p.m.”* This Boston resident called, trying to change the time and was told to call back. He did and was put on hold for 30 minutes. The complainant continues, *“My RIDE pickup was changed to 2:00 p.m. By the time THE RIDE eventually came, my meeting was over.”* - A RIDE user

This Boston woman was trying to get home from church: *“He [the driver] then drove toward my home to pick someone else up; then proceeded to Brookline for a third pickup [even though] we were a few blocks from my home. When I objected, he indicated that he had until 1:50 to get me home. Why should I be driven for over an hour when the church is 10 minutes from my home?”* - Joan Harris

#### E. THE RIDE NEVER SHOWS UP

Have you ever called a taxi, only to have it never come? If this has happened to you, it is probably filed in your mind as a bad, but rare, experience. For some RIDE users, this is not a rare experience. RIDE vendors often explain away such occurrences by claiming that the consumer wasn't there when THE RIDE arrived.

Here's the experience of a woman who made a log of her workweek:

*December 3: “I was two hours late for work.”*

*December 4: “I was one hour late for work.”*

*December 6: “THE RIDE never arrived.”*

Our complainant puts her experience in a larger context:

*“I've made it a policy to be there 10 to 15 minutes before my scheduled time. I believe when drivers are backlogged they just don't show in order to keep to their schedules. Those who take THE RIDE depend on it and the feeling of abandonment when it doesn't show up is real.”* - A RIDE user

Another woman wrote:

*“They claimed to have been there on time but [that] I didn't come out [to board the RIDE vehicle]. In reality I was sitting the entire time looking out the window for them. They said it would be over an hour before they could get someone else. . . . It was simply another instance of ‘the customer is always wrong.’ Also of their indifference to people with disabilities, i.e., we have nothing better to do [than wait around].”* - A RIDE user

#### F. GIVEN UP ON THE RIDE

We heard from people who have given up on THE RIDE primarily because of its unreliability. One person was able to purchase his own accessible van, but that is not an option for most RIDE users. When people give up on THE RIDE, very often their world shrinks and they become isolated.

# CONCRETE STEPS FOR CHANGE

## THE RIDE CAN BE FIXED

THE RIDE can be fixed. It can be a service that consumers and the rest of the taxpayers feel good about. It can be reliable and safe. We agree with a complainant who wrote, “THE RIDE . . . could be a pleasant [service] instead of a very aggravating and unpleasant [one].”

RAP has learned about paratransit systems that work well in communities roughly the size of ours. Orange County, California (population of two million); Las Vegas, Nevada; Portland, Oregon; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, all have paratransit systems that have a high level of verified on-time performance and no trip denials, even when contending with traffic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the Access Advisory Committee to the T (AACT), MBTA statistics show 97.8 percent of RIDE trips to be on time. Our data suggests otherwise. The transportation specialists we consulted deemed this to be an unrealistic figure.

The MBTA must have ongoing, objective information about THE RIDE for improvements to be effective and long lasting. **We believe that the MBTA must hire an outside consultant to monitor RIDE services.**

To ensure that the monitoring process addresses problems with THE RIDE, it is vital . . .

- that RAP have input as to who is hired as the outside consultant;
- that RAP have input into the criteria used by the consultant;
- that the consultant monitor *all* RIDE vendors;
- that the MBTA begin making structural changes to RIDE services *during* the monitoring process rather than waiting until the process has been completed; and
- that the consultant make monthly reports to the MBTA, to RAP, and to the T Riders Union.

If change is going to happen, it is going to start with the MBTA — and the rubber hits the road with the vendors. RIDE vendor contracts are coming up for reassignment in June of 2004. The larger public, including RAP and other members of the community of people with disabilities, has the right to give input into the contracts and which companies the contracts are assigned to. As an independent community organization of RIDE users, RAP can provide valuable testimony regarding the performance records of the current four vendors.

***The RIDE Advocacy Project (RAP)*** is a grassroots community-organizing effort aimed at bringing THE RIDE, the MBTA's paratransit service for people with disabilities, into compliance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. RAP members, most of whom have disabilities or chronic illness themselves, are deeply concerned about the poor quality of RIDE service and its negative impact on RIDE users. We are committed to bringing about improvements in RIDE service by building alliances within the larger disability community, as well as among health care and service providers, and together holding the MBTA and its vendors accountable for providing safe, reliable, accessible service to all eligible riders.