



TOWARD UNIVERSAL MOBILITY:

Charting a Path to Improve Transportation Accessibility

December 2019

A LETTER FROM MARYSUE BARRETT

A transportation system should meet the needs of everyone. But far too often, **transportation choices are severely limited for those who need them most**, leaving people stranded and isolated in their homes. This report identifies how our transportation network falls short, and offers a guide on how to remedy these shortcomings.

When the Metropolitan Planning Council staff and advisors took on the challenge of studying how people with disabilities and the elderly navigate the region's transportation system, we were inundated with examples of the enormous hurdles people face. Our region's trains and buses can be difficult to use for anyone with a disability. In many cases, bus stops and train stations can be impossible to reach, due to the lack of sidewalks and elevators. Paratransit options are limited and fractured with a multitude of funding sources, disconnected political jurisdictions, and providers with competing priorities.

This report documents these challenges and offers real solutions to better serve those who may need only slight accommodations to see huge improvements to their mobility. Our team's **32 recommendations** are presented to public sector leaders and transit operators, as well as private-sector transportation providers, to unlock opportunities for older residents and people with disabilities to thrive.

This study's top recommendation is to create a Mobility Coordinator to break down the silos in providing accessible transportation services across the entire region. Working collaboratively with local governments, transit agencies, and private-sector partners, a Mobility Coordinator would increase the quality of life for everyone.

As someone who developed a visual disability in my 30s, I have become more reliant on public transit myself. I understand the frustrations people face when trying to navigate a system not designed to accommodate their unique needs.

When a system fails those who need it the most, it fails us all.

Eventually everyone will face illness, impairment, or old age and need transportation choices for themselves and their loved ones. Now is the time to make the necessary improvements that can improve our neighbors' lives, and our own.

Yours in Mobility,



MarySue Barrett
President, Metropolitan Planning Council

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[METROPLANNING.ORG/
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Nearly every person in the Chicago region, or someone they care for, will face a disability that will impact their mobility at some point in their life. A public transportation system should meet the needs of all its customers, no matter their age or ability.

The concept of **universal mobility** is that everyone — in all stages of life, regardless of any disability — can access transportation options that will get them anywhere they need to go. A practical definition is a system of partnerships and policies that provide a minimum level of mobility to all members of society.

Universal mobility is closely related to **universal design**, which is the composition of an environment such that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, or disability.

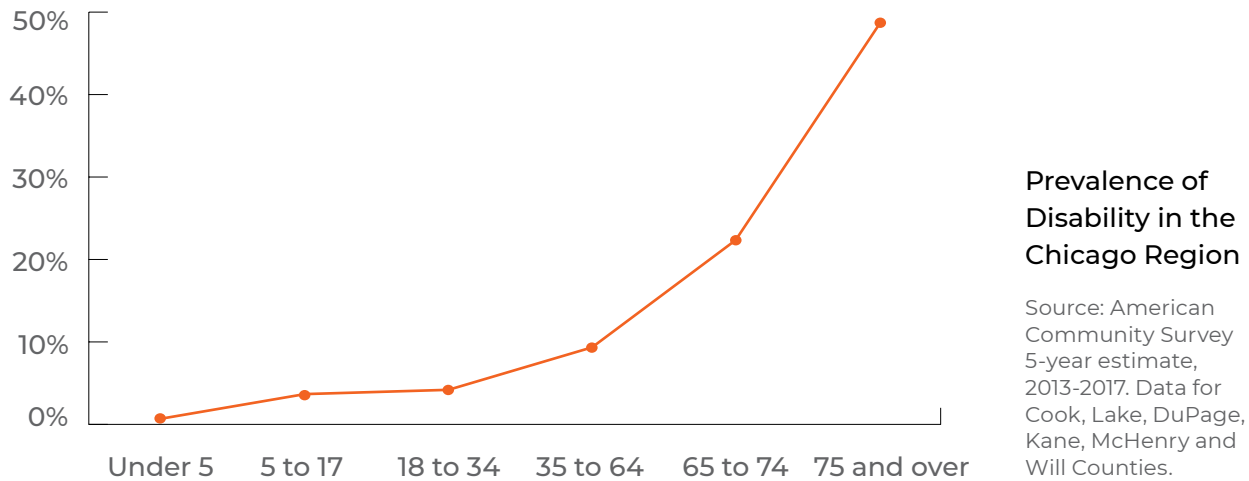
Another similar concept, **community mobility**, is frequently used in occupational therapy and views mobility as essential to participation in society and a key indicator of health.

Universal mobility combines the philosophy of community mobility with the tenets of universal design. It is the belief that mobility is a human right and that access to high-quality accessible transportation is fundamental to exercising that right. It is also the belief that building a fully inclusive transportation system, from the most basic pedestrian infrastructure to the cutting edge of on-demand mobility, will benefit all of us.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibited discrimination based on disability in all public places. However, while Federal law requires new infrastructure to be built so it is accessible to all, many gaps still exist.

DISABILITY AFFECTS US ALL

A surprisingly large share of the population experiences disability. 7% of people between the ages of 18 to 64, and 33% of those over the age of 65 have disabilities.



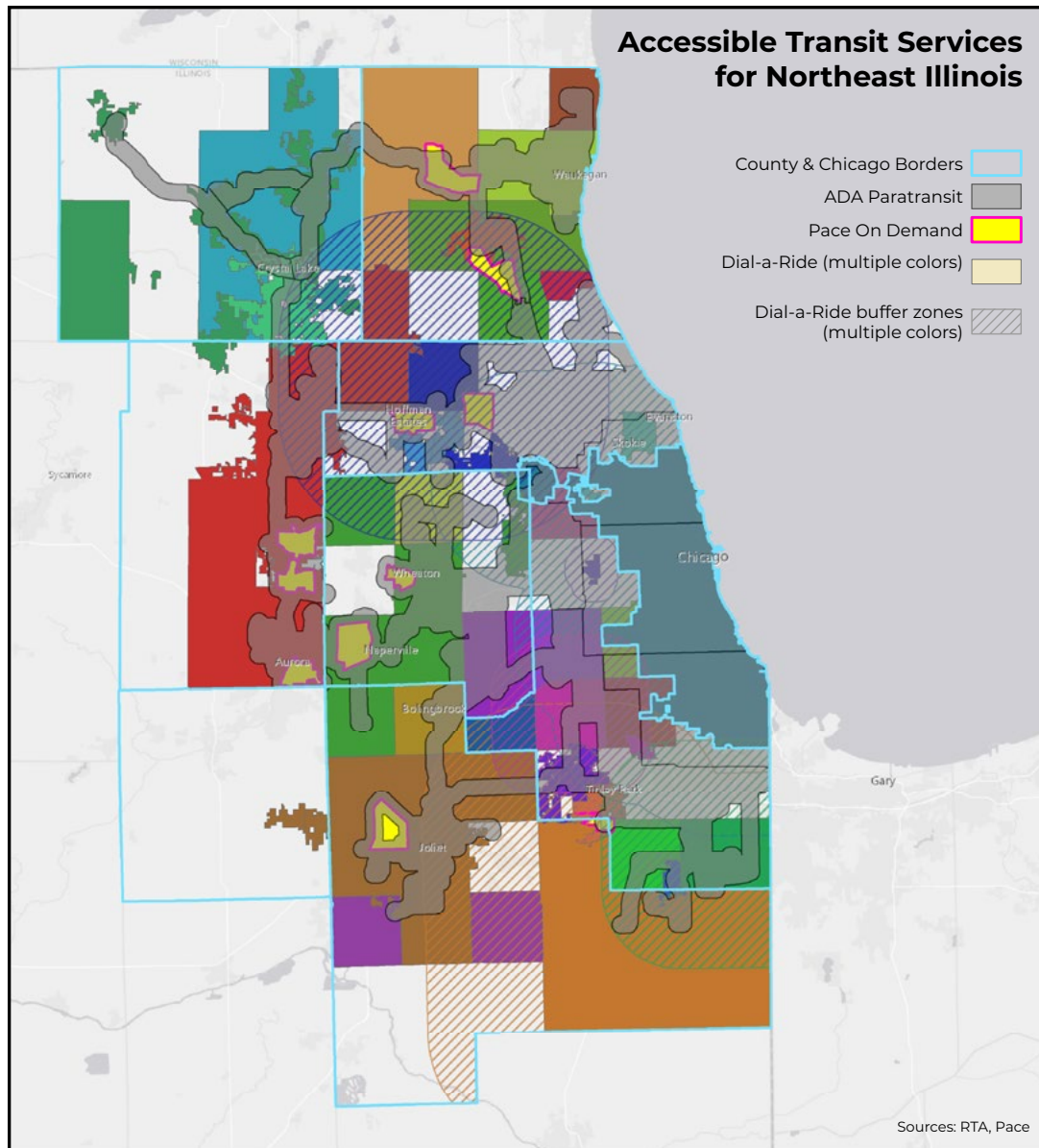
Moreover, while many older Americans do not meet the legal definition of having a disability, they still experience age-related conditions that can make getting around more challenging.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) has projected that large increases in the number of people over 85 will draw the region's median age upward from 35.7 in 2010 to 39.4 in 2050.

A FRAGMENTED SYSTEM

Over decades, countless systems have been established to address very specific transportation needs, but they are rarely planned or operated in a coordinated way. Services may be operated by a municipality, township, county, or at a regional level. The hours of service vary depending on the operator or location. Rider eligibility rules vary widely and trip purpose requirements are not standardized. Fare structures and reservation policies also change depending on where the rider lives, or where their destination might be. Information on these services is not provided in a centralized location. This patchwork exists for many historical reasons. State and federal funding plays an important role, as do local and regional politics. The bottom line is that the experience of getting around using these systems ranges from fairly reliable and affordable to maddeningly frustrating and expensive.

The map below shows the geographic extent of accessible transportation services in the region, revealing the fragmentation of services, which is difficult for users to understand.



STUDY APPROACH

MPC engaged with nearly 100 people through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and meetings to understand the systemic transportation challenges faced by people with disabilities in the Chicago region. MPC synthesized the qualitative findings from our outreach process with a broad literature review to develop a list of common problems and themes. MPC then worked with a technical review committee of transportation experts to develop a set of recommendations.



“I want others to understand that people with disabilities generally seek the greatest degree of independence possible.”

Andrew Webb’s commute to work downtown as a lawyer from his home in Glenview is basically the same every workday: A Metra train to Union Station and a bus to his office on Michigan Avenue. That keeps his rush hour travel relatively simple.

But one thing that can complicate Webb’s journey is a shortage of accessible signage. Since an injury left him blind about a decade ago, he has relied on his other senses — namely hearing, touch and smell — to navigate our region.

Imagine that it’s 5:30 p.m., and Webb wants to catch a Metra train home out of Union Station. Sighted travelers simply glance at the digital signs posted at the entrance to each platform to identify the number, destination and

departure time of their trains. But when Webb stands before one of those signs, he hears only this: “Track number five... Track number five... Track number five...”

“[That looping noise] would drive me crazy if I worked there, but I’ll bet a lot of commuters don’t even notice it,” Webb said. “What those announcements don’t tell you is which train is on the platform that you’re approaching. That can be a nightmare when you’re rushing to catch a train that you know is about to leave.”

To compensate, Webb memorizes schedules. He also carries a cheat sheet and uses Metra’s app. However, although the app provides an updated train schedule, it lacks platform numbers for departing trains.

In fact, there are very few places in Union Station to hear audible announcements of schedule and train information. In order to access this information for his trains, Webb and his guide dog, Lance, travel two blocks off his route. On those occasions when the normal train schedule is disrupted and he must quickly determine where to find the train he needs, Andrew sucks up a little pride and asks strangers in the station to point him to the right platform.

“I want others to understand that people with disabilities generally seek the greatest degree of independence possible,” Webb said. “Barriers to independence are usually a function of societal and architectural barriers, rather than of a disabled individual’s reluctance to pursue independence.”

RECOMMENDATION**IMPROVE SERVICE COORDINATION****#1: Establish a regional Mobility Coordinator.**

Municipal, township, and county boundaries play a significant role in our travel options, despite the fact that crossing jurisdictions to work, shop, or visit the doctor is routine. To better align adjacent services, the region needs a Mobility Coordinator, which could take the form of an individual position or a council. This role can assist with coordination between transportation staff and personnel from other agencies that provide transportation services but for whom transportation is not the agency's primary role, such as human services, housing, and agriculture. This position or council could be housed at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) or Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT). Additionally, to provide more localized coordination, each county should establish a County Mobility Manager to interact and collaborate with the Regional Coordinator.

#2: Provide consistent demand-response services in counties.

Most collar counties (DuPage, McHenry and Kane) have a coordinated Dial-a-Ride service covering portions of the county, but they often have significant restrictions on their use. Counties should reconfigure their systems to deliver more consistent and comprehensive services to more residents.

#3: Centralize information on available transportation services.

The RTA should explore establishment of a one-stop source of information, which ideally would include all public, private, and nonprofit transportation services available to riders for their specific trip.

#4: Improve and expand mobility outreach and travel training programs.

RTA travel training is available to assist customers with disabilities and older adults in determining how to make trips via public transit. RTA travel trainers explain the features of public transportation, teach riders how to use it, educate riders on their rights as passengers, and accompany riders while they learn their trip. The program should be expanded to proactively recruit new riders at schools, social service organizations, senior centers, job centers, and disability advocacy organizations.

#5: Incorporate real-time accessibility information into trip planning tools.

Riders with disabilities need more information than people not experiencing a disability. Nearly every rider we spoke to had a story of an unexpected outage that forced them to backtrack, going far out of the way to reach their destination. Information on elevator and escalator outages should be consistently incorporated into trip planning apps through application program interfaces (API) that each transit agency can provide to app developers on the real-time status of features used by people with disabilities throughout the system.

#6: Require ride-hailing services to provide information on fixed-route transit.

Ride-hailing services like Lyft and Uber should be required by the jurisdictions in which they operate to provide information on fixed-route transit options within their apps. This will better enable use for first- and last-mile access to fixed-route transit.

RECOMMENDATION

IMPROVE WAYFINDING

#7: Standardize wayfinding among transit providers.

RTA has developed an interagency design standards manual available for use by CTA, Pace, and Metra. However, there is a great deal of variation among existing signage. CTA, Metra, and Pace should continue to work together to standardize their informational signage so the same information is located in the same place in stations and at stops.

#8: Increase audible cues at intersections.

People with vision problems often cannot see the signs at crosswalks indicating whether it is safe to cross or not. Municipalities should install audio cues – usually as part of pedestrian signals — at all busy intersections throughout the region.

RECOMMENDATION

ENGAGE PRIVATE SECTOR TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

#9: Encourage additional training on accessibility for drivers of ridehail vehicles.

Transportation Network Companies such as Uber and Lyft provide minimal information about rules and regulations for serving passengers with disabilities in simple email reminders to drivers. That minimal education has resulted in drivers routinely refusing to provide service for people with disabilities, such as those with service dogs. The companies should provide incentives in the form of rewards for their drivers to participate in additional educational opportunities and sensitivity training for providing service to people with disabilities.

#10: Enforce adherence to service standards.

Suburban municipalities should track compliance data and follow up with companies on drivers that provide poor service, including issuing fines, re-educating drivers or requesting that they be dropped from the driver rolls if repeated complaints occur, as is already the case in the City of Chicago.

“The winter in Chicago is already depressing enough when it’s cold and bleak — cabin fever is real, and to not be able to get somewhere because of accessibility, it’s a bummer.”

Michele Lee enjoys trying new restaurants. She is savvy person whose Instagram photo of a well-executed entrée would inspire copycat reservations from her friends and followers. A resident of the West Loop — where construction cranes tower above hyped new bars and restaurants — Michele is right at home in her neighborhood. She watches storefronts open from her windows.

But even nearby dining requires planning and logistics. Michele uses a power chair after a college car crash paralyzed her from the chest down, so something as simple as a missing ramp or curb cut can keep her from getting in the door of an “accessible” establishment. Other parts of our city and region, they up the ante.

“I kind of have to stick to my neighborhood, and I don’t get to explore as much because of transportation and accessibility constraints,” Michele said, adding, “I’d love to go to Wicker Park more. There are so many bars and restaurants. Big Star, Violet Hour, Mindy’s...”

She added, “But the Damen Blue Line stop is not wheelchair accessible. There’s no elevator, only stairs. Especially in the winter, when some Piece Pizza or Mindy’s Hot Chocolate could really hit the spot, because of my wheelchair I can’t go. It sucks. The winter in Chicago is already depressing enough when it’s cold and bleak — cabin fever is real, and to not be able to get somewhere because of accessibility, it’s a bummer.”

The truth is, Michele can afford to live in a dense, transit-rich hub. Tricky as the West Loop can be, it is a haven. Michele moved from Glenview years ago because getting home to the suburbs from her downtown office took three hours.

“Many people with disabilities are underemployed and one reason is lack of access to transportation, not because they cannot work,” Michele said. “The reason I chose where I live is because it’s directly on the bus route that goes to my office. I was very intentional about it. I’m kind of stuck, because of where I work, where I can live.”



PROFILE MICHELE



“People who are very healthy one day can become temporarily disabled — because of a surgery or an injury — and they don’t know what to do. An everyday commute becomes a challenge.”

It happened to Vicky fifteen years ago when she was diagnosed with a rare genetic disease for which there is no cure, and her mobility will only worsen with time.

Vicky’s BNSF train quickly became more difficult to board after her diagnosis. “I used to walk six blocks from my house to the Burlington Metra station in Brookfield and a mile from Union Station to my job,” Vicky said. “Now I make sure I can park next to the ramp instead of taking four stairs.”

She once entered Union Station to find a stalled escalator and a crowd of hundreds of people. She

enlisted the help of Metra police to navigate through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. Had Vicky known, she could have just entered from street level at a different entrance, and not risk being knocked over and overwhelmed. When a person’s balance feels off, and their body feels weak, an unexpected crowd is dangerous.

That all could have been prevented with better information. “If you make commuting convenient and comfortable for people with disabilities, it will help everyone,” Vicky said.

For University Park resident and advocate Jemal Powell, public transportation is a lifeline.

Jemal’s activism is a big part of his identity and social life. As a man who experiences blindness, he relies on fixed-route buses and trains to stay involved.

He currently chairs the Pace Suburban ADA Advisory Committee and participates on Pace’s Citizen Advisory Committee. Commuting to one full-time job can be challenging enough, but with meetings all across the region, the logistics multiply.

Public transportation allows Jemal the freedom to change his plans, stop unexpectedly for groceries on the way home, and make spontaneous plans that are impossible when he has to call 24 hours ahead for Dial-A-Ride or ADA Paratransit service.

Jemal knows he is lucky to have access to fixed-route transit. Jemal rattles off his bus times so fast it is dizzying: “I’ve had those schedules read to me, so I know them by heart.”



#11: Develop a pilot program to subsidize ride-hailing services to supply ADA-complementary services.

Given the high cost to operate paratransit service and its low flexibility for users, some regions are exploring the use of subsidized ride-hailing services to provide some demand-response services instead. The Mobility Coordinator can work with ride-hailing providers to create pilot programs that provide affordable on-demand rides to eligible users.

RECOMMENDATION

UPGRADE TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

#12: Modernize routing and dispatching software.

Suboptimal rider experiences related to Pace’s dispatching software were one of the most common complaints we heard from riders. This can result in late arrivals and rides that are longer than necessary. Some of the issues are a consequence of the ADA paratransit mandate, meaning that no eligible ride can be refused. To manage costs, rides are provided in shared vehicles making multiple pick-ups and drop-offs, so there are some inherent structural inefficiencies. Pace should conduct a comprehensive review of its current software and performance and its use by dispatchers, ensuring that real-time optimization features are maximized.

#13: Introduce rider tools for ADA paratransit.

To improve customer satisfaction, Pace should introduce rider-facing tools (e.g. cellphone apps) that enable real-time information of ADA Paratransit vehicle locations and updated pickup times by users.

#14: Establish rigorous reporting requirements for service contractors.

Software upgrades to be installed by Pace in 2020 should enable new types of reporting to facilitate this evaluation. Pace should use this data to run regular analysis on contractor performance and structure contracts to incentivize good performance.

#15: Integrate ADA paratransit scheduling with real-time fixed-route information.

Paratransit service schedules, including non-ADA Dial-a-Rides, should be coordinated with fixed-route schedules to encourage more transferring between the services. Pace should also expand and better promote subscription services, which provide a more consistent experience.

#16: Establish ridership and cost reporting standards for all transportation services.

Having better ridership data would allow a regional Mobility Coordinator to understand where there are opportunities for consolidation or improvements. All transportation providers, whether they are affiliated with Pace or not, should report ridership data in a concise and standardized way to the RTA for analysis.

#17: Establish demand-response transportation data specifications.

There is no consistent format for disseminating real-time data on demand response transportation like the general transit feed specification (GTFS), spearheaded by Google, which allows public agencies to publish their fixed-route transit data in a format that can be used for software applications and apps. The RTA should establish a transactional data specification to enable demand-response services in the region to more fully and easily participate in an era of “new mobility” by facilitating interactions among the software systems that manage such services.

RECOMMENDATION

IMPROVE THE FINAL STEPS OF A JOURNEY

#18: Assemble regional data on pedestrian infrastructure and its use.

Often, the biggest barrier to mobility is the first and last 100 feet of a trip. As a first step in improving pedestrian data, CMAP has recently developed the region’s first comprehensive sidewalk dataset by analyzing aerial imagery. CMAP should encourage communities to collect better data on ADA compliance and pedestrian counts and develop a regional pedestrian infrastructure plan focusing on priority pedestrian/transit corridors and station areas.

#19: Create a technical assistance program for development of ADA transition plans.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that all municipalities conduct an accessibility self-assessment, and those with over 50 employees to create a formal transition plan for public facilities and rights-of-way. CMAP should collaborate with technical assistance providers, such as the Great Lakes ADA Center, to develop a “toolbox” with resources to support communities in data collection, prioritization of improvements, and transition plan development.

#20: Integrate ADA transition planning into local Complete Streets programs.

Detailed infrastructure accessibility data gathered through the development of ADA transition plans should be integrated into communities’ Complete Streets programs. CMAP should work with the Great Lakes ADA Center on developing guidance for communities to coordinate on transportation, public health, accessibility, Complete Streets and other plans, as well as assisting in coordination among state, county, and local agencies that own and maintain various roads in communities.

#21: Eliminate IDOT’s local financial match requirement for sidewalk construction.

Municipalities are required to provide 20% matching funds for each sidewalk project that occurs on an IDOT corridor. The match requirement should be eliminated because it has become a barrier to a complete pedestrian infrastructure network.

“I’ve used the door-to-door service a few times when the weather is bad, but it’s challenging because it’s less predictable.”

Cathy Garcia leads a pretty normal life. On a typical weekday she wakes up in her home in Des Plaines and shares a meal with her roommates before commuting a short distance to Morton Grove to work at a small fulfillment center. On the weekends she may catch a movie, visit family, or go shopping. There is only one small difference: Cathy has an intellectual disability and relies on a number of supportive services to lead her active life.

Cathy lives in a group home, or community-integrated living arrangement, where she and her roommates cook, clean and live communally with supervision from independent living coaches

who work to help them achieve their goals and fully participate in community life. Most days she travels to Shore Community Services in Morton Grove where she participates in their vocational work program. Shore provides her with job training and helps her gain work experience through community partnerships.

The linchpin that holds Cathy’s independent lifestyle together is accessible public transit. Because of her disability, she is not able to drive. “I take Pace everywhere,” she said. “I’ve used the door-to-door service a few times when the weather is bad, but it’s challenging because it’s less predictable. Sometimes it comes really early and sometimes it comes late.” She finds that using the bus allows her to keep a routine schedule, which allows her to work.

Customer service is especially important to Cathy. “If I’m not sure where to get off or if there’s a service change, I ask the bus driver for help. Usually they’re really nice.” Like most, she has experienced negative service as well. “Sometimes the driver is rude when you ask them a question. And in the winter, sometimes the bus stations aren’t shoveled.” Nonetheless, she is pretty satisfied with the service which allows her the freedom to live and work independently.



PROFILE CATHY



“If it’s going to cost me to have peace of mind and travel with ease, I’ll spend extra dollars.”

Andre Johnson is in a make-it-happen moment. An entrepreneur with a background in engineering, in 29 days he will attend a Pitch Night through a renowned Chicago technology incubator. In 29 days, he will pitch his business idea to the public and investors, people with the power to make or break his entrepreneurial dreams. He needs to knock it out of the park.

That means for Andre, right now, every moment counts. A wheelchair user, he cannot afford to wait around for a late paratransit van. He finished his bachelor’s degree and hustled, so he has earned himself a few cab and UberWAV rides.

“If it’s going to cost me to have peace of mind and travel with ease, I’ll spend extra dollars,” Andre said. “Stuff happens on the train. On the bus, people will have to move for me and they won’t want to. Of course I could save money if the system were more efficient — it makes me angry — but I’m going to do what’s best for me, for my mental state, for the things I’m trying to do in the world. I’m gonna worry about that, rather than how screwed up the system is.”

Andre’s company, LiveEquipd, is a platform that empowers people with paralysis-related disabilities and life needs to find products, assistive technology and innovations they need. This technology serves as a care tool for those health professionals that serve them as well.

LiveEquipd, and Andre’s relationship to Chicago’s 1871 incubator, both stemmed from gun violence. Shortly after high school graduation, he and a friend were carjacked and shot. Andre woke up with a spinal cord injury. His friend didn’t wake up.

“That was my brutal introduction to disability,” Andre said. “I was left with — what do I do now? How am I going to navigate this?” A series of hospital stays, nursing home stints, coincidences, and hard work led Andre to create LiveEquipd.

Andre knows how much easier life could be for people with disabilities. Paratransit vans would be trackable on your cell phone. More CTA stations would be wheelchair accessible. Rides would not be over two hours late. The Chicago region’s transportation network, Andre can’t fix himself. But with his business, LiveEquipd, he can do his best to make everything perfect.

RECOMMENDATION**UPGRADE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF THE FIXED-ROUTE SYSTEM****#22: Prioritize funding for universal accessibility of all regional rail stations.**

Future transit investments should prioritize making all existing CTA and Metra rail stations vertically accessible, and should include upgrades to wayfinding for blind, low-vision, and deaf riders.

#23: Build shelters with seating at stops, stations and transfer points.

When riders transfer between sub-regional paratransit services they do so at one of roughly two dozen transfer points throughout the region, which are frequently in parking lots without dedicated waiting areas or restrooms. Shelters and amenities should be prioritized by transit operators at stations and transfer points.

#24: Crowdsourcing data to improve wayfinding and navigation tools.

Transportation providers should provide methods for system users to report barriers to accessibility, including locations with insufficient wayfinding for people with a range of disabilities including those with vision and hearing problems. Agencies should engage these groups in planning for signage, on-board and off-board visual and audible information, and other tools to make transit use easier for people of all ages and abilities.

#25: Provide real-time vehicle information and station condition updates.

Having reliable information on service conditions is important for all transit riders, but it is even more critical for those with disabilities. Transit providers should seek to have such information integrated into trip planning services so that riders have routing alternatives in the event of elevator or other accessibility outages.

#26: Enact housing policies that encourage accessible housing near fixed-route transit.

People with mobility challenges greatly benefit from living in walkable areas with good access to transit. Unfortunately, areas with the best access frequently have a shortage of affordable housing options. Unemployment and poverty rates are high among people with disabilities, which makes locating housing in transit-rich areas even more difficult. Municipalities with affordable housing regulations, such as Chicago's Affordable Requirements Ordinance, should ensure that all affordable housing is also accessible.

#27: Require all new development to have pedestrian-friendly site design.

In much of the region, development patterns are very hostile to pedestrians and difficult for transit to serve. Municipalities should use their regulatory powers to require street-facing pedestrian-friendly designs and develop walkable places that will encourage transit use and foster safe streets so that people with disabilities can comfortably access buildings.

RECOMMENDATION

IMPROVE FUNDING STRUCTURES

#28: Prioritize accessibility in transportation investments.

The Rebuild Illinois capital funding bill passed in June 2019 includes significant new dedicated transportation revenues and enables counties to levy an additional motor fuel tax to raise transportation funds. Every effort should be made to ensure that new investments make the system more accessible. Additionally, other established transportation funding mechanisms are being diverted away from transportation projects such as the 0.25% RTA sales tax in the collar counties. Due to a political compromise, RTA sales tax revenue can also be used for “public safety” purposes. Funds used in this way generally go toward capital projects for law enforcement or other emergency services. As shown below, some counties choose to spend none of the RTA sales tax revenue on transportation. Ending the diversion of transportation revenue already being collected would enable the provision of a minimum level of accessible demand-response service for all residents. Given the scale of revenue invested in transportation annually, counties should appropriate at least some of these funds to dedicated universal mobility programs.

	Funding Amount from RTA Sales Tax (2018)	% going to Transportation	
DuPage County	\$52,068,852	0%	Percent of RTA Sales Tax Revenue in Collar Counties going to Transportation
Kane County	\$18,498,965	75%	
Lake County	\$32,054,503	100%	
McHenry County	\$10,615,161	100%	
Will County	\$24,929,887	93%	

#29: Assess transportation impact fees on trip-generating developments.

Some communities, especially in outlying areas of Kane, Kendall, and McHenry Counties, have experienced significant increases in demand for paratransit services associated with new senior and medical developments in greenfield locations. The future demand for transportation services should be taken into consideration when developing impact fees.

#30: Eliminate “legacy subsidies.”

RTA’s 2016 report on sustainable funding for coordinated demand-response services proposed implementing a more equitable, flat rate of subsidy for all communities that participate in a coordinated transit system. This would create equivalent services across the region and also encourage more townships and municipalities to participate. By eliminating legacy subsidies, we can clarify funding sources, improve equity, and improve service.

“Rather than maintaining an accessible vehicle of my own, it makes sense financially to use public transit, paratransit and taxis—everything I use here [in Chicago].”

For Adam Ballard, transportation is personal. He grew up in downstate Illinois, and moved to the Chicago suburbs in order to access the Metra system. Now he lives in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, where he gets around independently in his power chair without needing to buy an expensive retrofitted vehicle.

“Transit and transportation infrastructure have been important to me for a long time,” Adam says.

“[People with disabilities are] still developing a political identity and a political voice around our disability identity,” said Adam, Housing and Transportation Policy Analyst at Access Living. Founded in 1980, Access Living is a Chicago-based center of advocacy, service, and social change led by and for people with disabilities.

For decades, the organization has been a hub for Chicago’s disability community. Cumulatively, its employees and constituents use their hard-earned political voice to advocate, including for better transportation.

Two to five times per year, for at least the past decade, Access Living takes an Amtrak train to lobby Springfield. They don’t just bring staff, but folks who receive services, volunteers, organizers. They share their stories and lift each others’ voices. “At this point, we’re a known entity,” Adam says. “People are familiar with the kinds of things we’re asking for. We’ve developed relationships by being [in Springfield].”

A number of the transportation improvements that Access fought for made the Illinois \$45 billion capital improvement plan that Governor Pritzker signed into law in July 2019. These include funding for the Chicago Transit Authority to expand its accessible stations program. And for Pace to upgrade its computerized dispatch system to allow for real-time vehicle tracking, so that fewer people wait indefinitely in the winter winds for their rides.

“We’d like to see transportation systems that are fully integrated every step of the way. No matter the mode of transportation, no matter your disability or disability type, you’re going to be able to access the same level of service that a non-disabled person would.”



PROFILE
 ◀◀ ADAM

#31: Reduce restrictions on federal funding sources that can be used for transportation.

The National Center for Mobility Management has identified 122 Federal agencies that fund various types of transportation services, ranging from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Veterans Affairs. A national Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility was established to coordinate the efforts of federal agencies that fund transportation service, and has broadened the overall pool of funds available. Chicago-area stakeholders should engage with our Federal agency representatives serving this region to identify ways to increase the flexibility of different funding sources to support improvement of transportation services, particularly for people who are older or have disabilities.

RECOMMENDATION

EMPOWER PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND CAREGIVERS TO ADVOCATE

#32: Train people on how to change the systems they use.

People with mobility challenges should be empowered to advocate for high quality pedestrian and transit infrastructure that will benefit their mobility. RTA, with the support of community partners, should develop accessible and practical communication channels through which people with mobility challenges can easily transmit information about needed infrastructure improvements, particularly to improve wayfinding, pedestrian conditions, and last-mile connections.

NEXT STEPS

MPC is eager to remain engaged with the organizations, agencies and individuals whose input shaped the recommendations in this report. Together, we can change our transportation system and move our region toward universal mobility.

This report recommends policies to empower and engage people with disabilities and improve their mobility outcomes. It reflects the ideas and experiences of nearly 100 people with close personal knowledge of transportation access issues.

We have identified stakeholders with a role in implementation and will form a coalition to meet regularly to advance these policy recommendations. Some will be challenging, but with the right partners and enough political will, we can make lasting change.

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