



# ACCESS-A-CARD

*A proposal to improve the quality and cost efficiency of Access-A-Ride, by NYS Assembly Member Micah Z. Kellner*

## **BACKGROUND**

Access-A-Ride (AAR) is MTA New York City Transit's (MTA NYCT) paratransit program mandated by Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

A fiscal brief prepared by the Independent Budget Office (IBO) in 2006 found that the growth of the paratransit budget since 2000 is primarily due to an increase in demand by new passenger registrations and a trend towards users making more trips per year. In 2005, the operating expense per trip (includes registered user plus aides or guests) was \$56, the average user made 37 trips per year, and there were 91,953 registered users (a 50% increase in the number of users since 2000).

The IBO also found that the largest and fastest growing component of expenses was contracts for the service providers. (The 2005 value of contracts was \$144 million, and by 2010 this was projected by the IBO to grow to \$357 million.) Other significant increasing costs include capital spending on vehicles (from 2003 to 2005, \$32.3 million was spent).

Funding for AAR comes from MTA NYCT, a capped subsidy from the City of New York, dedicated tax revenues from commercial real estate transactions, and paratransit fares. An agreement signed by the City of New York and the MTA in 1993 maintains the City's contribution cap and holds the MTA to a promise not to raise fares higher than the cash fare on NYCT buses and subways.

## **ACCESS-A-CARD PROPOSAL**

Many major cities, such as Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, use taxis as a complement to their paratransit services. New York City has a high availability of taxis, black cars, and livery services as available resources. While many of these vehicles are not wheelchair accessible, 80% of AAR users are ambulatory.

A 2007 IBO report on the possibility of using taxis as part of the paratransit system noted that contracts with black car companies are already integrated into paratransit service for trips to AAR assessment centers and for certain VA hospital appointments. The service providers are paid through vouchers. For AAR vehicle no-shows, same-day trips where an AAR vehicle cannot be scheduled, call backs, and for some limited advance reservations, a reimbursement system also exists which allows the paratransit user to hire the taxi, black car, or livery car of their choice; with this model the user must pay the fare and any tip (capped at 15%) up front.

Recently, the Mayor's office has indicated that the City is in talks with the MTA about using TLC approved vehicles to cut costs for AAR. This is welcome news. The following are my recommendations for how such a program should be structured.

### **Payment Model: Debit cards**

In London, registered paratransit users are issued a debit card, a system that is popular with users, and preferred by disabilities advocates in New York City. Such a debit card should be designed only for use in approved taxis, black car, and livery card swipe systems. This is preferable to a voucher or reimbursement system. The voucher model discourages participation by service providers and has additional and unnecessary administrative costs. A reimbursement system requires paratransit riders, who are typically low-income, to pay the full cost up-front, a severe hardship that negatively impacts the ability to participate. Taxis, livery cars, and black cars should receive the same payment they would for any other passenger, including a built in 15% tip for each trip. The tip is an important component for provider buy-in which still allows for significant savings per trip as compared to current AAR contracts.

### **Scheduling of Trips: Direct contact between provider and user**

It is a waste of time and administrative resources to require a pre-authorization for individual trips from Access-A-Ride. Such a bureaucratic hurdle will discourage participation by taxi, livery, and black car providers. Also, such a system necessitates a declaration of oneself as an AAR passenger in order to receive service, which has the potential to result in discrimination. AAR users should be able to consult a list and contact any approved livery car and black car providers, hail any yellow cab, or schedule a pick-up through the 311 Central Dispatch System.

### **Vehicle Eligibility: Require card processing capability, GPS, posting and adherence to Taxi Rider Bill of Rights & TLC zone fare chart**

In order to use the debit card mode of payment, vehicles must have card swipe machines installed or have the capability to call in a debit card purchase to their dispatcher. To better monitor the program, GPS tracking should also be required. Finally, to ensure the rights of passengers and to maintain reasonable fares, non-yellow cab vehicles should post and adhere to the Taxi Bill of Rights and the TLC's approved zone fare chart for livery and black car companies. AAR should publish a list of approved companies on their website and in print for AAR users to consult.

### **Paratransit fare should be 'pay-as-you-go,' connected to debit card**

When a paratransit user charges the full trip to their Access-A-Card, the card should deduct the \$2.00 paratransit fare electronically from the user's bank account. This ensures efficient fare collection for AAR and is easier for the passenger. A model for this is E-ZPass.

This is an ideal time for AAR to also look at bulk savings options for AAR users, whether they are using the debit card system for a TLC-approved vehicle or an AAR vehicle. Weekly, monthly, and other bulk fare options that provide a discount are available for other mass transit users and should be available for paratransit users as well. Ideally, AAR-owned vehicles should be set up to accept the debit card swipes rather than continuing to require exact change.

### **Safeguards against fraudulent use**

The debit cards should include a photo of the registered paratransit user and the entire system should be subject to regular audits that watch for irregular usage patterns.