

CHAPTER 8 – TELERIDE PROGRAM REVIEW

This chapter provides a detailed look at the operations and administration of the CAT Teleride program, based upon a review of written materials, policies and other information sources. Sample performance data were collected from the 2006 National Transit Database (NTD) and Teleride/CAT reporting. The study team conducted interviews with staff involved in the program in late summer 2006, as well as from the Teleride focus group held in March 2007.

Background Description

Teleride is the paratransit service required by the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) to eligible people throughout Chatham County. The service provided is door-to-door paratransit, and is provided using 10-passenger lift-equipped cutaway vans. No assistance is provided beyond the doorstep. The service is available to disabled patrons throughout Chatham County who have registered with Chatham Area Transit Authority (CAT) for ADA service, filling out the Application for Determination of ADA Eligibility that Teleride provides.

Teleride service is provided under contract to CAT by Laidlaw Transit Services, Inc., a nationally recognized public transportation management and operating company with similar contracts across the country. Laidlaw was recently acquired by the FirstGroup PLC.

Per the requirements of the ADA, Teleride services are provided during the same operating hours as CAT fixed route services, which are generally 6AM to 12 AM Monday through Saturday, and 7AM to 7PM on Sundays.

The fare for Teleride is \$1.20 per trip for an eligible user, who may be accompanied by a personal care attendant, who is not charged a fare. Teleride also allows a guest of an eligible user to ride for \$1.20, even if that user is not certified for the service. Booklets of 10 tickets for \$12.00 are available for the convenience of frequent users, although no discount is offered.

Passengers can call for a trip reservation from 24 hours in advance to up to 14 days. Reservations must be made between the hours of 8AM and 4PM Monday through Friday, and 8AM to 12 PM weekends. Trip changes and cancellations are allowed up to one hour before pickup.

Teleride passengers are furnished with the Teleride Policy Handbook upon request. The handbook is also available for download from www.catchacat.org. The most recent update at the time of this project was done in August 2004. The handbook defines in greater detail the service description provided above, with sections on eligibility guidelines and the determination process, including denials and appeals, service coverage and fares, hours and days of service, reservation procedures, scheduling and cancellation and no-show policies, and other facets of the operations.

At least five areas of the Teleride policies require further discussion regarding how they are applied and/or enforced, and how their application/enforcement affect overall operations, productivity, and cost-efficiency. These areas are noted herein; after discussion with staff of CAT and Teleride, documented later in this chapter, an analysis of the impacts will be provided, along with suggestions for changes.

Coverage

The ADA requires that Teleride services be provided within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of all fixed route services provided by CAT. However, Teleride is provided throughout Chatham County, an area significantly larger than that required by the regulation. The impact of the wider boundaries for Teleride needs to be examined to determine the extent to which they affect productivity and cost-effectiveness.

Determination of Eligibility

CAT has a comprehensive questionnaire for applicants to fill out, and a review process that is clearly described in the Teleride Policy Handbook. The issues regarding eligibility determinations faced by many transit properties, and which need to be assessed for CAT, are generally as follows: How strictly are the regulations applied? How well does the denial and appeals process actually work? Does the transit authority use an outside agency for eligibility determinations, does it follow-up with professional providers or require a form to be filled out by a medical practitioner, and/or does it require a functional assessment?

Fares

ADA fares can be up to twice that of the fixed route fare for a similar trip. CAT only charges \$1.20 for a Teleride trip, which is well below the allowable one-way fare of \$2.00. If the same origin-destination pattern requires a transfer on the fixed route service, the fixed route fare would cost \$2 as opposed to \$1.20 for Teleride since passengers are required to pay full payment for each [fixed route] boarding. Charging such low rates has a significant impact upon the use of Teleride versus the use of CAT fixed routes for those individuals who might be able to use fixed route services for at least some of their trips. This policy does not encourage customers who are able to ride fixed route services to do so.

Reservation Notice

While 24 hours is congruent with the ADA requirement, and while Teleride also will try to accommodate same day trips as available, the 14 day advance reservation time needs to be examined in light of data that has recently collected around the country suggesting that longer

reservation periods can contribute to higher cancellation and no-show rates and affect overall effectiveness of the service.

Suspensions of Service

There is a specific no-show policy outlined in the Teleride Policy Handbook that defines the conditions for application of suspensions as well as the appeal process. The issue is whether these policies are enforced by management, and if management is supported in their decision-making by the appeals board. Without the support of an appeals board, the implementation of the policy lacks any strength in helping to curb abuse by customers. This has been a problem in some cities and will be discussed later in the chapter.

As noted, we will look at each of these issues in the context of their application in day to day operations and management, as well as in the context of financial and operating data collected from the 2006 NTD as well for a sample month, in this case June 2006.

Statistical Information

In this section, we have updated the NTD data reported in Technical Memorandum #1-Baseline Conditions to 2006, and have generated a series of performance statistics that can be studied against 2005 statistics, performance standards for similar ADA systems nationally, as well as against local performance measures and standards.

**Table 8-1
Teleride Operating Statistics**

	2005	2006
Annual Passengers	69,255	72,353
Revenue Hours	35,918	37,970
Revenue Miles	481,529	491,877
Peak Vehicles	16	16
Total Operating Expense	\$1,230,296	\$1,286,433

Using these data, the key annual performance statistics for 2005 and 2006 are as follows:

**Table 8-2
Teleride Performance Statistics**

	2005	2006
Passengers per Revenue Hour	1.90	1.90
Passengers per Revenue Mile	0.14	0.15
Operating Expense per Hour	\$34.25	\$33.88
Operating Expense per Mile	\$2.55	\$2.61
Operating Expense per Passenger	\$17.76	\$17.78

The key changes between 2005 and 2006 are the 4.5 percent increase in ridership to the highest total ridership over the past six years, and the reduced hourly operating cost, from \$34.25 to \$33.88 per hour. The operating cost per hour for the system, already low in comparison to operating costs for many of CAT's peers, is low and went down because of the terms of the operating contract with Laidlaw. In the contract, Laidlaw has specific rates for the first 2,400 hours of service it provides for each year 2004 -06, and lower rates for every hour over 2,600. The rates for the first 2,600 varied from \$38.51 per hour in 2004 to \$40.18 in 2006; for the excess hours, the corresponding rates were \$17.70 and \$19.42. Thus, for every additional hour of service being provided over 2,600, CAT sees a reduction in its hourly costs, which helps control its total expenses as the service grows.

Some issues of note inherent in the NTD data, to be further analyzed at the end of this chapter, are as follows:

- Given the favorable contract rates, unit costs are excellent for Teleride services; however, the hourly operating cost estimates are actually somewhat higher because CAT does not account for any of its administrative costs and overhead for the service. Still, after discussions with CAT staff concerning the level of such costs, it is clear that they are relatively small and would perhaps increase the hourly expense by between \$1.00 and \$2.00 at most.
- A second concern that will be addressed later is the productivity of the system. At 1.9 passengers per hour, this is low in comparison to most standards for door-to-door urban ADA systems, which generally look to achieve at least 2.5 - 3.0 passenger trips per hour.
- Despite the low hourly operating cost, the cost per trip is very high as a result of the large (county-wide), often rural service area and resulting low productivity of the system.

Further research was done using a sampling of operating and performance data provided by Teleride and CAT for the month of June 2006. Teleride keeps very complete records on a daily basis of its ridership, cancellations, no-shows, fares and tickets, and revenue hours and miles of service provided. Teleride provides these data to CAT for each day as well as summarized for the month.

Based on the June 2006 reservations summary, Teleride on average provides the following:

	Weekdays	Saturday	Sunday
Revenue Hours	128	66	50
Passenger Trips	215	91	54
Trips/Hour	1.7	1.4	1.1

For the month, the productivity was 1.6 passenger trips per hour, less than the full 2006 number of 1.9, so clearly June was a slower than average month for the system. Still, the data do indicate the relative use of the system between weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays.

The monthly summary for June 2006 showed the following data for 6,714 reservations made:

Trip Type	Total	Percentage of Total Reservations
Actual Rides	5,305	79%
On-Time Trips	4,495	67%
Late Trips	810	12%
Cancellations	1,308	19%
No-Shows	101	2%
Turndowns	17	0%
Service to Independent Municipalities	577	9%
Wheelchairs	1,775	26%
Subscription Trips	1,850	28%
Complaints	0	0%

A few key findings can be drawn from the data:

- A large number of reservations do not materialize as trips. Only 79 percent of the reservations resulted in completed trips. Of the 1,409 that did not end in trips, most (1,308) were cancellations and only a small number (101) were no-shows. Still, with such a high cancellation rate, Teleride may not be producing the number of trips it could, since it is often hard to slot in trips at the last minute to fill cancellations.
- The reported 810 late trips represent 15 percent of all trips, which is borderline high; the ideal on-time rate would be closer to 90 percent of all trips. Focus group participants highlighted this as an issue that should be addressed.
- The 17 turndowns is an excellent number. Although ADA requires no turndowns, in discussions it was indicated that these turndowns were almost exclusively calls made after the 24 hour reservation window had closed, or by persons trying to make late changes to an existing regulation. This does not indicate that there is any systematic turndown rate that needs to be addressed.
- Subscriptions accounted for 35 percent of all trips and were well within reasonable parameters under the ADA guidelines, which are designed to ensure that there are sufficient hours available for non-repetitive trip-making.
- Finally, Teleride reported no complaints. Some recommendations will be forthcoming in this area to ensure that this is properly reported, but discussions with both CAT and Teleride staffs, and for the most part with the focus group, did not indicate large scale complaints,

although as noted there were some issues registered at the focus group and recent Teleride users group meetings.

Staff Interviews and Discussion

The consulting team met with CAT and Teleride staff to discuss the policies and procedures governing Teleride, to discuss how these policies and procedures are implemented on a day to day basis, and to review and discuss key operating parameters and other issues raised through the reviews discussed above.

Management and Staffing

Teleride is operated by Laidlaw as subcontractor to CAT, with Laidlaw providing all management and operating personnel for the service. CAT administration of the program rests almost entirely with the CAT Transportation Service Manager, who receives the monthly statistics from Laidlaw and handles the invoices for service and coordinates payments. He uses the data to prepare policy reports and monthly figures for CAT's reporting to its Board, and works closely with the CAT Accounting and Budget Director and finance and payroll staff. Finally, the overall program is overseen by the CAT Executive Director.

Despite the number of people identified above, there is actually a minimal amount of oversight required for the program on a day-to-day basis. In fact, CAT does not include its administrative expenses in its NTD reporting, thus slightly under-estimating the true cost of the operation in its financial data to the FTA. This is common to many of the ADA paratransit programs that are operated by a sub-contractor.

Laidlaw provides management, operating, and maintenance staff for Teleride, and operates from a separate facility on Louisville Road on the west side of Savannah. The management team is headed by a Program Manager, who is responsible for all of the company's activities as well as coordination and liaison with CAT. The Program Manager has four direct reports, each of whom in turn oversees other staff:

- Operations Manager, responsible for the operating functions including scheduling and dispatching. The Operations Manager in turn has two scheduler/dispatchers: Monday through Saturday, one handles the morning, beginning with opening at 5AM, and the other the afternoon and evening, ending at closing around midnight. On Sunday, the shift time is 7AM to 7PM.
- Administrative Manager, who handles the paperwork for the program, and works closely with the Program Manager on administrative issues. The Administrative Manager does not have staff, and uses the assistance of the dispatch staff as needed.

- Maintenance Manager, who is responsible for daily bus cleaning and routine maintenance, preventive maintenance, scheduling repairs, and keeping maintenance records for each vehicle. At the time of the interview, the maintenance manager was assisted solely by a utility person; however, since that time two maintenance staff have been added.
- Driver Development and Safety Manager, who trains all new hires, re-certifies drivers annually, and works closely with the Operations Manager on the daily scheduling of drivers and daily reporting activities. At the time of the interview, Teleride had 16 full time and 2 part time drivers, and acknowledged that they needed additional driving staff, particularly part time drivers. Administrative staff members were driving at times when there were shortages due to drivers being out sick, on medical leave, or in training. Generally, Teleride indicated that they had 12 of 16 vehicles on the road during peak operations.

Operations Review

Teleride staff members were interviewed concerning implementation of the Teleride Policy Handbook and its impacts on day-to-day operations. As described earlier, the handbook lays out for riders all procedures regarding eligibility, intake, trip scheduling, fare policy, cancellation and no-show policies, etc. This section reviews the daily operations activities and any apparent issues arising from implementation of the procedures as described in the handbook.

Eligibility and Intake is based upon the submission of the application for eligibility, and the determination by the Teleride Program Manager if an applicant is eligible under the terms laid out on page 3 of the handbook. The criteria follow ADA guidelines regarding the ability to use fixed route transit, and include functional classifications that can be applied on a trip by trip basis, e.g. conditional eligibility. The program is open to all of Chatham County and not restricted by the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile envelope around fixed routes that would be allowable under ADA. This requires Teleride to cover a larger geographic area than the fixed route network, including a significant portion of low density and rural Chatham County.

The eligibility determination is generally very loose with regard to follow-ups to health providers, and no in-person interview or functional testing is required. No recertification is required for eligible users once the initial application is accepted. Very few applicants are turned down, but there is an appeal process for those who wish to contest the determination.

Fare and Rider Policies

If the client requires a personal care attendant (PCA), this is indicated on the application, and if accepted the PCA can then ride for free with the client. One guest is also allowed to ride with an eligible user on a fare paying basis. Personal care attendants, who assist the passenger with

boarding, paying the fare, alighting, and other necessities, are not included in the count of riders kept in the records.

The fare for a Teleride one-way trip is \$1.20, only \$0.20 above the cost of a fixed route boarding. Furthermore, if a fixed route trip requires two buses, the differential is increased to a savings of \$0.80 by using Teleride. Since Teleride can charge up to twice the fare of fixed route one-way trip, the Teleride fare could be as high as \$2.00 per one-way trip, which would be twice that of a trip on a single bus and equal to that of a fixed route trip requiring one transfer.

The fare policy is very lenient and coupled with the generally loose eligibility determination, undoubtedly results in the use of Teleride by some individuals who could potentially use low floor or lift-equipped fixed route services but chose the convenience of door-to-door service.

Scheduling and Dispatching

Hours of operation and hours for scheduling a trip are given in the handbook, along with advance notice requirements.

Scheduling can be done in as little as 24 hours in advance of a trip, or up to 14 days in advance of a trip. Teleride begins filling out its manifests three days in advance of the trips, and begins callbacks to confirm pick-up times two days in advance, which also helps in uncovering uncalled-in cancellations (next section) but reservations are still accepted while that process is underway. If a person calls prior to 24 hours in advance, ADA allows for no “systematic denials”, i.e., a pattern of denials which suggests an on-going issue of capacity or other constraints on travel. Teleride and CAT both indicated that there are few if any denials; in June 06 as reported earlier, there were 17 turndowns and 6,700 reservations. Turndowns happen only after Teleride makes efforts to accommodate each trip, negotiates alternative times with a client, and finds that the request cannot be accommodated. Furthermore, some of the turndowns reported are actually turndowns made on trip requests that come in after the 24 hour notice period, although an exact figure was not provided.

Scheduling is not automated although automated programs were being considered for the next contract. Trip reservations are taken manually and input to the computer to make driver runs. There are no “will-calls;” all return trips are given a schedule time. In the event a doctor is running late with a patient, Teleride will adjust its schedules accordingly.

The volume of trip-making on a daily basis is approximately 215 trips weekdays, 100 Saturdays, and 50 Sundays. Given that 1,850 of 5,305 trips completed in June 2006 were subscription (35 percent), this indicates that about 140 trips need to be slotted on a typical weekday onto the approximate 12 vans used in peak service.

Once the manifests are completed, they are used by the drivers and returned at the end of the operating day to the office for entry into the computer. The quality of the information provided is quite good, and drivers who do not fill out the information properly are instructed by management to make the proper corrections.

On-time Performance

The standard for on-time performance is to have all pick-ups within a 15 minute window on either side of a given reservation time. Only arrivals after the 15 minute late window are reported; any vehicle arriving earlier than 15 minutes in advance is not reported in the statistic. If a driver arrives before the scheduled pick-up time, and if the rider does not appear, he/she calls in to the dispatcher, who in turn will call the client. A driver will not leave a location without permission of the dispatcher.

In June 2006, on-time performance was 85 percent. This is considered low by industry standards, which look for at least a 90 percent rate for this measure. This issue was also identified in the focus group discussion.

Cancellations and No-Shows

Cancellations are acceptable without penalty if they are received prior to two hours of a trip pick-up time. Any cancellations made after this time will require that the person pay for the trip before riding the next time, and will be recorded as a no-show. Three no-shows within 12 months will result in a notice of pending suspension. There are no penalties for cancellations made before the two hour window; however, chronic abusers of the policy are called and asked to be more careful in the future. While many cancellations are for legitimate reasons, some are simply people forgetting that they made a reservation or abusing the policy, and CAT would do well to consider setting a policy for this issue.

While cancellations up to two hours before a scheduled pick-up are considered acceptable from a rider policy standpoint and will result in no action, the fact is that it is very difficult or impossible to use the available time to arrange another trip, and thus a high rate of cancellations will result in an inefficiency in the system. In fact, the cancellation rate for Teleride is very high; in June 2006 it was 19.5 percent; with the small number of no-shows (101), the number rounds to 20 percent of all reservations resulting in no trip being made. Converting all of these cancellations/no-shows into trips would increase the annual average of 1.9 trips per vehicle hour to 2.3 trips per vehicle hour, bringing the system more in line with standards of performance for similar ADA services.

According to on-going research for the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP B-31 Guidebook for Measuring, Assessing and Improving Performance of Demand Response Transportation, KFH Group, Urbitran Associates, et. al., 2007), one of the most significant

contributing factors to a high cancellation rate is the length of time that a person has to make a reservation. A window of up to 14 days is very large, and systems that have shortened the time period have often seen dramatically positive results. One large urban system reduced the window from 14 to 7 days and saw a drop in cancellations of almost 20 percent, resulting in almost 1,300 fewer cancellations a month. Three others went from 7 days to 3 days, and reduced the rate by 10 percent, 66 percent, and 20 percent.

Maintenance

While a detailed maintenance review was not part of the process, the consultant team interviewed the head of maintenance and reviewed the records for the vehicles and service interruptions. At the time maintenance was short-handed and since has hired two mechanics; however, there was a low incidence of in-service breakdowns or missed trips, the vehicles appeared clean, and the records were well-maintained on each.

Other capital equipment includes radio and dispatch equipment. On-site dispatchers use two-way radios to communicate with vehicle operators on the road. All trip records are maintained manually and entered into a computerized log to ensure accountability. Teleride's technology resources are generally simple yet effective.

Other Items

Several other items were touched on during the discussions:

- The Teleride policy is door-to-door service and not door-through-door. Although there have been requests for the latter, and riders still try to get drivers to go beyond the doorstep, CAT and Teleride are strict on the enforcement of the policy. Drivers also do not carry packages for riders.
- Neither CAT nor Teleride knows exactly how many active, eligible riders there are in the systems, as the client base is not culled on any regular basis.
- Teleride needs to incorporate a systematic, random follow-up procedure to assess service quality. Random passengers could be called to ask about their satisfaction with the trip they recently took, with the information gathered used to constantly improve service quality.
- At the time of the interview, a wage review and benefits package review was underway. The Teleride wages and benefits do not compare favorably to those of CAT, which is also unionized. Teleride operator wages may be too low, which has been demonstrated in several cases (TCRP B-31, KFH Group, Urbitran Associates, et. al., 2007) to lead to high turnover, additional recruitment and training costs, and a reduced quality of service.

- The Advisory Committee on Accessible Transportation (ACAT) advises both CAT and the Metropolitan Planning Organization on accessibility issues and acts as a liaison between transportation providers and under-served disability groups. While there are not many complaints recorded at Teleride, the ACAT is concerned about the length of time that a single person may be on the van and on-time performance. On-time performance was an issue addressed by the focus group as well.

Recommendations

Teleride is generally a well-conceived, well-managed program with some specific areas of concern where modest adjustments can be made that should contribute to an improved level of service for the community. Based upon the discussion above, the following actions are recommended for consideration by CAT to increase productivity and efficiency and to improve overall service quality:

1. Tighten Eligibility Certification to ensure that those who are using the system meet the ADA guidelines and cannot use fixed route bus services. Increase the use of conditional or trip by trip eligibility. Possibly use an outside vendor to do eligibility certifications, and incorporate either in-person interviews or a functional test into the process.

The use of third party eligibility certification processes has proven successful for a number of systems nation-wide. In Denver, the Regional Transportation District (RTD) benefits from eligibility certification and functional evaluations performed by Easter Seals of Colorado for its paratransit customers. In Lincoln, Nebraska, StarTran's eligibility certification is handled by the League of Human Dignity, which processes all paratransit user applications and also performs functional evaluations. These systems, and others, have found that external controls provide a more controlled certification process and thus fewer passengers using paratransit who could otherwise travel on traditional, fixed route bus service.

2. Increase CAT travel training so that those who are taken off the Teleride rolls, either for all or some trips, are prepared to use fixed route services. Travel training should begin to represent a more fundamental component of the certification process rather than a voluntary effort. CAT and Teleride staff should solicit the assistance of client groups such as senior centers to assist with outreach and training efforts for passengers who are candidates for assistance (and a potential shift to fixed route buses).
3. Consider tightening the geographic coverage to the three-quarter mile ADA standard so that the Teleride service operates where there is fixed route serviced, and does not operate in outlying low density areas until such time as fixed route service is increased. This will reduce trip lengths, should improve scheduling of trips, and in the long run should increase productivity.

4. Apply for New Freedom Initiative funds to use for replacement services, as needed, for individuals no longer eligible for ADA. This money is allotted specifically for those who “fall through the net”, i.e., those customers who are neither ADA eligible nor served by fixed routes.
5. Increase the one-way fare to \$2.00 as permitted by the ADA. This action could help shift demand away from ADA to fixed routes among those with the most mobility, particularly those with conditional or trip by trip eligibility.
6. Reduce the reservation time from 14 days to 7 days to reduce the rate of cancellations, which will produce more effective scheduling and more trips.
7. Set a cancellation policy for frequent abusers of the advance notice policy, and at the same time tighten enforcement of the no-show policy as well. The no-show span should be three no-shows in six months or fewer, not 12 months, and a parallel policy should be set for cancellations, e.g., three cancellations in six months would require a letter and hearing.
8. Review and revise wages and benefits package for drivers as feasible to reduce turnover and promote service quality.
9. Implement a quality assurance program to monitor completed trips for quality and on-time performance by calling random clients within a day of their completed trip.
10. Hire additional part-time drivers to allow for greater operational flexibility, lower over-time wage expenses, and reduce/eliminate need for administrative staff to drive Teleride vans in times of staff shortage.
11. Add CAT administrative costs to the financials for Teleride so that the CAT management and Board understand the full cost of the program, and so that the numbers reported to FTA for the National Transit Database are an accurate depiction of the program.

Summary

In summary, Teleride services are well-operated at present, though the topics mentioned in this chapter highlight some areas of potential improvement. Given some of the productivity levels seen with the system, the capacity does exist to offer general public transportation in conjunction with traditional ADA paratransit services. This is particularly true in lower density and lower ridership portions of CAT’s fixed route service area. Demand response and paratransit trips can provide a key link for those in areas that do not support viable fixed route transit and regional transit nodes, such as the Oglethorpe Mall.

The use of taxi companies has been incorporated into some systems' ADA programs, such as in the evening hours when ridership is lower. This may be possible in Chatham County, however CAT must ascertain the operational quality of private taxi companies prior to contracting for service. Additionally, taxi companies would have to provide ADA-compliant vehicles, which is not typical of private companies, otherwise CAT should provide these vehicles to the operators. In cases where taxi companies are used at certain hours, a transportation cost is generally established between the transit agency and the taxi operator such that clients pay the existing one-way fare (\$1.20 in the case of Teleride) while the transit operator pays the remainder of the meter rate for the taxi. Depending upon the size of the defined service area, a maximum allowable trip fare may be established so as to prevent excessive expense on the part of the transit operator.