

**COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION**

DATE: February 21, 2012

TO: Supervisor Michael Mayo, Sr.,
Chairperson, Transportation, Public Works & Transit Committee

FROM: Frank Busalacchi, Director, Milwaukee County Department of Transportation
Lloyd Grant, Jr., Managing Director, MCTS

SUBJECT: New Freedom Initiative Report

POLICY

MCTS periodically provides informational updates to the Committee on transit issues.

BACKGROUND

2012 budget amendment 1A073 directed the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) to provide a report on the results of the New Freedom Initiative to promote fixed route service to qualifying passengers with disabilities. This report is in following up to that directive.

The main purpose of the New Freedom Initiative is to expand the independence of persons with disabilities by removing barriers to their use of fixed route transit services. Benefits of this initiative include empowering individuals with choice and independence, while conserving scarce resources. In these pursuits, the New Freedom Initiative has been very successful.

People with disabilities are using the bus system more often to meet their transportation needs. When buses became wheelchair accessible about a decade ago, the number of passengers who boarded with a wheelchair increased annually for several years, but then wheelchair ridership leveled off and the increases substantially stopped. However once the New Freedom program was initiated, the upward trend returned with last year being a record year. In 2011, individuals that use wheelchairs boarded MCTS buses over 76,600 times.

Since 2008, MCTS efforts in the New Freedom Initiative has centered on four major components: Community Outreach; Travel Training; Barrier Removal; and New Freedom Pass Program.

Community Outreach

Community Outreach activities are used to solicit input on how transit can become more user friendly to persons with disabilities and older adults. Community Outreach also encompasses communicating the benefits and advantages of taking the bus to Transit Plus clients, seniors, students with disabilities, teachers, parents and guardians, social service providers and Family

Care agencies. Presentations, materials and a video are all used to get the message out. The video is available on-line at: <http://www.ridemcts.com/Programs/New-Freedom/>

Travel Training

The Travel Training program is designed to facilitate small specialized group training, and one-on-one travel training when necessary. A bus orientation training program has been developed and is used at high schools to help orient special needs students to the bus. The program consists of a presentation in a classroom setting that includes transit history, current services provided, and tips on proper use of the transit system. The orientation program concludes with a bus ride to better acclimate potential riders to the bus so that anxiety associated with a first bus ride can be minimized. In 2011, bus orientation training was provided 2 to 3 times each month throughout the County. Community Outreach in 2011 included 59 presentations for 2,000 participants. MCTS provided one-on-one travel training in 2011 for 120 individuals. And, since 2009, MCTS has engaged over 3,000 participants in group travel training and 285 in one-on-one travel training.

Physical Barrier Removal

Removal of physical barriers helps to eliminate obstacles to taking the bus. Older adults and persons with disabilities that use mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, can have a difficult time boarding or alighting from a bus if there isn't a paved area for them. MCTS has made good progress in making bus stops ADA accessible. In 2011, 17 new ADA compliant bus pads were constructed. Since 2009, bus pads have been installed at 69 bus stops.

New Freedom Pass Program

The adopted 2012 transit budget directed MCTS to continue to coordinate with the Office for Persons with Disabilities and other County agencies to continue to provide free rides on the fixed route system for eligible persons with disabilities. Offering free rides on fixed route transit to persons with disabilities who would have otherwise continued to use more costly paratransit services has proven effective as an incentive for developing interest in education/outreach and travel training by individuals and groups.


The New Freedom Pass is a tremendous complement to the mobility management activities described above. A New Freedom Pass is provided free of charge to conditionally eligible paratransit clients to encourage them to take the bus instead of the more costly option of a paratransit van ride. This pass empowers the consumer to choose a transportation option that is voluntary, spontaneous, safe and cost effective. The pass represents a strategy that is supportive of providing for universal access to all MCTS services. In 2011, for example, over 2,300 paratransit clients were provided with a New Freedom pass, up from 1300 clients in 2009. Also, passengers boarding in wheelchairs have increased from nearly 52,000 in 2009 to over 76,000 rides in 2011.

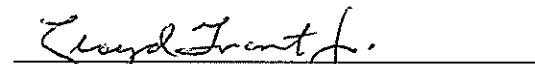
RECOMMENDATION

This report is informational only.

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Approved by:


Frank Busalacchi, Director
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