

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-office Communication

DATE: 6/18/2025

TO: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Department of Transportation
Julie Esch, Interim President & CEO, Milwaukee County Transit System

SUBJECT: From the Director, Department of Transportation and the Interim President and CEO, Milwaukee County Transit System, providing an informational report regarding transit/paratransit-related matters responsive to or within the 2025 Adopted Budget.

FILE TYPE: Reference File Report

REQUEST

This report provides information on the Transit Plus Same Day Pilot Program

BACKGROUND

The Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) paratransit program, known as Transit Plus, provides transportation for persons with disabilities whose disability prevents them from using the fixed route bus system for some or all of their trips. The primary responsibility of the Transit Plus office is to administer the federally required ADA paratransit program. In addition, Transit Plus also administers the Same Day Pilot program.

The Transit Plus Same Day Pilot was developed in collaboration with the Paratransit Taxi Task Force to provide same day trips for persons with disabilities that could not have been scheduled the day before and thus could not have been scheduled on the existing paratransit vans.

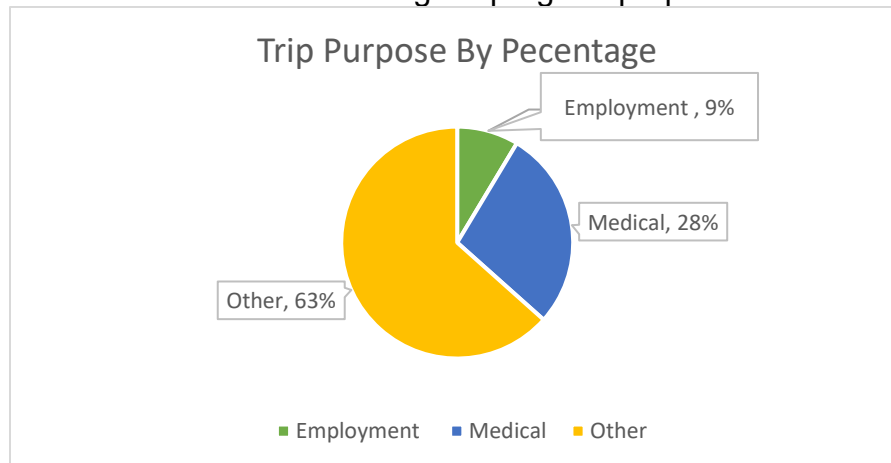
MCTS Service began on the Transit Plus Same Day Pilot at the end of August 2024 and is provided under contract with Tidewater Transit, dba Via. Service is provided using wheelchair accessible minivans which can transport a maximum of four ambulatory riders or one ambulatory rider and one wheelchair user at a time. Contract terms are currently being updated to provide service through December 2025 or until budgeted funds are expired.

TRIP PURPOSE

The original parameters for the program limited trip purpose to trips for health/medical or employment purposes only. Some examples of the use cases under this umbrella included a same day trip to urgent care, going to pick up a sick child, or being called into

work. Ridership under the original parameters was very low. As of March 3, 2025, program parameters were expanded to make better use of vehicle service hours that were already on the road. All Transit Plus clients are automatically enrolled in the program and clients can now use the service for a wide variety of trip purposes as long as the trip could not have been scheduled the day before.

Since this change in trip parameters the number of trips for medical and employment purposes has remained flat while the “other” category of trips has grown exponentially. This indicates that while there are more unique riders on the program, most are using this service for reasons other than the original program purposes.



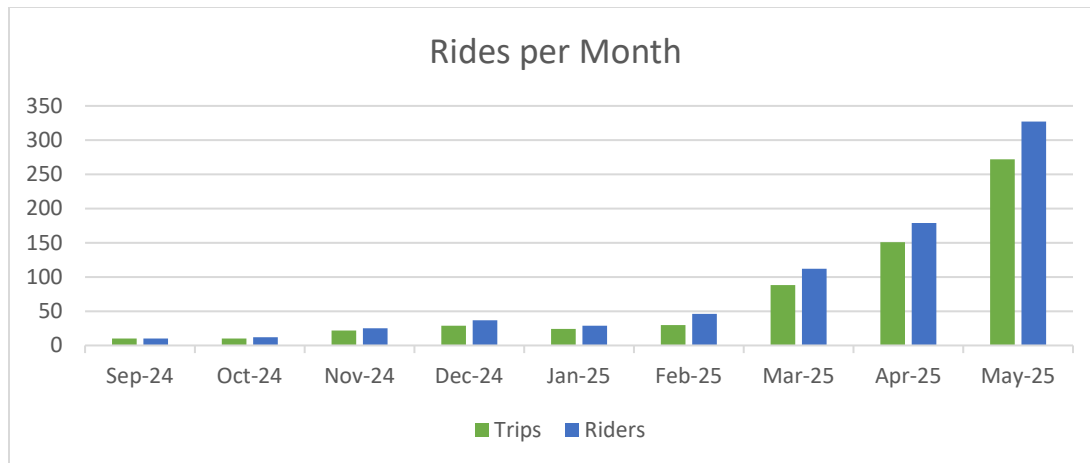
After evaluating trip origins and destinations, no clear-cut patterns can be determined due to the limited amount of trip data. If ridership continues to grow, patterns of high demand will become more evident.

RIDERSHIP

Ridership during the first six months of the program was extremely low, providing less than 30 rides per month. Since the change in program parameters in March, ridership has been increasing dramatically. The monthly number of trips each rider can take is capped in an effort to manage demand. This cap was reduced from eight one-way trips per month to six, in March to make sure the expanded program did not grow unchecked and as a result exceed the available vehicle hours or program funds.

Month/ Year	Client Trips	Total Riders
Sep-24	10	10
Oct-24	10	12
Nov-24	22	25
Dec-24	29	35
Jan-25	24	29
Feb-25	30	46
Mar-25*	88	112
Apr-25	151	179
May-25	272	327

*Program parameters expanded beyond employment and healthcare. All Transit Plus riders enrolled.

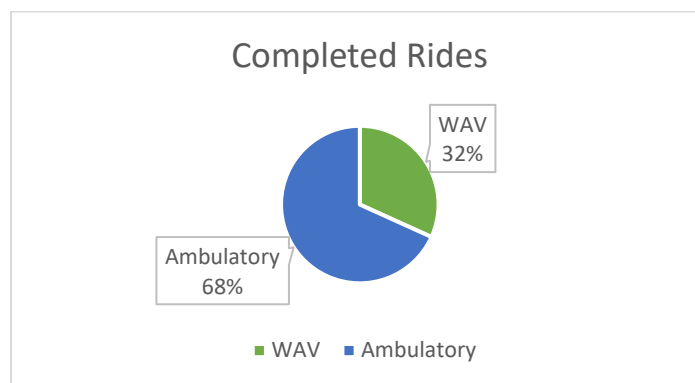


PROGRAM PARTICIPANT DATA

Since the service started, there have been 191 unique users of the program. Fifty-one percent of these riders (98 people) took their first trip between mid-April and the end of May. This indicates an increase of riders using the program after the change in service parameters and additional outreach efforts.

Paratransit ridership data shows that 48% of the pilot users are not regular paratransit users. These 92 riders took fewer than 50 rides per person (1 round trip per week) on paratransit during the six months before the start of the pilot.

Of the 636 total completed trips, a total of 202 trips were taken by riders who required a wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV). The other 434 rides were taken by ambulatory riders. This ratio of ambulatory to non-ambulatory trips is the same as what is seen on the paratransit vans.



FARES/ PROGRAM COSTS

Fare on the service is \$10 per one way trip and can be paid in cash or by credit card. Fares are retained by the vendor and are subtracted from the monthly cost of service. Service is paid for at a contracted rate of \$98.73 per vehicle hour. Currently the program operates 155 service hours per week, translating to a monthly service cost of

approximately \$55,000 per month. Administrative and staff costs are approximately \$60,000 per year. Of the \$1,117,054 allocated for this program, there remains a balance of just under \$495,000 in operating funds which is sufficient to continue the program at the same level of service hours through the end of 2025.

The cost per trip on this service was extremely high due to low ridership in the early months. As ridership has increased that cost has been dropping but remains significantly higher than the cost for prescheduled paratransit service. In April, the cost to Milwaukee County was just over \$360 per client trip. The cost for May is unavailable at the time of this report.



FUTURE STATE

Short term:

If growth continues at this same accelerated rate, it is anticipated that the current levels of service will no longer be sufficient to meet demand in the very near future. The result will be clients who are unable to get a ride when they want one. There are several options that could be considered to mitigate this situation. These include:

- Deploy additional vehicle hours to ensure that riders are getting the ride they request at least 95% of the time. This would reduce the number of months that funds would be available for this service and could deplete remaining funds as soon as August 2025.
- Adjust program service span to discontinue service on Saturdays and/or Sundays as these days have lower ridership and shift those service hours to the more popular weekday time periods in order to increase capacity during high demand hours.
- Switch from a service model where all drivers are employees of Via to a model that would have drivers be independent contractors. Standards for driver training, service expectations and random drug and alcohol testing would remain the same; but would result in a lower per vehicle hour rate. This would allow us to put approximately 80 additional vehicle hours on the road per week and still have funds to continue service until the end of the year.

The Paratransit Taxi Task Force, MCTS and MCDOT staff will be evaluating these options to determine next steps.

Long Term:

The current contract with Via does allow for one potential one-year extension. A competitive procurement process would need to be undertaken to secure a vendor beyond that period.

Due to the limited data under the expanded program parameters, it is difficult to project the level of service needed to consistently meet demand should this program continue beyond 2025. At 3 times the current demand, Via estimates that 356 vehicle hours/week would be needed to keep unfulfilled requests below 7%. This would translate to an annual operational cost of \$1,579,444 - \$1,827,690 depending on the driver model implemented. Administrative costs would be in addition to the amount paid to Via, bringing the annual estimated cost of this program to \$1,639,444 - \$1,887,690. However, costs could be much higher if demand grows beyond projected levels.

While this expanded pilot is growing in popularity and has gotten positive reviews from riders, it is important to point out that this is a discretionary program that goes above and beyond what is required under federal paratransit regulations. Many potential riders have cited the \$10 fare as cost prohibitive. As it is currently structured, this is a transportation program offered at an additional cost to Milwaukee County that meets an unmet need for a segment of our community, but not in the urgent safety net manner originally intended.

In light of MCTS's budgetary outlook and potential cuts to our core fixed route and paratransit services, funds for the continuation of this discretionary program are not included in the MCTS proposed budget plan for 2026. Additional funds would need to be identified and allocated to this program if the Board wishes to extend this pilot.

If budgetary constraints impacting our essential paratransit program did not exist, this program would be a positive, but potentially costly, addition to the transportation options available for persons with disabilities in Milwaukee County. To that end, MCTS is currently in the process of conducting a microtransit/same day paratransit feasibility study that is designed to determine if options exist for providing a fixed route first/last mile solution and a same day ride for paratransit riders in a manner that could complement, rather than detract from, our primary services. This study's recommendations are expected toward the end of 2025.

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the strategic plan:

- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity.
- 2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered.
- 3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities.
- 3B: Enhance the County’s fiscal health and sustainability.
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is for informational purposes unless otherwise directed.

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Dept. of Transportation
John Rodgers, Deputy Director, Dept of Transportation
Julie Esch, Interim President & CEO, MCTS (jesch@mcts.org)
Sandra Kellner, Chief Administrative Officer, MCTS (skellner@mcts.org)
Frances Musci, Director of Paratransit, MCTS (fmusci@mcts.org)
Megan Newman, Customer Relations Manager, MCTS (mnewman@mcts.org)

PREPARED BY:

Frances Musci, Director of Paratransit, MCTS

APPROVED BY:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Donna Brown-Martin", is written over a horizontal line.

Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Department of Transportation

cc: Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk