

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

JOINT COMMITTEES ON MENTAL HEALTH, AGING &
TRANSPORTATION

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April 27, 2009

Start: 1:17pm

Recess: 3:55pm

HELD AT: Council Chambers
City Hall

B E F O R E:

G. OLIVER KOPPELL, JOHN C. LIU,
MARIA DEL CARMEN ARROYO,
Chairpersons

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

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Helen D. Foster
Kendall Stewart
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A P P E A R A N C E S

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Simcha Felder

James F. Gennaro

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Thomas Charles
Vice President, Paratransit Division
New York City Transit

Bobbie Sackman
Council of Senior Centers

Lawrence Carter Long
Executive Director
Disabilities Network of New York City

Sharona Jones
Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled

Edith Prentiss
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Disabled in Action

Todd C. Walerstein
Concerned Citizen

Matt Shoik
Disability in Action

Patricia Dolan
Director
Queens Connection

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Good

afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm City Council Member Oliver Koppell. And I'm Chairman on the Council's Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services. This hearing is sponsored by three council committees. I'm pleased to have the Chairmen of the other two-- Chairmen or Chair people, I should say, Chair members, of the other committees with me, first of all John Liu, to my right, Chair of the Transportation Committee and Maria del Carmen Arroyo, to my left, Chair of the Committee on Aging. And we also have with us behind me, I think is Council Member Larry Seabrook, Council Member Eric Ulrich Council Member Simcha Felder. Council Member Diana Reyna in the front. Is that Council Member Miguel Martinez I see there? Very good. So let me make an introductory statement. This hearing will evaluate the Access-A-Ride program to determine what actions may be necessary to ensure that New Yorkers who utilize Access-A-Ride services receive safe, reliable and proper service. I've also asked, by the way, since we're going to have some

form the disable community here talking about transportation, that they make any comments that they'd like about the new New York Taxi and Limousine Commission accessible dispatch system, because that is an alternative to Access-A-Ride for many people. And we are all interested to know whether that system of dispatch of yellow taxis is working. Those invited to testify include the New York City Transit, which runs the program, that runs the Access-A-Ride Program; the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities; The New York City Department of Aging and other interested parties. Of course there are bases for criticism of the Access-A-Ride program and also of our general transit system, because it's not fully accessible, nor are taxis fully accessible right now. So that the Access-A-Ride is in fact the main source of transportation for the disabled. The Access-A-Ride also is the program that allows the City to meet the mandates of ADA, which requires the City, among other obligations, to provide a Paratransit system which is comparable to the level of designated transportation to individuals without disabilities. It's been more

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2 in this joint hearing today. This is an issue
3 that certainly has been at the forefront over the
4 last many years and it has been quite some time
5 since we've had a hearing here in these chambers
6 on Access-A-Ride. There are some changes that we
7 have all witnessed in Access-A-Ride, some
8 persistent complaints, perhaps some improvements.
9 One of the things we will be looking at is the--
10 what has been the impact on the new certification
11 or re-certification procedures that the MTA put
12 into place nearly two years ago. So with that,
13 thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and I look
14 forward to hearing from all of the witnesses
15 today.

16 [Pause]

17 CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Julissa
18 Ferreras, who has joined us this afternoon.

19 CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: The microphone
20 has a little sticky that says do not pick up from
21 mic, from the base. Sorry. Good afternoon. I'm
22 Maria del Carmen Arroyo. I chair the Committee on
23 Aging. I want to thank my colleagues Council
24 Member Koppell and Council Member Liu for joining
25 us in this conversation today with the Aging

Committee. Access-A-Ride is a vital service for the City's disabled residents, most of whom are senior citizens who depend on the service as their only mode of transportation throughout the City. Though thousands of people depend on this form of transportation, there still remains many issues surrounding Access-A-Ride that many seniors and disabled persons have consistently reported that need to be addressed. Most recently the New York Academy of Medicine, which identified how older New Yorkers view age-friendliness of the City, Access-A-Ride was identified as a critical service in need of reform. Many older New Yorkers indicate that their experience with this service include long delays in the cold, waiting for vans that never arrive, inefficient, unusual routes, unhelpful dispatchers who often send drivers to the wrong location or leave a message at home when a person is waiting on the sidewalk for their ride. These delays and inefficiencies of this service puts users in particularly harmful situations because many of the arranged trips are for medically necessary services. These issues have continued to plague this service and sadly I

do not see that much improvement has been made over the years. Hopefully this hearing will produce some solutions to these issues as well as a progress report on the efforts that MTA is currently undertaking to improve this vital service. I'm particularly interested to hear from the MTA with regards to their status on the in person eligibility process that was launched or was about to be launched in that year. We had many concerns about individuals' ability to get to a location to ensure that they can continue to receive the service. To date I don't know how that process is going, so I'm particularly interested in hearing from the MTA on that. And with that I turn it back over to my co-Chair, Council Member Koppell.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I did the same thing. We've been joined by Councilmember Helen Diane Foster from the Bronx. And I want to second what Maria del Carmen Arroyo said about the eligibility program. It is important for us to hear. And I call as our first witness, Thomas Charles, Vice President Paratransit, New York City Transit. Please identify yourself, and we look

forward to hearing from you. Did you provide a prepared statement?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, I did.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay, let me find it. Just give me a second. Okay, I have it. Thank you, go ahead.

THOMAS CHARLES: I am Thomas Charles, Vice President of the Paratransit Division, City Department of Buses, MTA, New York City Transit. Good afternoon, Chairpersons Koppell, Arroyo and Liu and members of the City Council. The Access-A-Ride is an advanced reservation shared ride, door-to-door Paratransit service provided in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. It provides transportation for people who meet the eligibility criteria set forth in the ADA, persons who are unable to use public busses or subways for some or all of their trips because of their physical or mental disabilities. Neither age nor income is a factor in the ADA criteria for eligibility. MTA New York City Transit administers Access-A-Ride using private contractors to deliver the service. When we last appeared before the Council in May

2007, the average weekday Access-A-Ride ridership was 19,432 trips. By the end of 2008 the average weekday ridership had risen to 23,650, an increase of approximately 22%. At present, Access-A-Ride has approximately 124,212 registrants, an increase of 13% in the last year. On weekdays in 2007 our reservation center received approximately 12,700 requests for trips per day. Presently over 18,500 requests for trips are received on peak weekdays in the reservation center, a gain of 45%. When New York City Transit first assumed responsibility for Access-A-Ride service from the City in July 1993, the fleet comprised 92 vehicles. In December 2002 there were 847 vehicles in service and another 100 vehicles on order. Now there are more than 2,000 vehicles in service with a projection of 2,222 vehicles by the end of this year. This larger fleet is critical to meet the increased demand for service. Since March 2003, Access-A-Ride has achieved and maintained a zero denial policy. ADA requires that every eligible customer who requests a trip be offered transportation within a negotiable window of time to their designated destination. Presently,

Access-A-Ride customers are able to request trips one to two days in advance of the day on which they would like to travel. With continued significant increases in trip volume it became necessary to increase the number of contractors providing service for our customers. At the conclusion of the contract award selection in August of 2008, a total of 17 contractors received contract awards, which doubled the previous number of contracts in place. This will not only help us meet the continuing growth in service, but will also provide us with greater ability to accommodate customers when issues arrive on the day of service. For same-day service operations we have developed two ways of responding to instances where there is a missed connection for a trip. We have increased the number of floaters, routes without assigned trips, which area available to both the Paratransit command center and the Access-A-Ride carriers to dispatch or provide trips to customers who missed their scheduled connections. We also established a response unit referred to as Route Zero within the Paratransit Command Center. Route Zero's sole

function is to secure a recovery trip to the stranded customers within one hour of notification by the customer. At present 97% of the missed connections reported by customers are addressed within one hour. To provide our customers with more flexibility with their travel plans we have increased the use of voucher and taxi authorizations, options which today provide approximately 10.7% of our scheduled trips. We recently issued a request for proposals and expect to award contracts to approximately six to eight car service and livery firms, which will allow us to further increase the use of voucher authorizations for Access-A-Ride customers. I want to also mention one major initiative that we've been working on for the past few years, the installation of an automatic vehicle location and monitoring system on our entire fleet of vehicles. This complex multi-year project is scheduled for completion later on this year. At present, approximately 1,000 vehicles, 50% of the fleet, are equipped with AVL. This system allows more efficient real time control of Paratransit service with the use of global positioning satellite

systems and a wireless data communication network. Mobile data terminals have been stalled in approximately half of the Access-A-Ride vehicles, providing drivers with maps of their routes and real time information. This gives us the ability to re-route vehicles in response to issues that arise while they are en route. This system also provides the exact location of vehicle and provides accountability for reported no-shows. In addition, we are working with the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and the Taxi and Limousine Commission to make use of the accessible taxi dispatch system, to offer our wheelchair users another option when a problem occurs with their scheduled service. And now that yellow taxis accept debit/credit cards as fare media, we're exploring the use of a dedicated fare car for Paratransit service. If successful, this will be another way of offering our customers greater flexibility for their travel needs. We are also working to improve communications with our customers. In August 2008 we upgraded our call center, added five additional T1 lines to address the additional call volume. The upgrade places us

in a position to accept additional telecommunication technology such as interactive voice response and web access. This technology will provide our customers with direct access to information about their scheduled service. Our efforts over the past two years have yielded an improvement in on-time performance and a reduction in the ratio of complaints to boardings. Based on our most recent Access-A-Ride customer satisfaction survey conducted in 2008, overall satisfaction with the service remains high. 76% of the customers surveyed who use the service regularly expressed satisfaction. 95% of those who were surveyed indicated that Access-A-Ride is a good value for the money. This survey is conducted each year by an independent market research firm. In an effort to address the rapidly escalating cost of the Access-A-Ride program, we are planning to launch a project for the in-house provision of Paratransit service. Our aim is to demonstrate that we can provide this service directly at a cost that is competitive with that of the private transportation firms now under contract with New York City Transit. We

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2 have identified a facility that will accommodate
3 approximately 230 vehicles and expect to begin in-
4 house operations in the fall. If this effort is
5 successful, as we have every reason to expect it
6 to be, we intend to expand our plan for the in-
7 house provision of Paratransit service. These
8 initiatives for 2009 in addition to the steadily
9 increasing volume of service we provide are
10 representative of the overall efforts of New York
11 City Transit to serve our Access-A-Ride. We
12 remain committed to meeting the continued growth
13 that's anticipated in our ridership and to
14 implementing further initiatives designed to
15 improve service to our customers. On behalf of
16 the MTA and New York City Transit, thank you for
17 providing a forum to discuss the status of our
18 efforts with respect to the Access-A-Ride program,
19 and for your continued interest in the public
20 transit system. We are now happy to answer any
21 specific questions that you may have.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you.
23 I'm going to ask you one question, then I'm going
24 to ask my colleagues. I notice you commented on
25 the results of your satisfaction survey. But do

you monitor and keep a record of complaints?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, we do.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And did you bring with you any compilation of those complaints?

THOMAS CHARLES: We can give that to you. I mentioned the reduction of complaints per boardings in 2008, but we can give you data on our complaint trends.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yeah. I think we would like to have that. Do you break it down with respect to the nature of the complaints?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, we do.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I'm sorry you didn't bring that with you. Maybe we should have asked specifically, but we would like to see-- and you say that there's a reduction in the number of complaints?

THOMAS CHARLES: Per boardings, yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Do you know how many complaints you receive on a monthly or annual basis?

THOMAS CHARLES: I can give you the

annual. On the annual we had about 20,500 complaints received by phone, letter, email, off of 7 million .2 boardings.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And can you tell us what most of those complaints or the categories that have been most frequently assigned?

THOMAS CHARLES: Sure. The major percentages are generally tied to no-shows, missed connection; telephone-- not able to get to through to the phone system. Those have been the major categories right now.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And do you have-- I think you did cite some numbers as to how many trips were successfully completed. But without looking at it, do you know how many, what percentage of the trips were resulted in a no-show?

THOMAS CHARLES: It generally runs about 4% of our trips.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And then you have these recovery options now where you can send someone else?

THOMAS CHARLES: The floaters, we

expanded the floater service and we just recently, about two, three weeks ago, are now working with the Accessible Taxi Dispatch System.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well, I'd be interested to see both the record of the complaints and to see as you go ahead how that reflects itself as operations continue. Council Member Arroyo?

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Moving it by the base, I want you to pay attention. Good afternoon.

THOMAS CHARLES: Good afternoon.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: I have a couple of questions. Though in my opening statement I was hoping-- I said I would like to hear the status of your in-person eligibility process and how is that going?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's going quite well. The recent survey showed a very high satisfaction with the process. We are still-- we have not seen a decline in applications. We have seen many who have expressed interest, but because of the assessment, we schedule them generally six weeks apart. We transport them to the center and

back. So the entire experience has been well received by our customers.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So you say you have about a 45% increase in requests for rides. What about the requests for eligibility?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. We receive about 4,000 applications a month, which has not changed since we introduced the 100% referral.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Is that more or less than what you were experiencing?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's slightly more, but not much more. It's still at the same levels.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Okay. Help me understand, if you have 20 plus contractors in the system, MTA still is the ultimate responsible party for coordinating the service?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. We provide the schedules. The reservations come through our offices through our call center and as those reservations are recorded the schedule is developed and by the end of the day we package the schedules and send them to the carriers who in turn execute the schedules.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Have you done an analysis of that complaint data to see if there are one or two of the contractors that are the ones that are the problem providers?

THOMAS CHARLES: We do a comparison to make sure that the schedules are adhered to, but we look at the complaints by carrier, the nature of the complaints and see if there is something that is systematic, systemic to the system that we can change. Generally what I see are isolated instances, but we do make comparisons.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So you don't find that those individual contractors are either irresponsible or attributing to the flaws in the service?

THOMAS CHARLES: They get our attention very quickly when we see any trend, anything that is not to the norm, we see them and visit them on a daily basis; our monthly meetings we express all the performance stats, we discuss that. So it's not for lack of attention, they get immediate attention on that.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So who is

responsible for the fleet, MTA or the providers?

THOMAS CHARLES: The providers under the contract are providing maintenance per our specification. We have a duty cycle that we adhere to and they not only have our inspection cycle but the state DOT cycle.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So the vehicles are the property of the provider or the MTA?

THOMAS CHARLES: We lease them back because part of the growth of the size of this operation we could not have the carriers trying to purchase vehicles and stay with this type of growth, so we decided to buy and lease back. But they are maintaining the vehicles per our specifications.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: What's our average rate for cost per trip?

THOMAS CHARLES: Per boarding it's now about \$45 per boarding.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: I've heard \$65. Is that...?

THOMAS CHARLES: There are different costs. Of the total costs some of it is

subsidized through the City, so that's where you get these ranges, because you're only looking at a facet of the cost.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: But it sounds like you should be contemplating awards to taxi limousine fleets of more than six to eight. Why only six to eight?

THOMAS CHARLES: We have a criteria where we look to see who has a sizeable fleet, who maintains their fleet well and will deliver on our service. We started taxis in December 2002. It has taken us five years to grow to 10%, the reason being is once the owners agree to our contract, especially the black car service, there was not a commitment by the drivers. The drivers were often in competition going to Wall Street, Midtown Manhattan instead of executing our trips. So we meet with the owners to say we need a daily strategy, a commitment on how many trips you will provide. I cannot take the excuse that the driver was discretionary in what trips they were going to take. It's a commitment.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So--

THOMAS CHARLES: [Interposing] So

we've worked this out with those car services. We introduced liveries a year ago. And so the selection process is making sure that we have a contractor that will perform those trips that we need them to perform.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: And have you thought about maybe letting the consumer drive that conversation as opposed to entering into agreements or contracts with fleets or businesses that may or may not be interested or have the will to make it work? So if I as a consumer am given a voucher, then I can pick and choose the provider, probably somebody close to home, who I know, and is going to be responsive and will be able to pick me up and take me to where I need to go on time. I'm going to end with this. We are facing a real, serious, budget crisis in our city. It is-- we must be compelled to look at every opportunity possible to save as much money as possible. I know that in the senior service community there is a transportation network that exists that works, that seniors rely on, use, as an alternative. And it seems to me that what the City subsidizes the service for the City can, or ought to, be making

an investment into our existing infrastructure, because right now most of those senior service providers are not reimbursed for the expense of the transportation. I think it's something-- when we look at DFTA potentially facing a close to \$40 million cut in service that we look at how this pot of money can be used to offset some of those expenses and some of that cost. So I think it's important that we think beyond and we don't have another ten years to wait to get this done. Thank you Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Thank you very much, Chairs Koppell and Arroyo.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Actually, Council Member Liu, if you'll just give me the opportunity I want to introduce two members who arrived, Dr. Mathieu Eugene, to my right, and Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito, to my left.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Thank you. I have three main questions for you. The first is-- and Council Member Vincent Ignizio from Staten Island had also joined us.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON LIU: We all are, right

now, waiting to see what happens with the MTA and the MTA bailout. And for several months the MTA had floated the idea of going up to double the rate of the base fare for users or riders of Access-A-Ride. What happened to that idea?

THOMAS CHARLES: Well the decision was--

CHAIRPERSON LIU: [Interposing] And let me make it very obvious, I was not in favor of that idea. I don't think any of us were. But what happened to it? What was the decision making that led up to not proceeding any further with the idea of charging twice the base fare?

THOMAS CHARLES: At the last board meeting, adopting the proposals, they decided to not double the fare on the Access-A-Ride but leave it at the base fare for now. Whatever the fare for bus and subway will be will be the Access-A-Ride fare.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: What are the annual collections from the fares paid by Access-A-Ride users?

THOMAS CHARLES: In terms of?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: In total

terms, how much does the MTA actually collect from riders on the Access-A-Ride fares?

THOMAS CHARLES: I'd have to look at my revenue and see. It's two dollars per trip, so it's not covering any of the costs, sizeable costs of our operation.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: I mean your response to my question is that basically the MTA board decided not to proceed with that.

THOMAS CHARLES: Right.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: That doesn't give us the reason; it simply says the MTA board decided not to go along with that. Is that something that they decided over-- even with the recommendations of staff that the MTA increase that fare?

THOMAS CHARLES: Right now the ADA requirement says that we could charge double, but there's also a City agreement that we need to look at. So right now the Board's decided to continue with the same base fare, but they will be pursuing the language of the agreement to see if there's an opportunity to meet the ADA requirement of charging double.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: So does that mean that the City actually had-- we know that there's a City restriction on what the MTA can raise the fare up to. What is the case? Is the case that the MTA has to get approval, explicit approval by the City in order to charge the maximum under ADA, meaning twice the base fare? Or is it something that the MTA could just go ahead and do if the City does not object?

THOMAS CHARLES: That's what they're pursuing right now. I don't have an answer for that. They are looking at that agreement. They are looking at the FTA requirement and deciding what options do they have.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Well hopefully it is the case that the City is going to object, that the City would-- hopefully it is the case that the MTA would actually require approval from the City and the City would certainly reject that kind of proposal. And if it's necessary, that the City in fact has to proactively object to that, then the City will do so. I guess this is something that, colleagues, we have to keep an eye on because it

still has not been made clear exactly what the case is, whether the MTA has to get explicit permission from the City or if the MTA could go ahead so long as the City does not object. At the end of the day our goal is the same, to keep it at the base fare and not to raise it up to the federal allowable maximum, which is twice the base fare. My second question has to do with piggybacking on what Council Member Arroyo had asked about, I had also brought it up earlier, which is the new procedure by which to recertify users of Access-A-Ride. How many Access-A-Ride users dropped off the rolls because they were not able to properly recertify?

THOMAS CHARLES: To my knowledge everyone was able to recertify. There was no dropage. Normal growth rate has still continued. 4,000 plus applications per month. We did not see--

CHAIRPERSON LIU: [Interposing]
That means everybody? Everybody was recertified?

THOMAS CHARLES: There's a-- we changed our recertification from every three years to five years. 2010 is just about the year for

the three-year cycle. Those starting in 2007 are on a five-year cycle. It's up to them to recertify. We give them a 60-day notice that their eligibility is about to expire. Should they wish to re-certify they call for an appointment and right now we still see that process continuing. Our recertifications are at the same levels.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: So I just want to be very clear about what you're saying. Are you saying that everybody who was certified to use Access-A-Ride before the change are still-- they eventually got recertified? Or are you simply saying that everybody who requested recertification got recertified?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct. Everyone who got requests after we give them the notification, if they wish to pursue--

CHAIRPERSON LIU: [Interposing]
Okay.

THOMAS CHARLES: We set them up for an assessment for recertification.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: But it was up to them. This is the subject of I think our last

hearing on Access-A-Ride, the fact that there were many complaints about people wondering why it is that they had to schlep all the way into an MTA center to physically be reexamined and therefore recertified. In many cases-- are you suggesting that, are you saying that people who chose not to come in for recertification, you know, of course they didn't get recertified. My question is then well how many of those people actually chose not to be recertified?

THOMAS CHARLES: I don't have the exact number, but I'm seeing tremendous growth and demand. I'm seeing the same customers continuing to come for more trips. But we can find out before and after to see what percentage. But I would be very surprised to see if it was a significant percentage.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: So in other words, the new system of requiring people with disabilities to actually come in for a physical recertification at the hands of an MTA doctor, if you will, or inspector--

THOMAS CHARLES: [Interposing] It's a contract service. It's a medical professional

we contract out with the assessment centers-- they have medical professionals. They perform the assessment per the ADA guidelines.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Okay. So I guess you're saying it was no big deal.

THOMAS CHARLES: I haven't seen any drastic change. In fact, as I mentioned, the growth has been even higher in trip demand and our registrant base continually increases year after year.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Okay.

THOMAS CHARLES: And our customer survey, we made specific reference to know from customers what was their experience. And we received very favorable ratings on the assessment center experience. We're out there visiting, auditing, every-- twice, three times a week. We're seeing a constant flow of customers going, getting the assessment performed, traveling to and from. So I see it as working very well right now.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: All right. And then my last area of questioning has to do with what I think is-- I think we have to complement you guys on, which is as I think everybody else

seems to fail consistently at being able to track their vehicles, it seems like Access-A-Ride actually is able to track the vehicles now, 50% of them, 1,000 vehicles. So does that mean for half of the vehicles-- there are about 2,000 vehicles on the road, right? Half of them, 1,000 of them have vehicle-tracking devices so you're able to find out exactly where each of those vans are at any given point?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Okay. Does the rest of the MTA know about this?

[Laughter]

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, they are looking at it because unlike the bus system where they had a radio transmission, our system was designed from scratch. So they are looking at it to see how it's working for us.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Okay. This, again, you deserve our congratulations and commendations for this thing. The MTA has spent, or had budgeted \$99 million to do this. And they, I think they didn't want to do it, but they came into a hearing that we held just earlier this year

and basically had their tails between their legs, had no reasons why it failed and had no plans on how to move forward. And yet you're telling us that Access-A-Ride, the Paratransit service run by the MTA actually is now capable of tracking 1,000 vehicles?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, because I believe we had an advantage of finding a technology that had been improved and was ideal for our situation, which is what the MTA is now looking at.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: I know but you're-- no offense. You are the MTA.

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. It's a matter of time.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: It just boggles the mind. You clearly have been doing your job. Someone at-- I'll leave it at that. We'll have another hearing on that, okay? But this is incredible. But of course this is something that you deserve credit for. So thank you for being able to track the vehicles. How much longer will it take to track the other 50% of the vehicles?

THOMAS CHARLES: We just have, as I

mentioned, new contractors we received. So we're planning by the end of this year to bring everybody up to AVL standards.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: So by the end of 2009?

THOMAS CHARLES: 9.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Then Access-A-Ride should know where all the vehicles are.

THOMAS CHARLES: Right.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: and presumably at that point you'll be able to schedule better, to dispatch the rides better? And to the extent where-- and this is a consistent complaint that I receive from constituents not only in my area but actually all over the City, that there's a mismatch sometimes between people who are waiting for their ride and they're waiting there and then they're determined to be no-shows because they may be waiting at a different spot than where the driver expected them to be. So at that point you should be able to tell whether in fact a driver or a van actually was waiting at some point for some specified period of time before moving on.

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: So that way we would have no more of this double penalty on the part of the users where they were waiting there, they were waiting there for an hour and then to add insult to injury the Access-A-Ride says that they were a no-show. Okay. So that clearly is one tangible benefit that will come out of this. But once again, congratulations and I hope that you will get it all done by the end of this year and I certainly-- at that point we will have a party. Thank you.

THOMAS CHARLES: Okay, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you for that. First of all, let me mention that we've been joined by Council Member Dan Garodnick, in front of me, and Council Member Vincent Gentile, also in front of me. I think, Council Member Arroyo, you have another question.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Maybe Council Member Liu can beat up on the MTA. I'll try a little stab at DOE. We had a hearing last week surrounding the same subject, being able to track vehicles and there was an incident where a vehicle or bus was lost with children on it, for about

five hours. And DOE is in the process of organizing a pilot study for, I believe, 50 vehicles. And one of the things that was explained to us is that they want to be careful to ensure that they're able to glean the right kind of data from their initiative to put these tracking devices on the vehicles. It might be worthwhile for Council Member Liu and maybe the Education Committee to have a conversation about what experience you've had thus far and what data you've been able to get out of the actual half of your fleet being outfitted with this technology and what information you have been able to gain and the use that you make of that information, so that maybe we can help DOE expedite their process a bit. Just a suggestion, Council Member.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Just before I call on Council Member Garodnick, just some clarification. First of all, on the first page you gave numbers of riders and trips. I'm not sure that they're inconsistent, but it's confusing. Because you say the average weekday ridership is 23,650. And then you say you get 18,500 requests for trips. How do those numbers

fit together?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yeah. The requests for trips are calls coming in to the reservation, but the customer may have multiple trips to request. We count the call as one call--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing] Even though they may be reserving for more than one trip?

THOMAS CHARLES: Right. Correct.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: So you actually have 23,650 trips?

THOMAS CHARLES: Trips per day, right.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Right. Now I'd like to go to the alternative service that you provide. You say 10% of your services is either-- what is it, taxis or black cars?

THOMAS CHARLES: And Livery, yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Livery, what's that? Is that black cars or is that separate?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's separate. It's the livery is actually the owner employs the drivers, whereas the livery they has-- they can

use their discretion, the drivers, whether they're going to take a trip or not. But the livery is the owner of the fleet and employs the drivers.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I see. Now what is your average cost for those trips, the 10%?

THOMAS CHARLES: The average is about \$23 for the taxi and about \$25 for the black car service livery?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: So it's considerably less--

THOMAS CHARLES: [Interposing] Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Than the cost of providing the van.

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And do you maximize your usage of those services?

THOMAS CHARLES: We maximize them. We're in-- we have what's called a daily strategy where we're speaking to the owners of these car services and liveries to give us a number that they will commit to for that day. We monitor it throughout the day to see if customers are being told to wait an inordinate amount of time. And

it's been a growth, because as I say, this is something that we're saying it provides the Paratransit service. If they don't perform the trip, it comes back to us. So we try to stress the commitment that's needed. So it's a daily strategy working with the car services and livery.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Now, there's a new service for using the yellow cabs, is that correct? And you've been utilizing that for some of the trips?

THOMAS CHARLES: For--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Yellow cabs.

THOMAS CHARLES: We've been using yellow cabs--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Accessible yellow cabs.

THOMAS CHARLES: Accessible is new. With the accessible taxi dispatch--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Yes. That's what I'm talking about.

THOMAS CHARLES: Commissioner Saplin got together with us and Taxi and Limousine Commissioner Matt Daus and we've established a

connection between our command center, the Paratransit Command Center, and their dispatch for the Accessible Taxi Dispatch. About two weeks ago we have now a link, and when a customer or wheelchair user is in need of a recovery trip we first try the Accessible Taxi Dispatch to see if they can make that connection.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: What is a recovery trip?

THOMAS CHARLES: If they miss their connection for whatever reason, they say our driver was there or wasn't there or they were delayed by their visit, their doctor's office, and they need now to change their time-- for our ambulatory customers we issue a taxi authorization if they're willing to accept it, and a voucher for car service. Our wheelchair users didn't have that option. Now with the Accessible Taxi Dispatch we offer that option to them.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: But only for a recovery trip?

THOMAS CHARLES: Only for a recovery trip right now, yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Why not use

it for just a regular trip?

THOMAS CHARLES: Right now the Accessible Taxi Dispatch is just that, a dispatch system. We're only using it as a recovery, but I believe the Accessible Taxi is open to the public making use calling 311 and then being referred to the Accessible Dispatch system.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Why wouldn't you use it for just a regular trip rather than using a van, since it's much cheaper?

THOMAS CHARLES: Well most of our customers, you have to have a tremendous outlay of money for the taxi trip, where in turn you send it back to us, the receipt, with the authorization number, and we reimburse you for the taxi less the Access-A-Ride fare. To many of our customers that's a tremendous outlay of money. So it's only generally as a last resort that they'll take a taxi authorization.

COUNCIL MEMBER KOPPELL: But couldn't you establish a system by which you could compensate or reimburse the taxis for the trip? I mean wouldn't that be a good thing to do?

THOMAS CHARLES: If we saw them as

a reliable and dedicated fleet, that could be down the road. Right now this is, from what I understand, they're building up that fleet. We're just making, taking an offer that our wheelchair users didn't have before. But each year we look to see what are our capabilities and options. And if they have a fleet that can give us regular service, then we'll see if we can make that happen.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay. Let me just say that with respect to that this Council as a whole, certainly I and Chairman Liu and Chairperson Arroyo, have been very interested in getting the yellow cab fleet to be accessible. And if we could use the rides that you provide as away of guaranteeing rides to the taxi fleet, the yellow cab fleet, I think that the taxi fleet owners would be more willing to purchase accessible taxis, if they knew they had sort of a book of business they could more or less count on. So I think that your using the yellow cab service would be helpful in terms of increasing the number of accessible yellow cabs that we could get on the street, which is an objective of this Committee,

or of this Council really, the Speaker herself.
So I would strongly recommend, especially because
it's cheaper, you've indicated. Right?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: The per ride
fare is about half as much, and it's still
wheelchair accessible. So it seems to me it's--
and it's probably on a one person one per ride
basis, so in many ways it's more convenient for
the individual, because now the Access-A-Ride is
more than one person can get in at a time, right?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: So I think
this is a very important thing to follow up on,
because it would meet a number of different
objectives, it seems to me, and I would urge it.
The other thing I'd like you to do because not
every member who's here-- and by the way I
interrupt to say that we've been joined by Council
Member Gale Brewer on my left and Jessica Lappin,
who is over to the left as well. Kendall Stewart?
Oh, there he is. Dr. Kendall Stewart is here as
well. I'd like you just to quickly go over
something you discussed with Council Member Liu

quickly. When you originally apply for the Access-A-Ride, you have to be certified. You have to provide certain medical information, and you also have to personally appear. Is that correct?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's not medical to begin with. It's an eligibility process that the ADA requirements have. They tell us the categories of eligibility, and it's basically your ability or inability to make use of bus or subway. In the course of the assessment, a customer may provide medical documentation to explain what their condition is that preventing them from using bus or subway for some or all of their trips. And that's what the assessment center process is about.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And it requires a personal appearance, is that correct?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Now, you say now you only have to get recertified once every five years?

THOMAS CHARLES: Once every five years, correct.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And that

requires a personal appearance as well?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: For most we have established a baseline. If someone has a condition that will not improve, we will give them continue eligibility and will only ask them to update their personal information every five years.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: So that if they have some sort of chronic condition they don't need to come in.

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct. We will just ask them every five years just to update their personal information, make sure we have accurate records.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: As I recall the testimony the last time, you've somewhat-- you've considerably simplified the process for recertification.

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, that was the continual eligibility, that was an enhancement that we've introduced with this so that someone doesn't have to go if-- they can just update the information.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And you've

done that since the last hearing?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well I guess we had some good affect, Mr. Chairman Liu, and the five years too. So I'm glad to hear that. I think that we can feel very positively about that and I thank you for taking that step, because I felt the last time that a spot check would have been adequate. But I think the way you're doing it makes some sense. So, Council Member Garodnick?

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to follow up on a couple of those points specifically related to costs. Let me just understand, the dollars that you were just setting out for taxis and black cars, there was a \$23 number and a \$25 number, is that right?

THOMAS CHARLES: On average. Right.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: That's the average.

THOMAS CHARLES: That's the average.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay.

And the average for the Access-A-Ride?

THOMAS CHARLES: Is about \$45 right now.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay.

And I'm not sure I completely understand the differential, why there's such a gap there.

THOMAS CHARLES: Well we have a call center operation. We have our eligibility center process. We have fixed costs from the carriers, their facilities, the maintenance. I'm not sure the fare that I'm paying on the taxi and vouchers is picking up all the costs of their infrastructure, but \$45 represents all our costs to operate the Access-A-Ride program.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay.

So it's all built in, and that includes everything to operate the system. You mentioned in your testimony that you contract with 17 companies to provide the service. Is that right?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct, at least as of August 2008.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay.

Now how do you assess the performance of the

various companies with whom you contract? I mean I assume that of the 17 they probably have different qualities among them. Maybe you set a floor of standards, but some of them may do better at some things than others. How do you evaluate that?

THOMAS CHARLES: At the time of the award or after the award? Because at the time of the award--

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK:
[Interposing] You tell me.

THOMAS CHARLES: --we're making site visits to see what their facility is comprised of, do they have a good maintenance good work area? Do they have good work areas for the drivers, training rooms? How do they take care of their current fleet? Once after the award that process continues where we have a strict compliance. We're out there looking at their pullouts, their vehicle condition, their drivers. On the road we're making sure that they're driving safely on the road. It's a continual compliance review at all levels. You mentioned customer complaints; we're always looking at any trend

lines. We're looking at the carrier; we're looking at the drivers. Is there any indication of driver high complaint ratios? So it's a continual compliance. And all 17 are being brought up to the same standards.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: So are you tracking-- if you have a complaint about somebody from an Access-A-Ride experience, you are tracking not only in the aggregate, well we have this number of complaints per year, but for each of the 17 they have their own database of problems, concerns, etcetera?

THOMAS CHARLES: Right.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay.

THOMAS CHARLES: We do a comparison, a benchmarking to see that if they are coming out of line or out of trend we want to know the root causes and have it corrected.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: How long are the contracts for?

THOMAS CHARLES: This last round is now for ten years with a ten-year option.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: So once they're in, the option is to them or to you?

THOMAS CHARLES: Us.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: To you.

Okay, so after ten years then MTA has an opportunity to renew for another ten.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: That's a long time.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay. I noted in your testimony also the customer satisfaction survey from 2008, which suggests that from the customers you serve, 76% express satisfaction. Now how many people were surveyed to come up with that number?

THOMAS CHARLES: We have three categories, frequent users, occasional, and infrequent users. And collectively I think it was around 5,000 customers.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Well I would share with you one of the--

THOMAS CHARLES: [Interposing] It's a statistical sample from the independent consultant.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: One of the complaints that we hear most is that drivers can be up to 30 minutes late for a pickup, while

passengers are only given five minutes as a window of opportunity before the driver is allowed to leave. Was that captured in any of the surveys? Is that a particular point of concern?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. Especially in inclement weather we are understanding of the 30-minute pickup window. It's called a pickup window. This is a mass transit operation; it's not a car service. So as we package the trips, there is a flexibility needed for that pickup time. But we are sensitive to that. We have asked what was a considerable tolerance for that half-hour. We have received about 15 minutes would be more appropriate from our customers. And the technology that we're looking at now, interactive voice, we're hoping that we can call the customer minutes before the vehicle arrives and make a better connection.

COUNCIL MEMBER GARODNICK: Okay. I think that that's important because I do-- you know, I asked the question, but of course also know that that is a point of great frustration for people. So, all right. Well we look forward to working with you on trying to make an efficient

system and one that works as it possibly can for the people you serve. So thank you very much.

THOMAS CHARLES: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you.

Council Member Gentile, you had a question?

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to clarify. Now for the first certification, the individual would be required to appear in person regardless of their condition?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: So--

THOMAS CHARLES: [Interposing] We would like to have a baseline assessment.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And how many centers can they go to?

THOMAS CHARLES: We have one in each borough, because we send them in their home residence, the borough of their residence. Brooklyn, because of the size, has two assessment centers. So, we try to send them to the assessment center in their residence, the home residence.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: So the

borough of Brooklyn is broken up in north and south or...?

THOMAS CHARLES: We have one in the Coney Island section and one in the Fulton Street Bedford-Stuy. But depending on the amount from Brooklyn, we may see if the applicant can go to either one, but we generally try to keep it close proximity to their residence.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And I'm just curious, what is the necessity for the appearance in person rather than some type of medical affidavit?

THOMAS CHARLES: Because you need to have an objective assessment. You need to-- again, this is not a medical related assessment. This is about your inability to make use of bus or subway. If you can't make that use of bus or subway, then we need to offer you Paratransit. An in-person assessment gives the medical professional an understanding of what it is that's preventing that person from using bus or subway. In the course of trying to learn that inability, medical documentation may be provided that will explain conditions that are compounding their use

of subway and bus.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And it is a medical professional that makes that analysis or makes that evaluation?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And that's just based on a visual and an interview and a visual evaluation?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's an assessment where they're bringing in their completed application, which has asked them questions about how do they travel, where do they travel to, what's preventing them from traveling; the interview from the medical professional; also a functional assessment if it's necessary. We have in each of the assessment centers a mock build up of a front of a bus with our kneeling steps, and we also have a wheelchair lift. So we ask them to see if they can demonstrate getting up the steps--

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE:
[Interposing] Do you ask them to try to go up the steps?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. Navigate around the fare box and be seated in the front

section, or if they need the wheelchair lift, there's a wheelchair lift at the assessment center and we see if they can board a bus that way, since 100% of our buses are accessible.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: Right. And that certification then as you said, would stand. Is there an appeal process at that point?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. The federal ADA requires an appeal process, whatever the determination is; the customer is able to appeal.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: To whom?

THOMAS CHARLES: To our appeal board, which is comprised of a medical doctor and our director of appeals.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: A different panel?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: It's a different panel. And do you have any statistics as to how many people are not certified?

THOMAS CHARLES: Our denial rate is about 3.3%. And our appeals are generally around 6% and upheld about 75% of them.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: Are

upheld.

THOMAS CHARLES: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And
someone can reapply at some point in the future?

THOMAS CHARLES: They're always
able to reapply if their condition-- they're
always able to reapply and go through the same
process.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: I just
wanted to also share with you some of the concerns
that many of the seniors in my district have
mentioned to me as problems with Access-A-Ride.
And I just wanted to see if in fact this is still
occurring. One of the things that many, many
seniors tell me about is that when they get picked
up or even when they get picked up to go to an
appointment or on their way back to-- particularly
on the way back home-- they are driven throughout
the entire borough before they actually make it to
their home base, to their point of departure. And
it will be a two, three, maybe a four-hour ride to
get back to their home. And that's stressful for
many, many seniors. Is that still happening?

THOMAS CHARLES: I will say that it

may be isolated occurrences. What we've done to restrict that is, one, the carriers and the dispatch cannot make any manual changes to the schedules. What we find is in that cases such as that where a dispatch may have thought they were-- they had good intentions to rearrange a route and place a trip on another route, but what happens is it compounds that person's scheduled time of drop off. So we've discouraged manual or manipulation of the schedules. There's also a ride time allowance, this is part of the ADA requirement, to be comparable to mass transit options, they cannot travel the same distance at lengthier times than you would by bus or subway. So our scheduling system hones in on those ride time allowances to make sure that their trip isn't multiple hours and being... So we have made every effort to reduce that. We've also introduced restricting what we were told is zigzag or traversing, where the route stays in a general direction and a trip can't deviate from the route many miles and then recover. We've kept that to-- that was introduced two years ago. So I'm seeing a decline in excessive ride times, and we're still enforcing

with the carriers not to make any manual adjustments to schedules.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: But you're saying when you do have excessive ride times you're actually violating ADA guidelines?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. If there's excessive ride time we bring it to the carrier's attention. They have to explain; otherwise they have a penalty for that. But the intent for the scheduling is to stay within the ride times.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: Okay. And that has been decreasing, you're saying.

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: Now as far as missed connections, I know that Council Member Garodnick was just talking about that, so as I understand it, you tell passengers that they will be picked up within a 30-minute window of the time that you indicate that's their pickup time. Am I correct on that?

THOMAS CHARLES: They'll be given a time, but it's a 30-minute-- whatever time they have is 30 minutes beyond that is the window for pickup.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And am I correct, it's a five-minute wait time on the part of the driver?

THOMAS CHARLES: Correct. This is a mass transit system. We ask the customers to be there at the appointed time, that they may have to wait that half-hour for that pickup window. We certainly don't try to stretch it in to the half-hour. But given the unpredictability of the day's service and the pickups and drop offs that a route may have, close to ten to 12 trips on a route that time may not be precise, so we ask them to wait. The driver, in getting there, if the customer is not there, they've made every effort to see where the customer might be, in the lobby, we also have that the driver cannot leave until dispatch releases the driver. And what dispatch is to do is to call the home phone, the cell phone or if they have AVL, to check is that vehicle in the right location where the customer is. And only until that's satisfied, then dispatch can release the driver.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: But what happens when they get to an event, whether it be a

doctor's office or a senior center or something of that nature and the senior doesn't have a cell phone but is waiting somewhere within that senior center for a pickup and the van is down the block or around the corner because the pickup was either not made clear or they had the wrong pickup location?

THOMAS CHARLES: If they've made all those attempts and they can't make a connection with the customer, the driver has to move on to the next trip. If the customer then calls the command center, that's where our recovery system goes in to play.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: And how would this new interactive voice technology work if you're out on the street, you're not at home; you're out on the street somewhere?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's still going to require, and we've asked our customers to see if they can secure a cell phone, advance notification from the IVR would call that phone to say, from the GPS signal of the bus or the van that the vehicle is 10 to 15 minutes away from their pickup location.

COUNCIL MEMBER GENTILE: If that were to work in terms of seniors having cell phones, that would be a great system. Because one of the biggest complaints I have from seniors is the fact that they wait beyond, way beyond the 30 minutes for a pickup, particularly on the way home. And many, many times they're at one door at a center and the van is somewhere else around the corner waiting for them, and they never make that connection, which requires another van to come and pick them up. That's a major problem. And I don't know how you can man, have seniors all with cell phones, but if that's possible, that is a major-- it would be a major improvement, because that as I see is the missed connections is one of the biggest concerns my seniors have. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you.
Council Member Eugene?

COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and Chairmen. Sir, you already answered some of my questions, but I may have a couple anyway. You said that at present-- I know that you indicated that the number had been increasing almost every year. And you said that

at present, Access-A-Ride has approximately 124,212 registrants. Could you explain what is the difference, when you say registrants, are they people who request services, trips or...?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. Once an applicant is determined eligible they become a registrant now of the service. So once they're deemed eligible, they're given an ID number and they can call our call center to make a reservation. They give the call center agent their ID number and they're already in our system as a registrant and eligible for service.

COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: All right. You also indicated that you use taxi, black cars that you sent RFPs. What are the process, how do you determine, how do you select exactly which taxi owners you should send an RFP to?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's an open forum. We broadcast the request for proposal to the industry. It's on our website. It's open to all the industry. We currently have contractors who've been with us many years, so they're also in touch with any new vendors that come into the business. We generally get a good response when

we send out our requests for proposals, but then the selection process makes sure that they have a good facility, a fleet that's in good condition, a steady employment of drivers and so that narrows it down until we make our selection.

COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Do you have the list of all the taxi owners? The fleet honors? And you send the RFP to all of them; give the opportunity to all of them to apply? Or you only contact those you have in your database?

THOMAS CHARLES: No, no. It's advertised to the public. It's advertised in the open. It's a request for them to submit a proposal. The TLC has a list of all the services, but not everyone is interested in our program. So the request for proposal is that their invitation to submit a proposal. And this last round, given the economy, has been on a decline. We saw an opportunity for car services that were affected by the Wall Street decline to now have capacity to provide service for us. So we had about 21 respond. After our site inspections, looking at their fleet we now have eight possible awards.

COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Let me put

it this way, let's say for example in the Spanish Community or Chinese community or Haitian community, there are some of the taxi owners who would like to be part of that. How do you reach out to them, to the different, you know, ethnic background people?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's basically our advertisement on our website and in the newspapers about a request for proposal and word of mouth through the industry. Not every one who has a fleet is automatically interested or would be a candidate for our operation, that's why we make site inspections. But this is open through advertisements and the web. And the industry knows about our program.

COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you. We have just a couple more questions by Council Member Arroyo. Here, I'll move it.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: By the base, by the base. Thank you. We want to hear from the public. So I'll try to, in some cases, just bring us back information and I think that would be

sufficient. The first, the names of the contractors or the companies that currently make up that list of vendors that you're using--

THOMAS CHARLES: [Interposing] The 17.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Where they're located, what boroughs or what communities are they serving. The contract period ten years, that seems excessive. Why so many years? Everything else the City contracts for is at, I think at a maximum of three with maybe a renewal for another three.

THOMAS CHARLES: There's two reasons. One, there is no ready-made Paratransit industry. When we went, and we've been at this for many years now. We are the ones that are really trying to develop these car transportation firms to be Paratransit. There's a lot to go into it. Second of all, cost certainty. When they're bidding their prices for award there's a risk both for us and for them to be a viable operation. But we find that it keeps our costs and the cost-certainty model-- the last contract was for seven years. We decided to bring it up to ten years to

get some stability. This way once a carrier knows they have this commitment, we can work on the quality and the service instead of changing--

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: [Interposing]
And that rate, the rate in that contract is locked in for ten years?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes, except for some CPI adjustments, but that's locked in.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Wow. What do you think is causing the increase in the requests in the ridership of Access-A-Ride?

THOMAS CHARLES: There's two. One, the aging of America; we do see it doubling. The City census is showing us that. 50% of our registrants are over the age of 80. We're seeing that continuing. Also, once our registrants are on, we see each year they take the service more. They take additional trips every year. And even in our survey we ask them, and they all intend to take the service more.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So given that there's-- such an incredibly large portion of the population that uses the service is aging, what collaboration is there, if any, is there with the

Department For The Aging on the issues around this service and how we can, working with that agency, figure out a way to make it more efficient and more cost-effective?

THOMAS CHARLES: Well we've been at many outreach activities, senior citizen centers. We've been invited-- I think a year ago we sat before the DFTA senior advisory committee, talked about Access-A-Ride. Right now it's a combination of both, outreach and activities, and the advisory committee.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: So there's been no conversation with the Department for the Aging to see how we can better spend that \$75 million the City subsidizes now for Access-A-Ride?

THOMAS CHARLES: No.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: I think, Mr. Chair, both of us or the three of us need to have a more detailed conversation around how that conversation should occur. It certainly provides an opportunity for us to provide for our seniors a better service, and that's going to cost the City a little less money to provide. And lastly, given the increase in ridership, has there been any

discussion about reduction in the budget for Access-A-Ride, given that we're in a fiscal situation?

THOMAS CHARLES: Like with any budget, it's always how can we spend more wisely, more cost-effectively. That's why I mentioned about looking at the fare, electronic fare, in taxis. And if that can be extended to liveries, we can see if we can bring more trips on through taxis and liveries.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: But you have not been requested to identify a reduction?

THOMAS CHARLES: No. We have been requested to.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: You have?

THOMAS CHARLES: Improve productivity in our trips; the ratio of number of trips per hour is a productivity measure.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Okay. But the dollars that you're funded for, for this, that's the question. Is there a reduction in that number?

THOMAS CHARLES: No. Right now there's adjustments made, but it's always manage

the cost--

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: [Interposing]
With what you have.

THOMAS CHARLES: --that's the cost
certainty. Right.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Okay.

THOMAS CHARLES: That's the cost
certainty of the contract.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Very good.
Thank you, Mr. Charles, for your testimony and for
spending so much time with us here this afternoon.

THOMAS CHARLES: You're welcome.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Gale, you
have a question?

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I'll be
very quick. Regarding the GPS, this may have been
asked, so are you working off the NYC WINs System?
Is it just your own system?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yeah, it's a
Verizon Wireless. It's our own system. The WIN
we did look at but we felt the protocols, we would
not be in the priority scheme. So right now we're
alone.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And does

that cost money to do the GPS off the Verizon system?

THOMAS CHARLES: It's use of the Verizon Wireless, yes, it's a cost factor but--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER:
[Interposing] Okay.

THOMAS CHARLES: It's something that--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER:
[Interposing] Necessary.

THOMAS CHARLES: We control. Right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And you say that you will be completely solvent by the end of this year in terms of GPS?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. We have half the fleet done and we're now focusing on the remaining half.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. And it does make a difference in terms of response and communication where you have the GPS system?

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes. We are making sure that it's not just a system that's on a bus, but at every level it's used by dispatch,

the call centers. We want it to become second nature to everyone to use this system and to improve the dispatching and the efficiency.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Thank you, Mr. Charles. And I just want to make sure we're doing this right, so once again, congratulations on the vehicle locations devices. And can you-- are you intending to work with the rest of the MTA to get these devices up on the buses?

THOMAS CHARLES: They are looking at our system and other systems, and we're there for them, so we are.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Right. Please work with them, but don't let them slow you down on your Paratransit vehicles.

THOMAS CHARLES: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON LIU: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you, we do look forward to getting that complaint information because that's very important to us, because that's the issue that, you know, we deal with when we deal with the public. Thank you.

Now we look forward to hearing from users of the system and others who represent users. We have several-- we're doing it in panels. We've found that to be the most efficient way. So the first panel will be Bobbie Sackman from the Council of Senior Centers; Lawrence Carter Long, Executive Director Disabilities Network of New York City and Sharona Jones from the Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Oh, okay.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Why don't we go in the order that I mentioned? Just one second until Ms. Jones gets set. You're welcome.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: You know, it's true we spend a lot of time with representatives of the administration or providers, but they're the ones who are sort of on the hot seat, so we extend to them no specific time limit. But for everybody else, we would appreciate your summarizing your testimony, if necessary. And we will allocate five minutes for

1
2 testimony. That will not include time for
3 questions. That's up for the members asking
4 questions. But please, your initial testimony,
5 please limit it to five minutes.

6 BOBBIE SACKMAN: Good afternoon.
7 My name is Bobbie Sackman. I'm with the Council
8 of Senior Centers and Services of New York City
9 and as you know well, our organization represents
10 Senior Centers but also a broad array of community
11 based services for the elderly. And I will
12 quickly summarize my testimony. I just want to
13 put a little bit of a broader perspective. We
14 just released a long-term care paper, community
15 based paper, and in it we state that
16 transportation is one of the cornerstones of
17 somebody remaining in the community. And I think
18 that over 50% of the Access-A-Ride riders being
19 over age 80 was eye opening and I think it points
20 to that. We also did a survey, a statewide survey
21 in 2006, in collaboration at that time the
22 Assembly Aging Chair. And we found that the
23 average cost of a van that is run through senior
24 centers and other community based senior service
25 providers was \$37,000 a year and that included

1 maintenance, fuel, insurance and driver salary.

2 And they took them to a whole gamut of services,

3 not only medical care but adult day care, senior

4 centers, even cemetery visits and banks and

5 grocery shopping. I just want to give a quick

6 example. In Staten Island, Borough President

7 money is used, funded-- you know, it goes through

8 the Department for the Aging for transportation to

9 take seniors grocery shopping, and they get like

10 an escort service with it because they can't carry

11 the groceries themselves. And if this money were

12 to disappear, the thought of the providers out

13 there is that most of these people would probably

14 end up on Meals on Wheels because they simply

15 couldn't go grocery shopping. So sometimes this

16 is really the nitty-gritty of how somebody does

17 stay in the community. We are going to see a need

18 for community-based transportation, and I think

19 the essence of my testimony is that we need to

20 develop that system. The Department for the

21 Aging, as you stated Councilwoman Arroyo, has been

22 doing this, but there's been no reimbursement.

23 And so it's been a patchwork of money brought

24 together. We've done a series, over the years, of

transportation summit meetings and Councilman John Liu in his role as the Transportation Chair came to the first one and I will not forget that moment, I don't think he will either. 200 senior citizens, we thought maybe we'd get 50 to 100, came to that meeting and they came walking; they came in wheelchairs; they came with wheelchairs; they came using canes, because they knew that if those vans were going to not be able to be driven on the road for lack of funding, they weren't going to go to another meeting or go grocery shopping or to medical care. And thanks to his leadership, your leadership and Speaker Quinn, we have seen money put into the Department for the Aging's budget. But it's at great risk now. And it comes to about \$7,400 a van, but that's about 20% of the cost of the van. So with all due respect there is still a distance to go, and it seems like DFTA has been given an unfunded mandate. They do drive Access-A-Ride customers, either those who can't or won't any longer even attempt to use Access-A-Ride. And they will literally go the extra mile. Nobody will ever be left at the doctor or, you know, given five

minutes to show up. They do provide an escort service if the person needs that, of course. Also in working with Councilman Liu over the year, my organization, we have a web-based purchase group called the Marketplace. And it was his foresight to see if we could develop a group insurance program, a vehicle insurance program to save money. And two years ago we did, and it's the first time in the history of the Department for the Aging's transportation system, we have a group vehicle insurance program that agencies have signed up for and they are literally saving thousands of dollars. They get a better package and the money is reinvested back into the transportation system. So we're able to be flexible and efficient in ways-- as these times certainly call for. What I recommend, is we need to stabilize the funding of these vehicles. It's always up and down, the budget dance, every year, whether it's City Council money, Borough President money and DFTA's budget itself as you stated, Councilwoman Arroyo. We're looking at over \$40 million in tax levy cuts, which is huge for DFTA. I think that there should be a portion of the

Access-A-Ride money that does pay, that does reimburse the vans and that we figure out a system. Apparently when the Paratransit system was first put into place, I guess before ADA, the MTA didn't want to do it. And there is a memorandum of understanding of which DFTA is a partner, to continue to provide transportation. Well it needs to be funded and not make it an unfunded mandate as it's been. I would be interested to know the cost of the ride at DFTA. We're hearing anywhere from \$45 through the MTA to \$23 to \$23 for taxis. And just to make an option - you know, as someone who can use mass transit, I have options of the kinds of mass transit. So the more options we have within Paratransit, it just makes sense for people's lives. Ten-year contracts, boy I wish we had ten-year contracts. That means that if Access-A-Ride has been around for about 20 years, they've only had two RFPs. So I wonder-- I understand stabilizing the system, but I wonder if that allows those contractors who aren't as efficient to keep those contracts a little too long. I also just wanted to suggest something. There seems to be something that's

coming through the state, I think they're called Life Line cell phones, and it's for people who can't afford phones, but they have like an hour or so time on it, and for people of low income I think they can get these phones for free. There may be a way of hooking that up with Access-A-Ride users. And I think I've pretty much said everything. And if there's any way that my organization can play a role in developing a more efficient Paratransit system and more options for the ridership, we'd like to play that role. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I do have some questions, but we'll reserve the questions until each person on the panel has testified.

LAWRENCE CARTER LONG: Thank you. My name is Lawrence Carter Long and I'm the Executive Director of the Disabilities Network of New York City, that's over 60 different organizations across the spectrum of the disability population. These are people with mobility impairments, visual impairments and hearing impairments, within our organization and there are 60 different organizations that make us

up. The question before us today, are Access-A-Ride consumers receiving services to which they are entitled? If I were to ask my membership, and we did this over-- beginning last December, we did transportation forums in every borough. We went out to the hinterlands to find out exactly what consumers were thinking, feeling and doing with regard to their transportation options. I'm keenly aware that the vast majority of disabled people are not going to be members of groups like ours. They're not going to be advocates. They just want to get to and from their place of, let's say, where they work, the school or the doctor. Right? So we wanted to reach out directly to the community, and there are things that we heard as we talked to them. I think the question are they receiving services, begs larger questions and bigger questions. Those would be, are they receiving services dependably and are they receiving them in ways that are on par with transportation options that are utilized by non-disabled people. You're going to get different answers if you ask those second questions. And I think those are the questions that we need to be

asking. You know, ask the previous speaker said, accessible transportation is a key component to a person's overall quality of life, not only for such obvious things as medical treatment, but also getting an education, remaining gainfully employed, also other important areas such as political participation-- yes, I'm aware it is an election year-- access to entertainment, socializing and religious attendance. So if we get into those areas, what are the things that we're hearing? Other speakers are going to give you this; they're going to tell you about the fact that trips have to be planned in advance. In this day and age, who lives their lives like that? They talk about long rides, especially between boroughs. A trip on Access-A-Ride should not be the Gray Line. It should not be an unexpected sight seeing tour. Let's aspire to get people where they want to go quickly, just as everybody else wants to do. We have no guarantees that people will be picked up at all. We've had people come to our events that have been left stranded and had no way to get home. We have passengers that are left sitting around for a half-hour, an

hour, maybe more. What is the message that is being sent here, I ask you? The message that is being sent here is that a disabled person's time is not as valuable as everybody else's time. There's an attitude that assumes that we're going back and forth maybe between doctor visits, but that we don't work and we don't have lives. That needs to be challenged. That's the message that I keep getting time and time again, it's one of attitude, it's one of respect or lack thereof respect. Those are the things that we keep hearing over and over again. So if we're going to talk about, you know, whatever could go wrong would, right? That's Murphy's Law. I'd somewhat ascribe that to Access-A-Ride. But I have to say there have been changes in recent years and there have been some improvements in recent year. I'd rather subscribe to Noah's Law. What's Noah's Law? Noah's Law is that you don't get credit for predicting rain; you get credit for building an ark. That's what we need to be doing here. The solutions to these problems are in front of us. They have been in front of us for a number of years now. I don't know how many more surveys we

need to do, how many more hearings we need to do, how many more times we need to talk to people. These things, these problems, have been heard over and over again. So let's begin to work on those solutions. One of the things that I think is working, that is going in the right direction are the programs to begin providing regular users of Access-A-Ride, their subscribers, with taxicabs. I think that's a step in the right direction. What do we need? More options. What do we need? Cheaper options. We can't restrict it thought to below 96th Street in Manhattan. The vast majority of people live in those neighboring boroughs, live outside of Manhattan. We need to be connecting with the livery drivers and the community car services to provide those people with transportation options. I haven't seen the attention given to that as I have with the taxis, and I would like to see that being done. Our members would like to see that being done. You know, 20 years of advocacy haven't convinced me of much; the sands change constantly. But this I know for certain, issues surrounding access and inclusion of people with disabilities into the

civic, social and economic opportunities available to others are not caused by malice, they're caused by proximity. Too additionally, people with disabilities have had to rely on policy makers who have had family members with disabilities to help move our agenda forward. Thank you. We appreciate that. But you also need to understand this; the difference between a disabled person and a non-disabled person is about five seconds. What do I mean by that? I mean any of us could step off the curb the wrong way outside City Hall and bam; you're in the club. So the question for you then is this, if we've got 80% of the population of the US, and New York City is no different, who will become disabled at some point in their lifetime, 20% of those people will be permanent. We're talking one in five here. I don't care if you're Black, White, Latino, Asian, gay, straight, bisexual, confused, Presbyterian, vegetarian. If you don't get the options you need, if your van doesn't pick you up, you're not living your life fully. That's what we're talking about. The kind of transportation options everybody else takes for granted, we're left out of. So we need to see

that kind of attention place across the board.

The question that I'll leave you with is this. If you or one of your family members became disabled tomorrow, what kind of transportation services would you want or would you need? Let that be your guide. I thank you for your attention.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Ms. Jones?

SHARONA JONES: Yes, good afternoon. Can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes.

SHARONA JONES: Yes. Thank you. I will be reading for Michael Godino, director of advocacy for the Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled. Thank you for the opportunity to present the opinions of the Board, staff and participants of the Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled, known as BCID, on answering the question are Access-A-Ride consumers receiving the services to which they are entitled. The Brooklyn Center for the Independence of the Disabled is a consumer-based not for profit organization controlled and operated by people with disabilities. Our mission

is to provide the tools, services and necessary assistance to remove barriers within the community which prevent people with disabilities from fully assimilating. Carrying out one's fundamental right to use the transportation being provided by the City is critical when one has business, personal tasks and or social affairs to attend.

Access-A-Ride is an accessible means of transportation mandated for use by persons unable to use the locally provided fixed methods of transit. The AAR service is mandated by the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, and is to parallel the fixed system and to provide equal service. However, in New York City the transit authority has constructed a system that is for the most part only just usable by people who have no ability to used the fixed route system. Some of the failures of this system are, a phone in for reservation that leaves one sitting on hold for long periods of time; a system unable to provide the requested ride; drivers who are ill-mannered and in some cases downright rude; additional pickups and drop offs far off from what one might consider a direct route to his or her destination;

drivers having access to consumer's personal information, i.e. phone numbers; drivers inability to locate people who cannot locate the bus; and finally an overall system-- the system's inability to get to and deliver consumers in a timely manner. Considering the fact that NYC is probably the largest Paratransit system in the United States, the riding public would hope the service they receive might be better coordinated and provided by people who might no more about providing transit services to people with disabilities. At BCID we are excited to know that the Transit Authority is working to implement a sedan service to individuals who are ambulatory. This service will free up buses for those who need the larger space for wheelchairs and other devices that permit travel. We are hoping the Transit Authority will continue its investigation into the use of smaller, fully accessible taxi style vehicles that provide more maneuvering and faster access to consumers in this very fast paced New York City environment. Additionally, we at BCID feel there must be more accountability for the complaint process. People with disabilities are

discouraged from filing complaints as many of them feel their complaints are not addressed or they themselves might be subject to retaliation. As it stands, there seems to be a select few who handle complaints and they, more often than not, place the infraction on the consumer and remove the burden from the provider. We understand the Transit Authority has a major task of providing transportation to millions daily, but we also know that the AAR should be at the very least be at the very least equal in usability by those who cannot access the fixed route buses and subways. Because a person has a disability, their lives and needs are no less important or valuable, and this service should provide for them as such. Again, thank you for the opportunity. If BCID can assist you with any other information on this or any other topic regarding people with disabilities, please feel free to contact me or one of my esteemed colleagues at the below phone number. I would just like to add, my experience with Access-A-Ride is this winter I placed one of my fellow members on an Access-A-Ride bus. The driver hit a woman in East New York, told her to get going,

took her bags from underneath the wheels and made veiled threats to the two women of our organization who were onboard that van. And anyone that knows me knows that I am not a person with fear in my heart, but from the advocacy that we do at BCID and the stories that we hear from other members, it puts fear in my heart to ever get on one of those vans and be held hostage. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you. Since you just raised it, did you complain about this incident?

SHARONA JONES: Oh, I believe the driver has been identified by the women on the bus and I think they have located the person, but I'm not certain a police report was filed. I don't know if any follow up has been done.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: If you send us a report, we'll look into it. If you send it--

SHARONA JONES: [Interposing] Okay, I'll have to contact the women.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: --to my attention or to John Liu's attention at City Hall or at 250 Broadway, we'll follow up. We'll look

in to that.

SHARONA JONES: Thank you. If I may have your business before we leave?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes, sure.

SHARONA JONES: Is that a possibility?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes of course. Of course.

SHARONA JONES: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I would like to ask Ms. Sackman, you're talking about an alternative van system provided to senior centers, am I understanding correctly?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Correct. Yes, correct. It already exists. There's hundreds of vehicles operated through the Department for the Aging funded system. And as I mentioned, they're already picking up Access-A-Ride riders either because the seniors won't call Access-A-Ride anymore or, you know, Access-A-Ride just couldn't accommodate them. It's well know they're picking up Access-A-Ride. So these are people who have been deemed eligible for Access-A-Ride, I'm not just talking about seniors who get on the van for

other reasons and they're not, quote, eligible to be an Access-A-Ride rider. These are people already assessed as accessible--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
And why are they not using Access-A-Ride?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: For all the problems you've heard. I also think that there's a problem when you don't have that same subscription, you know, these aren't people who are going to work every day. So I think sometimes if their rides are to different places, it's a little bit harder. But I think it's for all the same problems you're hearing. I think no matter what age the person is; it's not a reliable system. They've had bad experiences and they've gotten frustrated. And they have an alternative; it's a very limited one though. It is to go to the senior center and if the van is available to them the van will, you know, bring them. So they've found an alternative, more power to them. I think we just have to make that a more sustainable option for people.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: But we have to make sure we're not duplicating also.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: No, I don't believe we're duplicating.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Because, you know, we have limited-- we don't have unlimited funds to do these kinds of things.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Right. But what you don't want to do, not you personally, but we don't want to do is, is have the DFTA transportation system fall apart, and it will if these budget cuts go through. And we've faced this over the years. The reason Councilman Liu got involved in helping us win the, what's now about \$3 million, is there were vans that were either sitting or not being operated at all, or only operating part time. And I can tell you that, you know, that will happen again. There's no choice. You have to cut what you have to cut.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well, so let's take an average senior center. The members who come to that senior center, do most of the senior centers now have a van of their own that's available?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Do most of them have a van? Probably most of them. I really

offhand couldn't tell you. Some may have only one. Some are going to have, you know, three or four. It definitely varies. What was interesting to me was that 80 plus thing, because the average age of someone going to a senior center is 77. So, you know, they're really serving people in their 80s and 90s. Mind you, I'm not looking for duplication. We can't waste a penny. But as an option, just as perhaps a car service can be an option, you know, this is an option. And they're already doing it, so why not let them get reimbursed for doing something that Access-A-Ride isn't doing.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well what I'm trying to figure out in my own head is whether Access-A-Ride can do it or whether it's-- do most of the senior centers use the vans to pick up members and bring them to the center and then take them home? Is that what the vans are used for?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: They use it for a variety of reasons. It's to bring them to the senior center. It's very often for medical visits. It's for daily things like I mentioned, like grocery shopping, going to the bank, you

know, a whole slew of those kinds of activities.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Isn't that pretty much duplicating what Access-A-Ride does?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: But they're not duplicating the same rides. These are people that aren't going to Access-A-Ride. They're serving the same function, well so would a taxi. They're going to take them to the bank, to the grocery-- I mean there's only so many places people are really going to need to go. It's--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Well that's--

BOBBIE SACKMAN: --it's not duplicating the ridership. Yes, it's filling the same need these people have for transportation.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well then the question then comes to me at least, as we don't have unlimited funds, which is more expensive. Should we be using Access-A-Ride to be providing services to these seniors or should we be using the vans that the senior centers have?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: The DFTA system doesn't have the capacity to serve all the senior citizen that Access-A-Ride serves. And Access-A-

Ride should certainly be the best system it can be. It's not serving all the needs of the seniors in this city. And what's been going on for the same 20 years or whatever it is that Access-A-Ride has existed, is that the senior centers are also transporting seniors. I just would like to see it as a reimbursable option so that they can perform that service. Because then what's going to happen, and you get the calls, you will begin to hear from seniors in your district, now I can't even get the van at the Center and Access-A-Ride is not picking me up. So, you know, I mean it is a reality. It's an option. And maybe it's also that they feel comfortable because they know that these people will go the extra mile for them. They're never going to leave somebody at home and they're never going to leave somebody at the doctor's office. They've even paid-- I hear this all the time. One person just told me, it's at least three times a week she pays for a car service to bring somebody home from the doctor. She might not have even brought them there, Access-A-Ride stranded them; she didn't strand them. Because they will do whatever they need to

do to get the person wherever they need to go.

LAWRENCE CARTER LONG: I would also just add, you know, the question should be who is going to do it cheaply, who is going to do it efficiently, who is going to do it reliably. So if they can provide a similar service that would be better and take some of the burden off of Access-A-Ride so that they can really get to those consumers who need the lifts, for example. Maybe in the way that taxis are being piloted and I hope that Liveries would be piloted, we could pilot the DFTA vehicles as well.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: But my view is that I think there should be some discussions as was suggested by Council Member Arroyo between DFTA and the Access-A-Ride people, because, and I don't want to get into a debate about this, but it strikes me that there may be some duplication, if I could use that word, not on the particular ride, but on the service being available. And it should be being looked into in any event, in my view.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: When I hear duplication it makes me worry that you think that the vans that the senior centers are operating

aren't necessary and we shouldn't be spending money on them doing that. And I think, again, that couldn't be further from the truth. Look, I have a choice. I can take a bus, an express bus and a train because I'm fortunate-- and I own a car as it happens; I'm a crazy New Yorker. So I have a lot of options to my transportation. I don't see why somebody who uses Paratransit shouldn't have options to the kind of Paratransit they use. I think that's all we're trying to say.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I'm not going to get into a debate with you.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Sure.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Anyone else? Yes.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Well certainly it is-- it presents an opportunity and I think we must be very prudent in exercising and exploring every opportunity available to us and particularly in this fiscal situation. I have just one question on the eligibility issue and how in discussions, because I think this is something that we as chairs of the relevant committees need to move forward in terms of conversation, about

that option, about the opportunity to keep tax levy dollars in our service system and not send it out to pay for something outside of the social service system that we provide for in the City. So if we, if I as Committee Chair of the Committee on Aging, want to move this agenda forward, how do I convince those that we are not duplicating service; two, will we apply the same eligibility criteria for a DFTA transportation network to require that individuals be certified or approved under the Access-A-Ride system?

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Well I would see two things. One is yes, I think that there should be a system of reimbursing for rides where the person has been approved by Access-A-Ride. However, if there's someone that needs a ride that's not approved by Access-A-Ride, then they just don't get reimbursed by Access-A-Ride. It doesn't mean the DFTA system, if they have capacity, can't give that person a ride.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Which is probably the case now, they're providing for those that are not eligible for Access-A-Ride.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: That's what I'm

saying, that's not true. They are providing rides for people that have been approved by Access-A-Ride--

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: [Interposing]
That I know, but they can also be providing for those that are not.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Yes, who are not approved. So I say that they should be able to do both within their capacity, so you have a system of reimbursement for the Access-A-Ride.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: For those that are eligible.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Okay.

BOBBIE SACKMAN: Because you know Access-A-Ride, far from a perfect system, there are sometimes those gray areas of frailty among seniors of who can use public transit and who can't. So I would hate to think that while trying to help one aspect of transportation we may end up denying somebody else that van service that can't use a subway any longer.

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you

very much. Our next panel Edith Prentiss, the 504 Democratic Club, and other organizations; Jean Ryan, Disabled in Action; and Bill Danielson, also Disabled in Action. Oh. I understand Jean is reading Bill's testimony. Well we have three, so. Do you want to make an announcement?

EDIT PRENTISS: Hi. As was said, okay my name is--

CHAIRPERSON ARROYO: [Interposing]
Before you start I just want announce to my co-chairs to indulge, I have to excuse myself. I have a meeting across the hall to discuss the DFTA budget reduction plan that's looming before us. So Mr. Chairs, thank you for your cooperation and your partnership on this conversation, and we'll talk further about the thoughts that we've had here. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you.
Ms. Prentiss, please.

EDITH PRENTISS: Okay. My name is Edith Prentiss and I'm the President of 504 Dems, and the Vice President of Legislative Affairs for Disabled in Action, as well as a member of Disability Network. In November of '06 there was

a hearing, an oversight hearing between Disability Services and Transportation, and it was entitled Access-A-Ride Operation. I dug up my old testimony and that testimony had 13 points, 11 of them I'm speaking about today, plus there are two new ones. I am not a-- although I am certified for Paratransit of New York City I rarely use it. I do utilize other options, but I do most frequently use Paratransit in Albany, but I've used it in other localities. I think that we can say if so many of these issues are still among of in 2009, that we have to look at the question of what services are people really getting and the need for services. I'm going to skip most of it because I would like to address primarily the question you asked earlier about the Central Dispatch System, and I know that this will be read into the record later. I think that having actually used Central Dispatch System and also been successful in twice hailing yellow cabs on the street, the Central Dispatch System does not work well for anyone. I am now one of the honored one and I now get to call their 718 number instead of the 311 number. The second time I used calling

through the 311 number I actually was on hold with the wrong part of TLC for over half an hour. We were on our way back on the ferry from IKEA and it took the entire trip plus another 15 minutes, so it was a little ridiculous. Since that is a voluntary system and not all accessible vehicles are on the system and the driver does not have to take every call that they receive, I really do not think it's going to work for anyone, certainly not for Access-A-Ride. I mean, as Access-A-Ride has discovered in trying to use it for the backup for stranded passengers, it's not working very well for them either. The likelihood of being able to get a trip, unless you're in midtown and going to midtown, is highly unlikely. From Washington Heights I'm successful usually when it's someone coming on service and they're passing through the neighborhood or near the neighborhood on their way downtown and they pick up the call. I also would like to address the fact that although it is not mandated by the ADA or any other federal regulations a major concern, particularly for power chair users is the need for emergency services, same day services. It's a tremendous

problem when our chairs die. If I'm down here and my chair dies, I've got to get over to Church street somehow and get on a bus and get on another bus and then push my chair half a mile from that bus to get home. It doesn't work. Calling 311 to find a taxi that's going to take me home is highly unlikely. I would like to address the issues that I didn't-- that have not been addressed, and that's primarily the issue of travel training, at this point when we're looking at asking Access-A-Ride users to be a little more discriminating in the trips we choose to utilize Access-A-Ride for. For example, if I'm going to Throgs Neck from Washington Heights, which is a four bus travel and it's buses that actually run half an hour intervals, I will use Access-A-Ride. But I do not use Access-A-Ride otherwise if it's a trip that I can utilize other transit options for. But to do so, Access-A-Ride users have to be more confident in their transportation options. Access-A-Ride has to have, to my believe, an aggressive travel training program. It's-- I don't even know if they have one at the moment, they had been in contract through ICS and I've been told that is no

longer. And New York City Transit has to improve accessibility. If you talk to chair users they point out elevators and gaps. Coming here I came across the shuttle. There's a 14-inch gap for Lord's sake. That's ridiculous. That station is supposed to have been made accessible last October. Well you know where we're standing on that one. One of the issues-- I'd like to address the issue about utilizing--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Is that the 42nd Street you're talking about?

EDITH PRENTISS: Yes, yes. 42nd Street. The Grand Central end is accessible, the West End is not accessible, I guess the Times Square end. Yeah. And it's really great to scare the tourists. One of my concerns when we talk about the utilization of taxis and car services, etcetera is that the TLC has been basically ineffectual in implementing and managing the for hire vehicle role, which was to have been in effect on 9/11, and it's never been. If Access-A-Ride is using more vehicles, Department for the Aging is using inaccessible vehicles, and let's talk about-- do you remember United We Ride?

Remember United We Ride? It's an FTA money and it's supposed to say that people who have vans, when they're not using them are supposed to be usable by other organizations. We haven't seen that go anywhere. It's been around for a while and we haven't seen anything happen. When we start talking about increased utilization of inaccessible vehicles, I have a problem with that concept. I think that people who need an accessible trip are going to find that they have more and more problems. We hear about people complaining about the inability to get a trip when they want the trip. They're being given earlier trips and earlier trips and trips when they want to be picked up, say for a DIA meeting, they're being told they have to leave earlier. If you have a trip scheduled for 4:00 and you're being told you're in a vehicle with someone who is a 3:20 pickup, come on. None of us are rude enough to make someone else sit for 40 minutes on a bus, but that's a situation that people are being forced into. And Jean will speak at that further. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you,

thank you. I have a couple of questions.

EDITH PRENTISS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: We'll leave them until after. Yes, please. Ms. Ryan.

JEAN RYAN: Is this on? Okay. Mine's on.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: It's a different system now. The light has to be on.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. And red means it's on?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes.

JEAN RYAN: I always thought red meant off.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: No, it used to. We changed the microphones a few months ago.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Your recollection is correct. It's a new and better system, because I think this is more the way you would think it would work.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. Not intuitive.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Good. Right. Now it's intuitive. It was non-intuitive before.

JEAN RYAN: Oh, I think it's not

intuitive now.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Oh, okay.

Well anyway. I don't know.

JEAN RYAN: To me red means off.

Okay. I'm-- first I'm reading Bill Danielson's testimony. He's unable to make it today because he's ill.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Oh, I'm

sorry.

JEAN RYAN: So I am not Bill

Danielson. Good afternoon, Council Members.

Thank you for having this hearing today. My name is William Danielson. I have been an Access-A-Ride user since 2001. I was so dissatisfied with the service that I had contacted the New York State Comptroller's Office, told them what I knew and they asked me to work undercover for the special investigation unit and the audit department. I did that for over five years starting in December 2002 as a volunteer. I found many disturbing things going on in the Access-A-Ride system with the private carriers. What I found in the beginning part of my investigation was fraudulent activity. Number one, instances

where carriers said they were there but they weren't. For example, I took a trip on Access-A-Ride to the South Street Seaport and was being followed by the investigation unit. On my return trip, Maggie's [phonetic] was supposed to pick me up. They claimed that I wasn't there, but I was. One of the investigators drove me home. The investigators checked on other people too. Number two; I named names for two people who worked for a total of three companies who go into those carriers' offices at night. They would fraudulently change the records in the computer system, either changing the time that the vehicle showed up on either end or changing the time to a no show. I heard from drivers that other carriers also have people doing this, but I did not have names of those people. The New York State Comptroller's Office said I was correct. The State Comptroller's Office agreed to follow up and report all findings. They did that for a period of time, but eventually they put the investigators on the Long Island School District funding investigation and the final report was buried by Comptroller Hevesi before it got released. From

that period of time, I, Bill, was still asked to continue to get information about the Access-A-Ride carriers because of my good credibility. So the Comptroller staff agreed to investigate another issue, safety and maintenance. Access-A-Ride drivers and Access-A-Ride riders were calling me and telling me horrific stories. This time I videotaped drivers and riders telling me what happened during their trips. I also videotaped drivers handing me paperwork. What I was told by one TFM driver was that porters, maintenance workers, unqualified people, not mechanics, were repairing the vans. The same TFM driver informed me that there were numerous records of vans that should not be on the street because of all the problems they had. When New York City Transit, the MTA division who runs Access-A-Ride, would come to check on the vans, if a van could start it was out on the street and that was okay with New York City Transit. They had supervisors who allowed it. There was also a DOT inspector who kept getting his private vehicle repeatedly repaired at TFM. I heard of another Access-A-Ride van that went up on fire in 2003. The fire

department had to come and the van was totaled. You could see that it was charred. It was an electrical fire. I provided the State Comptroller's Office with a newspaper photo of it. It should not have been out in the street. Other Access-A-Ride vans had electrical fires in other years. As long as a van started, New York City Transit never checked records. They never checked to see if the repairs were actually done. It was a common practice for vehicles to go out on the street to have said in the paperwork that they were repaired and they were not repaired, then they'd be out on the street the next day, driven by the same driver with the same problem. The drivers would tell the passengers this too. There was a driver from Atlantic Express who reported that the van's breaks failed, and the next day he took the van out after they said they repaired it; it still had the same problem, the van was totaled and now he is permanently disabled. Other drivers, from Maggie's and MV, were taking radios and heaters out of the vans. Other companies reported gas smells, exhaust smells; that's supposed to be fixed, but it wasn't. All the

companies reported it and New York City Transit allowed them to get away with it without fixing because the vehicles would start. Additionally, parts were hidden and put away. Parts were transferred from one company to another with no paper trail. Where was the money going? The money was going for repairs, but the vans were not being repaired. I gave all records, paperwork and videotape to the Comptroller's Office. The audit was supposed to take one month, but they were there for six, from December 2007 to May 2008. The Comptroller's Office said they wouldn't be there if they didn't find anything, now five carriers are gone. They reported the information to the MTA and the MTA got rid of the five worst. The MTA couldn't get rid of all the carriers, so they got rid of five of them. The New York State Comptroller is issuing the final report to the public soon, they almost issued it today, but they weren't quite ready. The problems are still ongoing. There are many more examples of unsafe practices and lack of follow up to accidents and repair and preventive maintenance. Supervising and inspecting records and vehicles are the

ultimate duties of New York City Transit, and they are shirking their responsibilities. The only way to maximize safety and maintenance and minimize fraud is for the MTA to get rid of the private carriers totally so they know where the money goes and so we know too. By knowing where the money goes, we will have better safety and maintenance in Access-A-Ride. And Bill Danielson said that he would be happy to talk to anybody and he gave his phone number on his testimony.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you. I'm going to ask the Counsel to the Committee to try and see if we can get a hold of that report as soon as it is issued. And we will follow up. Certainly these are very disturbing allegations and they're somewhat contradictory to the fairly rosy testimony we heard from New York City Transit. So we will want to hear more about this, certainly.

JEAN RYAN: Well I can tell you from my experience that I would be on a van, we would be on vans and we would say, we're all crying out in pain, we're flying up in the air when they're going slow at street speed and they

feel like they don't have any shocks. And I would complain and they would say, well there's nothing wrong with them and, you know, they checked them. And there's got to be something wrong, you know? But I guess they were working and I was on a van where the driver said, please, you know, I'm having problem with it. He called the dispatcher, it's cutting out while I'm going. And the dispatcher said, you have to continue. We were at Nadler's office and he said, you have to drive this van. And he had to pick up another passenger and while we were on the van, it cut out in the middle of the Brooklyn-- the tunnel between Manhattan and Brooklyn--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Oh, my goodness.

JEAN RYAN: It cut out, the ignition just died while we were in it. That was the problem he complained he was having. And he was going to have-- and finally he got it going again. And he was going to have to continue with that person on to Staten Island. I mean really.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Did you want to say anything on your own behalf beside that?

JEAN RYAN: Yes. Yes, I have a lot to say.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay. Well, five minutes. We'll let you do it because you read the other statement and he was ill, but we've got to move alone.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. Just a minute.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. I am Jean Ryan. I'm Vice President for Public Affairs of Disabled In Action. I have been a member of the Access-A-Ride advisory committee since 2000 and I'm an Access-A-Ride activist working to change the system; I'm also a rider. Disabled In Action strongly supports the MTA and New York City Transit taking over all aspects of Access-A-Ride. Our subways and buses are not outsourced and Paratransit should not be outsourced either. When companies have a profit motive, bad things happen. For one thing, with the drivers in these private companies, it's a job and not a career. For another the companies are trying to make money, so what now goes into their profit could go into

paying drivers or going to providing service or fixing vans. Although there are more Access-A-Ride riders taking rides than every before, when it comes down to the basics, what matters most to people is can we get a ride when we need it and will we have to wait a long time to be picked up or to ride, will our ride be comfortable and safe? Will the driver be polite and will we be dropped off on time? It goes without saying that customer service being able to call with a question or a concern is part of the basics. But when we call with a problem with today's ride, we get a recorded message to hold at least 90% of the time, and we are answered by people who do not give their names, who speak fast and who run their words together and they are usually impatient with us. He didn't talk about that. Heaven help us if we are in a wheelchair and there is a problem with our ride, we don't have very many options. First Transit, the people who it's outsourced to, routinely tell us 90 minutes without checking to see if something better is available like they're supposed to do. It will likely take hours to get another ride while we are very stressed about

waiting for a van, not being able to find and use a bathroom or leave the area, being too hot or too cold, perhaps feeling ill and trying to get in touch with transit control and dispatch, whether or not we have a cell phone, and worrying about eventually getting to our destination. We never get one person to call back and the same person never calls us back when we are stranded. It's a nightmare of confusion. Sometimes we get picked up in a van that has a mechanical problem, but at least it's a ride. We just hope it isn't a bad mechanical problem that the driver says the van has, but we can't say no or we are stranded again. Is this any way to run a service? No. Floaters from the carriers were supposed to make the system more flexible so if there are problems they can fill in. Either there aren't enough floaters or they aren't dispatched right. I hear drivers assigned to be floaters complaining about it. When I'm in the van and drivers are given add on rides, they complain and argue and refuse. It sounds like we're going back to the bad old days. Automatic vehicle locator monitoring system was supposed to be installed in all the vans by the

end of 2008, but it's only in 50% now. And many drivers don't pay attention to their AVL. The First Transit control people also do not pay attention to their AVLs when we call and ask where our van is. They say it will be coming on time, the van will be coming on time and refuse to look where it is. Without AVL, the system cannot be very flexible or honest. There's a glitch in the ADEPTs scheduling software that sometimes drops reservation for people who have special needs with our chairs. I had a broken ankle and had to ride with my leg extended. We make the reservation and then when we're waiting for the ride we're told we didn't make a reservation even though we confirmed it. It isn't in the system anymore and no van comes. This happened to me and to Ludadema Kovskaya [phonetic]. A supervisor told me this might happen because the software things that two trips were mistakenly booked. I reported it to Tom Charles twice and asked that it be looked into and I never heard anything back on it. Why? By the time a van finally shows up, unless we're going home it's too late to go to where we were headed. This is like what you were

1 talking about. We would have missed our meeting,
2 our appointment, the train, the funeral, have been
3 horribly late for our job, the wedding, whatever
4 we were going to that day. It's the same old,
5 same old. Some of the reservationists that
6 outsource First Transit are impossible to
7 understand because they run their word together,
8 they only speak parts of words, and they do not
9 speak standard English. Their sole job is to make
10 reservations and speak on the phone. When we
11 complain we get nowhere. Some reservationists
12 make mistakes that take weeks to resolve. That's
13 in my testimony. You can read it. There
14 essentially is no customer service at Access-A-
15 Ride. Well, there's a tiny bit, but only a few
16 people have the numbers of the four customer
17 service people, because if everyone did, they
18 would be overwhelmed because there's such a need
19 for them. Riders can't call and get the help they
20 need. When people are having repeated problems,
21 they don't know whom to turn to. You have to be
22 extremely lucky to find someone in Access-A-Ride
23 to help you. What happens is that people give up
24 in disgust or they don't take Access-A-Ride even
25

though they really need it. We also can't get systemic problems worked on. When we have a problem it isn't like we can just wait for another bus or train to come, this is door-to-door service and if it doesn't show up we can't get anywhere. We're told the proverbial five to ten minutes that go way beyond that. You don't have to tell that to wheelchair user Anthony Trochie [phonetic] a former president of DIA who was stranded Saturday night when the van didn't show up as he waited in vain in front of his building for 30 minutes. They didn't call him--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
I'm going to have to interrupt you because we have your testimony and we'll put it in the record and we'll review it.

JEAN RYAN: Okay, well just let me gloss over.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Why don't you get to the end?

JEAN RYAN: 75 year old Ms. Webber [phonetic]--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
No, no. Let's go to the end.

JEAN RYAN: From the Bronx, she had a five-hour trip--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing] No. Ms. Ryan, we can't do that. Let's go to the end.

JEAN RYAN: Okay, well these are seniors.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And do your summary at the end.

JEAN RYAN: 100 year old. Okay. I wanted to just mention the problems with the-- the ongoing problems with, at DIA meetings, with Maggie's. They're terrible. We had a dispatcher there who couldn't even manage the rides.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Is Maggie's one of the providers?

JEAN RYAN: Yes, they are and they're horrible. And we had drivers going off and they were supposed to have two people and they only took one. We had one driver who took-- he took somebody, he left the passenger he was supposed to take and he took somebody with a walker instead of a wheelchair user, and there was a dispatcher right there. And then we had

somebody-- I was in the van with another wheelchair user. He made the person get on an hour before she was supposed get on. So then I got on too because I was supposed to ride with her. And then the guy didn't even want to hook us up right-- improperly, he was just going to leave us half hooked up and take off with the van. That is so dangerous, and he didn't even have the proper equipment to hook us up with. I have to say that.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay.

JEAN RYAN: We have the time for that. So we insisted that he hook us up properly. He had to go to another van to get the equipment because he had left without the proper equipment in his van. This goes on all the time. Van after van, after van the drivers are not properly trained. Every time. Just about every van I'm in the drivers are not properly trained.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well let me ask you this, have you filed these complaints?

JEAN RYAN: Yes. Yes, I could complain 95% of the time, that's what my testimony says.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: No, I understand that, but when--

JEAN RYAN: [Interposing] Do we have time for this? Most people don't bother to complain, but I do.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay. I'm glad you do and I've looked over--

JEAN RYAN: But they have to do something about this systematically.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Wait. You've got to let me ask my question.

JEAN RYAN: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: When you complain, did you get any response?

JEAN RYAN: Seldom, very seldom do I get a response. And--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing] Would you do me a favor?

JEAN RYAN: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Are your complaints, I saw a number of complaints in this testimony.

JEAN RYAN: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I'm going to

ask that the Council send your testimony to the MTA, to Mr. Charles and get a response on each of these items.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. But I would like to add--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing] And if you have any other complaints, if you'll provide them to us, and I'll give you my card, in writing, we will then try and follow up.

JEAN RYAN: Well I would like--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing] It's very helpful to have these specific complaints.

JEAN RYAN: Okay. I would like to add that I do make specific complaints, but we can't change the system by specific, by specific, by specific; these are systematic complaints. They have to change the system. That's why we're here giving you testimony. At the last Access-A-Ride Paratransit Advisory Committee, we actually had a meeting on driver training and they were talking about securing wheelchair users, and we were talking about the need for that. And they said that they were training the drivers, but it's

obvious the drivers don't know what they're doing and are not supervised properly.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I hear you. And we'll look into each of these complaints. Let me ask Ms. Prentiss, as you, I know you're very active with the disabled community, I mean is it the general sense that this service is not being provided in an appropriate manner?

EDITH PRENTISS: I would say the general sense is that people would rather not have to use it. People use it under duress, but people do use it and are very unhappy with it. I think that it's an enormous problem and it's an enormous program, but that people use it because they have no other options. We would like to see more options available to us, and we believe that travel training and increased accessibility with-- by New York City Transit are absolutely essential.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: As you know, we agree with your options concept. But thank you both very much.

EDITH PRENTISS: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: And please be in touch with us. We'll try and communicate the

complaints and get some response. Thank you. And now we have the last-- I have I guess three people. Miss-- I can't read the first name easily but it looks like Todd, or Todd Walerston?

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Do you need any help with the Sergeant here?

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yeah, what is your name?

[Off Mic]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes. Is anybody else who put in who's here who wants to testify?

[Off Mic]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Is she here, Patricia Dolan?

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Anybody else? Okay.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay. You're

right. The table's a little crowded. Oh wait,
just a moment. The other gentleman--

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: [Interposing]
You'll have to forgive me--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Just hold on a second. Let the other gentleman
sit down. Oh the dog is in the way? Okay, all
right. Okay.

[Pause]

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Go ahead now.
You can go first.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: You'll have to
forgive me on a couple of counts here, one I don't
mean to be disrespectful, I'm light sensitive. I
have to wear a cap to keep the light from going
into my eyes.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: That's fine.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: My name is
Todd C. Walerstein and Hanley is my partner, whom
you probably noticed.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Hanley is the
dog?

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: I'm sorry?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Who is your

partner?

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Hanley.

Hanley.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Oh, Hanley is the dog. Oh okay.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Hanley, come on. They can't see you up here.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I understand. We see him.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: There he is.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay, very good.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Well we're a team. We go, you know, all over together. I should like to point out, however, that there's a lot of spaghetti after my name and just to let you know, you know, I'm engaged with BCIDNY, the ACB, the Borough President Manhattan's Disability Task Force, the CCLVI. This is all on national, state and local levels, okay? And there's a lot more after that. I would also like to get my contact information into the record because I'm going to try and make this short because there seems to be time constraints and I understand that, and I'm

not going to go into a heck of a lot of details,
but you may want more details, so--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
If you want to state your address that's fine.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Well, I also
have a major hearing problem.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Can you hear
me now.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: And I have not
been able to hear much of anything that's been
going on. If I'm lucky, 40%. But I would like to
put my contact information--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Please do that.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Okay. 212-
260-1633, extension 2. That's fax and voice. And
if you prefer email, it would be T-C-M-A-I-L, just
like US Mail, only Tcmail, at juno.com. T-C-M-A-
I-L at J-U-N-O.C-O-M. The part of the reasons
besides putting that into the record is because I
would like to work with any of you later on in
terms of questions and so on. To get more to the
point of what is going on, and I'm not going to
say that Access-A-Ride is junk, it isn't, it's a

necessary form of transportation, however if we look at what it costs and how the MTA itself operates, the MTA is throwing money down the drain, forcing people such as myself to use Access-A-Ride by pushing us off the system in so many ways. You can look at the HEETs, without auto gates, I don't know if you know what that is. My dog cannot use a HEET. So if you take a particular station entrance, for example Rockefeller Center, popular station, I can't get out at the 47th Street entrance. Well, I can get out now because they put a crash bar in because I think they were sued-- but I'm not sure about that. But I can't get in there, I think on weekends. So they're taking the system away from me slowly. The MTA also, and this is across the board, I'm talking Metro North, although Metro North is the best. As far as the Long Island Railroad, have you ever gone up to a station and said, excuse me, do you know what track the next train is on? Read the sign. Where is it? It's right there. What are you, blind? I kind of thing that's, you know, a little annoying, maybe somewhat discriminatory. But anyway, I could go

on and on with one story after another, after another, after another. The low turnstiles, which I can use when they're open are fine when they're open, but when they're closed and they're closed on one side you walk through them and walk into a fence and when you bring it up specifically to the TA ADA compliance board, when you bring it up to the Transit Authority's President's Office, what do they say? Oh, we'll look into it. And nothing happens. Okay? When you say to them, gee, you know, I can't take the buses because if they don't curb the bus and the bus driver doesn't tell me the bus is there and I'm standing at the curb yelling, is that the bus, is that the 103? A couple of minutes later a couple people come down, we heard you at the corner, that was the bus, the bus didn't stop. You do complain. I think I heard you ask if people register complaints. You do complain and nothing really happens. The MTA as a whole is more interested in their lip service. They do a great job for people without disabilities. Don't misunderstand me. They do a really good job. They have signs up there that give you full information on what time the train

runs, by what route and so on. Do they give that information to people who can't read the signs? No. And you know this, there are no signs. The best you're going to get is downtown and Brooklyn and then say A train. It doesn't tell you the train doesn't run midnight to 5:00. It doesn't tell you it goes down, you know 8th Avenue to Far Rockaway and so on and so forth. If you give us the information, people who can't read your signs, if you give us that information we can use the system. If you make the system accessible where we don't have to worry about going through four or five entrances-- again, try Rockefeller Center, walk down from 53rd Street, West Side of the street going to every entrance, it doesn't tell you if it's accessible, get down to 47 and then work all the way back up and finally find the one entrance that might be open and accessible. Wonderful. Seniors also have trouble with HEETs, by the way, I might add. But they refuse to put in auto gates. Auto gates are a simple solution. You've got the service gate there, make it an auto gate. They won't do it. Then you go ahead and you look at their announcements-- I don't know if

that was my hearing aid or--?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: No, that's the time.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Let me--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
And I think what you have to say is interesting to me-- hold on a minute--

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: [Interposing]
25 seconds.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: No. Can you hear me? Can you hear me?

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Barely. You heard what I had to say, but I didn't get to the training.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: No, but I--

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: [Interposing]
Nor did I get to the announcement.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: If you can hear me, can you hear me now?

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Yeah, I can get a lot of it.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay, good.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: But not all.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: I'm speaking

loudly so that you can hear. What you're saying is interesting, but that's not the subject of today's hearing. We're talking today about Access-A-Ride.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Right.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Not about accessibility of the transit system, although that is an important point.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Correct. I understand that.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: So what I'm asking you, you use Access-A-Ride.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: I am going to be forced to at this rate.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Have you used it so far?

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Huh?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Have you used it before now.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: No, I have not used it before now because--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing]
Okay, so then you can't really enlighten us on that.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: I'm sorry?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: You can't really respond to what this hearing is about.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: I understand that. That's where I'm going.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well why don't you go there quickly, because your time is up. Your time is up. But I'll hear one or two words if you want to say something about it.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Okay. I just wanted to say if the MTA continues to do this and they're in charge of Access-A-Ride and there's no language in their contracts then there's no way to make it work for people. Their training is terrible, and then if you're going to move us to the taxi system, make sure there's language in the legislation that trains the people so that it is accessible and so that that way I can call up and I don't have to do it 24 hours in advance. Yeah, if I can call a couple hours in advance it would work.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Well try, why don't you now that you know about the Access-A-Ride system, and since you're dissatisfied with

the regular transit system because of the problems you mentioned, I assume you'll probably be eligible for the Access-A-Ride, why don't you try it and then tell us how you find it?

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: I have spoken to many, many sight impaired blind people who think it is absolutely abhorrent and extremely discriminatory as well as ineffective in many, many cases, other than when they have to go to work at the same time every day.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay, thank you.

TODD C. WALERSTEIN: Okay. Sorry.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Our next witness now?

MATT SHOIK: Mr. Chairman, is this on?

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Yes. It's very loud. You don't need to speak so loud.

MATT SHOIK: Okay. The Daily News reported on Saturday a 1.3 billion dollar MTA fare hike, too high. That's a billion dollars in revenue that would have been cut. Some of it Paratransit. They're going to double the Access-

A-Ride fares? That would have been crazy. Then we had two press events on this Access-A-Ride issue. I don't know why you waited so long to have this actual hearing, maybe you can explain that when I'm done. The first was held on a Saturday last December, on a beautiful day just like this, although it was a little bit cooler. Also like today there were quite a few members of the disability community in attendance along with Borough President Stringer and his now former director of community affairs, Jenny Sobelman, who is now working at the Department of Education. The second press event, the second of these press events was held right before a DIA meeting in February. Borough President Stringer was very animated and adamant in his comments at both of these events. Since then we've instituted and I'm speaking now as a member of the Taxis For All campaign, since then we've instituted hybrid taxis that are cleaner and more fuel-efficient. I'm now speaking as a member of the Disability Task Force. I think that the fact that the Access-A-Ride fares are staying the same is a good thing. The disabled population can barely afford to take an

Access-A-Ride the way that the fares are now.

Thanks for your time this afternoon, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you.

Ms. Dolan, you're next. Thank you for your patience. I also might say it's very gratifying that Mr. Charles has remained. I appreciate that. It's unusual. Sometimes they leave an aide, but for the main witness to remain is somewhat unique, and it's appreciated, although I'm sure he's not too happy about some of the things he's heard.

Ms. Dolan?

PATRICIA DOLAN: Yes, okay. Thank you for being so patient, sitting here and waiting to hear all of the people who came here this afternoon. I'm Patricia Dolan. I'm the Director of Queens Connection, a program of the Queens Community House, which was established by the Queens Borough President more than 20 years ago. We coordinate Paratransit service for Queens senior centers and services. We also provide information, referral and advocacy to Queens seniors who depend on safe, affordable and accessible public transportation to maintain their independence. Most seniors, certainly in my

experience in the Borough of Queens, want to use mass public transportation. They are not clamoring to use Access-A-Ride, because they know full well the challenges involved using Access-A-Ride. That said, Access-A-Ride has improved markedly in the last year or so since the last hearing of your Committee. But problems to persist and too often riders have an adventure instead of a ride, interminable and scary waits for return trips. Trips to Manhattan that begin in Queens that travel through Brooklyn or the Bronx, confused and confusing schedulers mistakenly canceling trips or refusing car service when warranted, and folks who need Access-A-Ride are forced to go through a qualifying process that's too much like a trial. There are several things that the MTA Access-A-Ride management should consider. Replacing the oldest vans that bounce and jolt riders from one end of the ride to the other, completing the installation of the automatic vehicle positioning devices which we heard about earlier, but they need to also instruct the drivers that they need to use them. It's sort of like email, people get hundreds of

emails, but if they don't read them it does no good. In this case, we do know there are drivers who simply never activate the automatic vehicle positioning devices. They need to improve the reservation system and they need to advise, to open the advisory committee meetings to the public. At this time advocates are not permitted to even sit in on those meetings. This Committee needs to take note of the MTA's plan to double the Access-A-Ride fare, which was part of the MTA's budget proposition. That the MTA even considered such a step, which it withdrew thanks to an outpouring of objections from City Council Members, other elected officials, riders and advocates, is a wakeup call. The MTA in making the proposal ignored the longstanding agreement with the City to hold the fare at the prevailing transit fair. It also at least publicly overlooked a requirement that it seek federal permission to double the fare. And even after all the uproar, the MTA considers to consider a huge fare increase to the frailest and neediest among us. I might just want to parenthetically add this, it's not just simply doubling the fare of

Access-A-Ride here in New York City. In Queens in particular because we abut the Borough of Nassau, many of our Queens riders who use Access-A-Ride sometimes want to travel into Nassau beyond the corridor Access-A-Ride now allows them to do, and they need to then transfer to the ABLE system in Nassau, which also wants to double its. So that a person who uses both the Nassau and the New York City Access-A-Ride programs could well pay a fare of \$14 round trip. This is not a little bit of money to people who are needy to start out with. Finally, the state legislature is holding in its hands the future of public transit in this City. If after the legislature bails out the MTA, the MTA eliminates targeted bus routes across the City, it will simply grow the demand for Access-A-Ride, a demand the agency is ill-prepared to meet. Those bus routes, more than 30 of them across the City, largely serve the elderly and the disabled who are able to use public transit. The loss of those bus routes will simply force those seniors, those disabled persons into the arms of Access-A-Ride, and the arms of Access-A-Ride are very firmly folded against them. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Thank you for your testimony. It was a little bit of positive testimony in terms of improvements that you cited and I'm glad to hear about that. And, you know, we hope that the legislature will do the right thing and not saddle us with huge increases in costs and reductions in services. We should know about that soon, but I hope you're right.

PATRICIA DOLAN: Thank you. We would like to address the comments that Bobbie Sackman made regarding the van services--

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: [Interposing] Yes.

PATRICIA DOLAN: And we'd like to discuss that further with you at another moment.

COUNCIL MEMBER KOPPELL: Okay. Well we'd like to hear what you have to say, certainly on that point. But since you do mention, and I will ask you this, do you think they're duplicative of Access-A-Ride?

PATRICIA DOLAN: They're duplicative in the sense that they take people often to the same destinations. Are they duplicative in the sense that people who need to

go-- I don't think that they're duplicative in the sense that you mean. They're certainly not duplicative in the sense that Access-A-Ride is going to be able to provide that service to those people or vice-versa.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: That was my question, essentially. I mean, could we-- I mean if there are vans with the senior center, could we say, well if a senior center has a van to pick up people and take them home and to the center then those people shouldn't use Access-A-Ride.

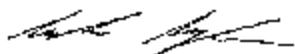
PATRICIA DOLAN: No, you can't do that because they don't use Access-A-Ride simply to take the van to and from the senior center. This is a misapprehension on the part of too many people. Seniors don't simply go to senior centers or simply go to doctor's visits. They go to all the other places that we go. They go to family occasions, they go to social occasions, they go to public events, they go to political rallies, they go shopping, they go to a bank, they go to funerals, they go to cemeteries, they go to have their hair cut. They even go to the dry cleaner occasionally. They do all sorts of things that

they continue to need Access-A-Ride for that the senior vans are not going to be able to provide that kind of service for, nor have they ever.

CHAIRPERSON KOPPELL: Okay. Thank you very much. Is there anybody else who wishes to testify? Seeing no one, the hearing is adjourned.

C E R T I F I C A T E

I, Erika Swyler certify that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. I further certify that I am not related to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that I am in no way interested in the outcome of this matter.



Signature_____

Date May 21, 2009_____