



New York City Comptroller
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NEWS

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COMPTROLLER STRINGER AUDIT REVEALS WIDESPREAD MISMANGEMENT, WASTE AND SERVICE FAILURES IN MTA'S ACCESS-A-RIDE PROGRAM

Tens of thousands of New Yorkers left stranded; 2.5 million pick-up and drop-off times may have been manipulated to show more favorable performance; Less than 50% of one car service's trips were on-time

(New York, NY) – More than 31,000 times in 2015, New York City residents booked Access-A-Ride vehicles that never showed up and failed to provide service, stranding thousands of New Yorkers with disabilities, seniors and others who are unable to take mass transit, according to a [new audit](#) released today by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. The audit found that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) allowed vendors to act with impunity, failing to monitor and correct problems or improve its Paratransit service.

“Access-A-Ride is absolutely essential for thousands of people to get around New York City every single day, yet this program stranded thousands of people, wasted millions of taxpayer dollars and caused untold harm and distress,” Comptroller Stringer said. “We found serious breakdowns in oversight and operations which have contributed to a culture of indifference and neglect by the MTA. After years of mismanagement, it’s on the MTA to take action now.”

Access-A-Ride services are mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires public transportation authorities to provide a paratransit system for passengers who cannot use public bus or subway services. In assigning Access-A-Ride trips, the MTA delivers service through a network of 16 companies. These companies provide service using MTA Paratransit Division-owned vehicles, such as specially equipped buses and cars, and for hire vehicles that provide transportation to ambulatory passengers through car services.

The Comptroller’s Audit examined Access-A-Ride services for which the MTA paid \$321 million in calendar year 2015.

Key findings include:

Access-a-Ride Buses and Cars

Thousands of people were left stranded by Access-A-Ride, and service providers blame customers, not themselves.

- In 2015, self-reported data from Access-A-Ride bus and car providers showed passengers were stranded 31,492 times, nearly double the rate that was allowed by their contracts before penalties and corrective action would be taken.
 - One contractor, GVC II, reported 10,100 no-shows, which is when a customer doesn't show up or a van or car does not show up or arrives at least 45 minutes late and the customer is not provided service. The company blamed customers for more than 7,500 of those instances. However, an MTA review found that the contractor, not the customer, was likely responsible for 40 percent of those no-shows. This is especially problematic as this negative information can be used by the MTA to suspend customers from the program.
- All told, the MTA assessed only \$12,000 in penalties in 2015, 0.004 percent of all payments made to bus and car providers in that year, for inaccurately reporting when vehicles were no-shows.

Service providers may have manipulated over 2.5 million electronically recorded pick-up and drop off times to improve their on-time performance data.

When auditors examined all pick-up and drop-off times, a troubling pattern emerged. Of 9.3 million pick-ups or drop-offs, 2.5 million had been “reconciled” by service providers so that it appeared buses and cars arrived earlier than GPS data showed.

By manually comparing electronically recorded times to providers' hand-written notes and “reconciling” those two times, the vestige of an era when GPS data did not exist, providers can avoid incurring penalties and improve their perceived performance.

A sample of rides found that nearly three-quarters of the time, Access-A-Ride bus and car providers misrepresented or had no data to confirm when customers were picked up.

Although Access-A-Ride buses and cars were required to have GPS systems installed, the MTA routinely failed to use this technology to determine if buses and cars actually showed up for appointed rides and provided timely service. Instead, the MTA has relied on contractors' self-reported trip and vehicle data, which is often inaccurate and not supported by GPS data.

- In a sample of 150 trips by three providers, auditors found that 73 percent of the time, there was incorrect self-reported data or no data at all to prove when passengers were actually picked up.

Contracted Car Services

Because the MTA lacks GPS data, it may have paid nearly \$130,000 for car service trips that never occurred.

- The MTA didn't enforce contract requirements that car services install GPS. As a result, it couldn't ensure that taxpayers paid only for trips that were performed.
- The MTA determines how much to pay car service providers by reviewing the total number of trips that were assigned, and deducting cancellations and the number of times a taxi was used to replace a trip that didn't show up.
- In 2015, customers logged 4,771 complaints about no-show vehicles, but the MTA deducted only 586 reimbursements for taxi rides taken when vehicles didn't show up. Because billing is done essentially on the honor system, taxpayers may have paid for 4,185 trips, worth nearly \$130,000, which never occurred.

Customer complaints for one car service were up to six times higher than the contract allows and half of all rides from one company weren't on time, yet the MTA did not take meaningful corrective action.

- While contracts stated that there should be no more than 1.5 customer complaints per every 1,000 trips performed, one provider, Corporate Transit Group, logged negative customer service complaints up to six times the allowed rate.
- In addition, a review of performance data for another provider, Medical Transportation Management, showed that less than 50 percent of all rides in 2015 were on time.
- MTA acknowledged that both contractors were poor performers, but never held either company accountable or found alternative service providers. Both companies' contracts are set to expire this year.

The MTA fails to offer customers the option of taking taxis, which are significantly less expensive on a per-ride basis, imposing a significant cost on taxpayers.

- Ambulatory Access-A-Ride passengers are allowed to take taxis instead of buses or cars if traveling within the same borough or traveling to or from a City airport. However, in 50 sampled reservations in which a taxi option should have been offered, reservation agents gave riders that option just seven times. Taking taxis could save taxpayers significant money, as the average cost of a bus or car trip is \$67, while the average cost of a car service ride is \$31 and the average cost of a taxi is \$18.

“There's a reason Access-A-Ride passengers call the service 'Stress-A-Ride.' Providers left people stranded, manipulated records, may have been paid for rides that didn't happen, weren't on time and racked up customer complaints yet the MTA willfully ignored this and essentially did nothing. When Access-A-Ride leaves customers in the lurch, they may miss medical appointments or risk being late to work. It's time for the MTA to do its job so that all

New Yorkers who depend on Access-A-Ride can access transit services that are safe, timely and reliable,” Stringer said.

The Comptroller’s audit made 21 recommendations, including that the MTA:

- Ensure that all buses and cars are equipped with GPS technology, and that the GPS is properly functioning and activated when the vehicles are in service.
- Direct providers to stop recording “reconciled” times, except when the GPS system fails to operate properly.
- Use GPS data to evaluate performance, including if buses and cars meet minimum no-show and on time performance standards.
- Take corrective action against service providers that inaccurately report trip and vehicle data, including higher financial penalties, reductions in trip referrals, and termination of contracts.
- Consider seeking new car service providers or alternatives to the existing service model.

“In a City that prides itself on its diversity, tolerance and accessibility, the Access-A-Ride program is an affront to all New Yorkers. The MTA needs to respect the civil rights of all riders, bring this program into the 21st century and get serious about actually fixing what’s wrong. Everyone deserves a fair shot to make it here, but when this program fails to work for everyone, we can’t fulfill that promise,” Stringer said.

To read the audit, please click [here](#).

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