

Transit systems eye Uber, Lyft as way to cost-effectively transport disabled

BOSTON (AP) — Several U.S. transit systems looking to defray costs of providing services for the disabled are weighing partnerships with Uber and Lyft, unsettling some advocates who note that ride-hailing services have themselves faced criticism over accessibility.

Paratransit, better known under names like “The Ride,” “Access-a-Ride” or “Dial-a-Ride,” is required under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. But the costs, which include door-to-door pickup and drop-off, can be steep.

The average cost of operating a single paratransit trip is about \$23 in the United States, compared with less than \$4 for the average trip on bus or light rail. In Boston, the average cost a ride is about \$45, in Washington, about \$50, and in New York, nearly \$57, officials said.

Transit agencies nationwide logged about 223 million paratransit trips at a cost exceeding \$5.1 billion — about 12 percent of total transit operating costs — in 2013, according to the most recent data from the American Public Transportation Association. The price tag is particularly high in major cities, where agencies struggle with regular ser-

vice and maintenance.

“I understand there are budget concerns. But for me this is a quality-of-life issue,” said Sarah Kaplan, 32, who was born with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. She rides a vehicle operated by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority to get to and from her job as internship coordinator with the Boston Center for Independent Living.

“I want the right to leave my house like everyone else,” Kaplan said.

In 2012, the MBTA doubled fares from \$2 to \$4 for The Ride, triggering protests; several people chained their wheelchairs together and blocked traffic. Fares were later rolled back to \$3 for most rides.

The deficit-ridden agency now hopes to cut \$10 million in annual paratransit costs by expanding an existing taxi voucher system and contracting with ride-hailing services.

The plan, not yet finalized, would charge customers \$2 a ride, while the MBTA contributes up to \$13 for the trip. If a trip costs more than \$15, the passenger would pay the difference.

A potential incentive for riders: Uber or Lyft can be summoned immediately



—AP photo by STEVEN SENNE

Sarah Kaplan, of Lynn, Mass., rides an elevator to board a bus outside her place of work, in Boston. Transit systems in major U.S. cities are required by federal law to provide specialized services for disabled passengers

with an app; trips on MBTA vehicles must be scheduled a day ahead.

“My guess is it will be very appealing to people who need to go shorter distances where the fares are under \$15 and they can get an on-demand ride as opposed to booking 24 hours in advance,” said Brian Shortsleeve, the agency’s chief administrator.

But convenience comes with a catch.

With a limited number of wheelchair-accessible vehicles, the ride-hailing services would be available largely to people who can walk. And while a majority of individuals certified to use paratransit fit that bill, advocates worry about creating an unfair and pos-

sibly even illegal two-tiered system for the disabled — one serving people who can walk, the other those whose needs the private vehicles can’t accommodate.

“We don’t want racial segregation, and we also don’t want disability segregation,” said Marilyn Golden, senior policy analyst for the California-based Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund.

Uber and Lyft have both cited efforts to improve offerings for disabled riders. But the services have argued they are technology, not transportation, companies, meaning they are not required to provide accessible vehicles.