



PSTA ICAM Grant Final Report

Narrative

Introduction

Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) appreciates the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) award of this Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) Program Grant that made this project possible. In addition, PSTA appreciates the grant administration assistance provided by the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC).

PSTA utilized this grant to further the goal of on-demand transportation equity for riders with disabilities who require a Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle (WAV) compared with the experience of riders with disabilities who do not require a WAV ride. PSTA had a long history of contracting out to private operators its ADA Paratransit ambulatory and wheelchair trip provision. One of these operators was Wheelchair Transport Services (WTS). While these customers rated the service highly, they still longed for the flexibility to take same-day trips as the public was now beginning to do more broadly using TNCs. So PSTA began offering on-demand first-mile/last-mile service to the public in 2016 called Direct Connect, with WTS as its partner for all riders who needed a WAV. Building on this success, PSTA was ready to try offering its ADA Paratransit customers the option of Mobility On Demand (MOD) service as an alternative to traditional ADA Paratransit. The competitive contract was awarded to Lyft with WTS as their subcontractor. While PSTA's contract was with Lyft, WTS had its own API and PSTA worked directly with its long-time leadership on service parameters. In contrast with Direct Connect operating as a discount program thru a promo code given to each provider, PSTA needed a different approach to offer more robust service. For MOD Since Lyft was not the only trip provider awarded, PSTA needed a separate software to connect to Lyft, WTS, and the other providers in one place – that was awarded to Goin' LLC. Goin' built APIs with the operators, and trained PSTA staff to dispatch the ride requests thru its Call Center. Pre-pandemic MOD was just starting to grow beyond its small initial size, and then ridership dropped off until the pandemic ended, bringing us to the funding period for this grant.

Technology & Cost

PSTA's ICAM grant aimed to enhance the Goin platform to reduce response times for Mobility on Demand (MOD) riders by improving Goin features for riders and drivers, as well as connect to additional vehicles/fleets to increase WAV capacity. The MOD program is an on-demand program open to all PSTA ADA paratransit riders, with Goin being the platform that housed all client information, took all ride bookings, and dispatched trips to all service providers. The MOD program serves all of Pinellas County, with on-demand rides available to customers between 7 am and 7pm Monday through Saturday. During the grant period, PSTA utilized Goin' web-based software to provide MOD service to ambulatory and wheelchair riders with disabilities found eligible for ADA Paratransit service. Key features of Goin' are integrations with multiple providers including Uber and Lyft, local taxi, and wheelchair providers. Goin also provided assistance notes for call takers & drivers, rider & driver apps, an e-wallet, and ride notifications by voice and text. The Goin' software then returned time and GPS-stamped ride data to measure time to pick-up, ride time, and ride distance.

PSTA was providing between 100-200 MOD trips per day pre-pandemic, which works out to be under \$1 a ride software cost. This covers GOIN' software wallet, payment processing, provider integration development and support, rider and driver notifications, servers, and support.

Non-dedicated service providers are contracted for all MOD rides. Only one of these providers transports riders in their wheelchairs, and they are the largest such company in Pinellas County. The majority of their drivers are independent contractors, which is the same for the other providers as well. PSTA has done business with this company for many years, and works directly with the company owners and senior management, as well as with Lyft for whom they are a subcontractor for MOD.

Wheelchair Service Experience

Pinellas County residents who rely upon wheelchair-accessible vehicles for transportation have long bemoaned the lack of any same-day service except for private-pay wheelchair van service with ride costs starting at \$35 (vs. under \$10 for ambulatory TNC/taxi). The Goin' software and PSTA's relationship with the wheelchair provider have enabled MOD to fill this void. PSTA's approach is to allow the customers to decide for each MOD ride where, when, and with whom they want to ride given that day's weather, how they are feeling, and what opportunities arise. Even many wheelchair customers will sometimes choose to ride in their wheeled mobility device for some rides, and to leave it at home for others (such as destinations which offer customers use of company mobility scooters).

Data

Rider surveys were conducted by texting a SurveyMonkey link to all registered WAV customers of MOD. Those who could not complete the survey online conducted the survey over the phone with a live PSTA staff member who entered their anonymous survey responses for them. The pre-survey was conducted in early 2022, and the post-survey around the end of 2022. While

there are no significant differences in rider survey responses between the pre and post surveys, their results and ride data tell the story of increasing demand despite supply challenges (see Operations below for details). The vast majority of riders developed their current level of disability after age 22. Riders took about an equal number of rides on MOD as on Access. About 2/3 of riders requested their ride > 30 minutes in advance, which is at least double that of ambulatory riders. This is not surprising since the overwhelming majority of rides the wheelchair provider performs for all its clients are reserved in advance, so their business model is built around this, not on-demand rides like a TNC. Similarly, about half of rides are reported to take > 30 minutes to arrive. Despite these challenges, only 5% of riders said they are dissatisfied with the service. Perhaps this is why the number of wheelchair MOD rides between the first and fourth quarter of the grant period increased by 14% to 4,644.

Operations

During this post-COVID recovery year, the county's largest wheelchair transport company had difficulty maintaining enough drivers to meet trip demand from PSTA and their other customers. They had insufficient available driver pool to meet peak demand during the first few days of each calendar month, and often at peak times of day as well, causing a longer response time during these periods. PSTA met weekly with the local company and with Lyft as they managed our contract. These efforts resulted in improved rider communications but could not ameliorate this variability. So PSTA launched its own in-house pilot wheelchair service under MOD using Goin'. The result is that the cost for PSTA to operate as an in-house wheelchair provider is greater than the contractor, and it was challenging to keep the three dedicated vehicles productive, but did demonstrate that a larger fleet, perhaps sharing rides with other services, could help meet peak demand and reduce wait times on those occasions.

Access and Mobility Grants Performance Measures

Major Activities Output Measures (this can include appropriate procurements, cooperative agreements, policies and procedures, personnel recruitment, calls received, rides provided)

Activity Objective	Numerical Target	Results/Outcome
a. Increase in the Average Trips per Month, measured quarterly	10%	10% Met
b. 80% of Respondents Report a 10% Improvement in Satisfaction with the Transportation Program	80%	0% Net Change so Not Met

c. Reduction in Average Duration Between Trip Request and Pick-Up for Wheelchair/Scooter Users	60% (37 min to 15)	0% Net Unchanged so Not Met
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NOTE: Originally there was an Objective related to improved health outcomes, but measuring outcomes became too difficult so NADTC agreed to not measure it.

Access and Mobility Grants Rider Survey Results

Pre and Post rider surveys were conducted using a Survey Monkey link distributed via text message. PSTA staff were also able to complete surveys for participants who could not access the Survey Monkey link. All surveys were anonymous with questions agreed upon by PSTA's Grant Project Manager. 157 riders completed the pre-survey, and 276 riders completed the post-survey.

Q1 For PSTA Access (prescheduled DART) services – How often do you use the service?

RESPONSE	% Pre-Survey	% Post-Survey	Difference
Never	14	12	-2
1-3/month	49	48	-1
1-3/week	28	30	+2
1-2/day	6	6	0
>2/day	3	4	+1

Q2 For PSTA Mobility on Demand ((MOD) no reservation) services – How often do you use the service?

RESPONSE	% Pre-Survey	% Post-Survey	Difference
None	12	10	-2
1-3/month	55	56	+1
1-3/week	23	25	+2
1-2/day	7	6	-1
>2/day	3	3	0

Q3 About how far in advance from your desired pickup time do you request a wheelchair ride on the PSTA Mobility on Demand (MOD) service?

RESPONSE	% Pre-Survey	% Post-Survey	Difference
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1-2 hours prior	39	40	+1
30 mins.- 1 hour prior	30	27	-3
15-30 mins. prior	15	15	0
0-15 mins. prior	8	9	+1
Didn't use MOD	8	9	+1

Q4 On average, about how long from when you request an MOD wheelchair ride does the vehicle arrive?

RESPONSE	% Pre-Survey	% Post-Survey	Difference
Within 15 minutes	7	8	+1
15-30 minutes	20	20	0
30-60 minutes	33	32	-1
>1 hour	15	16	+1
Varies	18	17	-1
Didn't Use MOD	6	7	+1

Q5 On a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is excellent and 1 is very poor, please rate your level of satisfaction with the PSTA MOD wheelchair service

RESPONSE	% Pre-Survey	% Post-Survey	Difference
Not Satisfied	4	5	+1
Somewhat Satisfied	16	16	0
Satisfied Half the time	15	14	-1
Mostly Satisfied	37	38	+1
Very Satisfied	28	27	-1

Q6 At what age did you get the condition that makes you eligible for this service?

RESPONSE	% Pre-Survey	% Post-Survey	Difference
From Birth	7	7	0
Before age 22	4	4	0
After age 22	76	77	+1
Mild before age 22, severe after age 22	13	12	-1

Conclusions & Lessons Learned

The grant period coinciding with the challenges of pandemic recovery counteracted efforts to improve most outcomes. This is due largely to the WAV provider's difficulty in:

- acquiring and maintaining a sufficient number of drivers
- reducing their administrative staff
- less time to call customers with updated ETA
- inconsistent response to PSTA requests for updated ETA information.

In spite of this challenge causing long wait times during peak hours and days, MOD WAV ridership increased along with ambulatory ridership. The Goin' software integration increased in performance and reliability.

Ultimately, we must conclude that as the ADA teaches us that providing equity does not necessarily mean doing things the same way for everyone, not all measures of equity may be of equal value to WAV customers. For example, without this service, our WAV customers must either make an advance day reservation for ADA paratransit, or pay a very high fare for a same-day wheelchair ride (typically at least 3x the cost of a TNC ride). Thus, fare equity and same-day service are valued much more than ETA disparity. WAV riders have repeatedly told us they don't mind waiting if they know accurate ETA so they can stay comfortable until pick-up.

Another lesson learned is that if NDSP is to be primarily used for WAV on-demand, the provider needs to commit to an SOP for providing on-demand ride request with equal priority to the operator's advance ride requests. Timely and accurate ETA's must be provided into the API so that WAV MOD riders' ride notifications are of equal value as those of non-WAV MOD riders. Utilizing dedicated resources reduces this problem but at a higher cost to the agency and operator until WAV MOD volume makes it efficient.