



EXPANDING ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION
THROUGH INNOVATIVE ALTERNATIVES

MetroWest Regional Transit Authority

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Executive Summary

Under a Mobility for All Grant, MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) in Framingham, MA set out to explore innovative ways to provide same day transportation options to its senior and disabled populations. A key focus of this program was to enhance and further develop the Catch Connect microtransit program, a same day on demand curb to curb and door to door transportation service. Customers were provided both a mobile app and a phone number to book trips and were able to request trips when ready to go on the same day, as opposed to scheduling in advance. While the Mobility for All grant focused on funding the technology and infrastructure required for the program, MWRTA matched the grant with operating funds for service. Booking through the Catch Connect service provides flexibility for our customers to go on multiple trips (including but not limited to medical, pharmacy, and shopping) as opposed to booking trips individually. Overall, Catch Connect was extremely well received by our customers, providing many more trips than initially anticipated. In addition, feedback received by our customers has helped to improve the platform over time. Due to its success, the microtransit has continued to expand in both hours and areas throughout our service region.

Introduction

The MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) received \$300,000 to explore a new accessibility model with complementary technology for its demand response services, expanding transportation options for seniors and disadvantaged populations in the community. MWRTA was able to use the funds provided to improve its microtransit platform and provide options to its Dial-A-Ride community for same day reservations to medical trips and trips that customers would otherwise be ineligible for. During the grant program, MWRTA reached out to the community to make them aware of this new service and received feedback about improvements that could be made to help streamline the booking process. MWRTA also improved over-the-phone processes to ensure that customers could also book trips without the use of a smartphone.

Background

The MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) is a public transportation agency comprised of 16 member communities in the MetroWest Region of Massachusetts. Founded in 2007, MWRTA provides fixed route services to its communities along with complementary ADA paratransit services and above and beyond Dial-A-Ride services. MWRTA also maintains close relationships with the Council on Aging agencies within its service area, along with opportunity councils and community advocate groups, to provide as many transportation options as possible to those who need them. MWRTA maintains a central passenger facility in Framingham, Massachusetts that acts as both a central transfer point for fixed route services along with a maintenance and administrative facility. There, the MWRTA has focused on staying at the forefront of technological advances in the industry. MWRTA has built an expansive solar array onsite to assist with energy costs and has an onsite CNG fueling facility. Current initiatives focus on improving efficiency of the vehicle fleet through emerging low and no emissions technologies, along with a comprehensive review of fixed route services to improve transportation options in the region. As a core component of this review, microtransit is being reviewed as an option to provide services to more rural communities or to augment fixed route services. Microtransit is also being used to provide real world data on transit demand in an area, which this grant has focused on doing.

Project Description

Under this project, MWRTA worked to expand transportation options for its senior and disadvantaged populations in the MetroWest region, focusing on delivering same day on demand trips to its customers. This service provided additional options to customers that would otherwise not be available, allowing customers to book on the same day when needed. This project looked at the benefits of expanding microtransit services to ADA communities to allow for trips that would otherwise be ineligible, including same day reservations and Sunday trips. In addition, focus was put on ensuring that transportation options were available to provide medical trips within the service area. Usage of these trip types were tracked as main performance measures for the grant to determine the effectiveness of the service, both in determining how many trips would be generated from these new options available along with how much additional access was being provided to medical facilities and more flexible trip options than those that were traditionally available.

As part of the program, MWRTA also upgraded and provided continuing improvements to its microtransit platform, the Catch Connect system. This platform allowed for customers to book trips via their smartphone and receive real time vehicle location updates as their trip approached. Feedback on the app's effectiveness was measured by its adoption rate, along with ratings received in the respective App Store and Google Play store, along with feedback received directly in the app from an in-app feedback mechanism. App ratings were averaged and tracked. As feedback was collected, app improvements were made to address concerns and to improve the rider experience.

Key Partnerships

Throughout the project, outreach to the community was an important component to ensure that customers were aware of the new services available. MWRTA outreached to key stakeholders in the disability community, including the Framingham Disability Commission along with the MetroWest Center for Independent Living. MWRTA also engaged its existing customers using Dial-A-Ride and ADA complementary paratransit services by announcing via phone message service

expansions and additional options as they became available. MWRTA participated in multiple community awareness fairs, including municipal outreach days and community fairs to ensure that potential customers were aware of new services available.

Implementation

To implement the service, MWRTA began by expanding its Catch Connect microtransit service to the towns of Natick and Framingham on Saturdays and Sundays. Prior to this service, customers were provided limited ADA paratransit services on Saturdays. For most customers, Sunday was also not a travel option. For those customers who qualified, trips must have been booked at least 24 hours in advance. This service aimed to expand service availability to the entire general public population of Natick and Framingham, therefore not requiring eligibility. While making the service more accessible, focus would also be placed on making sure that the existing senior and disabled community were aware of these new options by marketing heavily to that user base. Marketing materials were provided in different media and also in various languages to ensure as much

visibility as possible was provided. Not knowing how popular the service would be, the service began under a limited test group on Saturday and Sunday to both provide service feedback on the parameters and technology and to ensure that systems were not initially overwhelmed with use. As the program was initially launched, additional considerations needed to be



made to ensure proper social distancing policies were being met. As time progressed, services were opened more readily until service became available to the public. This service became generally available for the service hours of 8:00 AM – 6:00 PM on Saturday and Sunday. Once widely

available, outreach efforts were conducted to ensure customers were made aware of the service. Information was provided to all community stakeholder groups for distribution and MWRTA's director of Travel Training and Outreach spearheaded training and awareness throughout the community. On the inbound call line for traditional ADA and Dial-A-Ride services, messages were added to inform customers about the new service options encouraging them to ask their call taker for more information. In addition to services provided on the weekend, MWRTA also encouraged medical and necessity trips for target populations in Wellesley during the week. Travel to key medical and pharmacy locations was supported and encouraged. These trips, instead of requiring prebooking and meeting requirements, were available during the targeted service hours of 6:45 am - 6:45 pm. Same day trip reservation attempts made through the MWRTA Call Center that were within the Catch Connect service area were accepted under that program as opposed to only allowed in limited conditions.

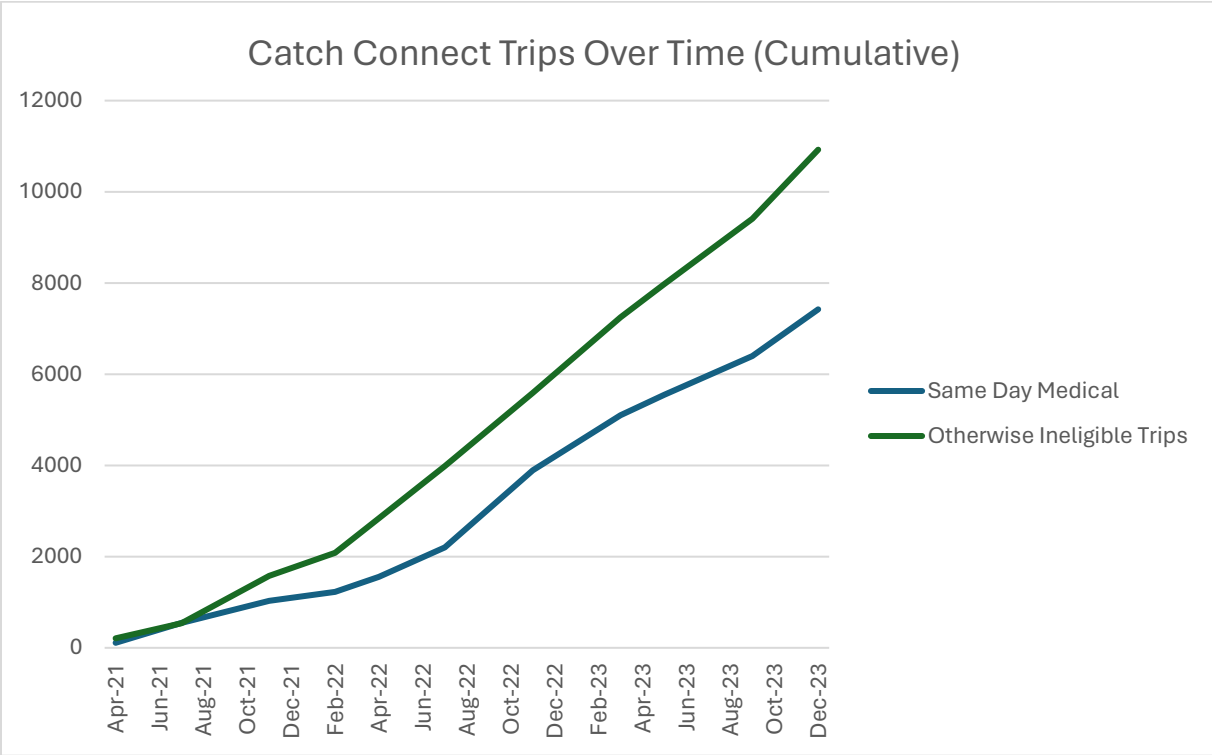
Mobile app usage was encouraged to book trips and outreach and training was provided to any customer who wished to receive it, along with training at senior centers and other community outreach events. Here, feedback was also sought to provide application improvements, including general stability improvements along with additional features. Feedback continues to be collected and the application continues to be improved even beyond this program. In addition to general app improvements, general app reliability has continued to be monitored, ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place. An innovative feature of our app that allows for immediate feedback and communication with our clients includes a 'real-time chat' feature. In addition to being able to leave traditional feedback via a rating and comment box, customers can also chat with our dispatchers in real time through the app. This helps with time sensitive questions, such as questions regarding a booked trip, while also improving our ability to have a two-way conversation with customers regarding their feedback. This real-time chat also provides a hearing impaired customer a vital way to communicate with dispatchers independently. For customers who do not wish to use the mobile app, it was important that a phone number also be provided to allow customers to book over the phone. Not knowing app adoption rates, MWRTA wanted to make sure that it was not excluding any customers from taking the new service due to any reason related to not using the app.



Performance Measures

The new Catch Connect services were extremely popular, and adoption rates were much higher than anticipated. In addition to the capital fund provided through this grant program, funding for operating the service was more readily available than anticipated. With these additional operating grant funds, the MWRTA was able to provide more service than was initially imagined under this grant. As shown in the performance measure table below, MWRTA greatly exceeded the initial targets set for both same day medical trips and trips provided to otherwise ineligible individuals. Throughout this period, MWRTA also maintained its target rating of 3.5 / 5 stars on the general application feedback provided.

	Performance Measure	Target	Actual During Grant	Percent of Target to Date
1	Rides Provided- Trips booked for same day medical	2000	7423	371%
2	Trips provided to otherwise ineligible individuals	1000	10924	1092.4%
3	Smartphone App- Average rating through in app feedback	3.5/5	3.65	Met Threshold



Moving Forward/Sustainability

MWRTA is pleased to report that the agency is very encouraged by the results of this project and has continued to expand microtransit services to other communities as funding becomes available and the community is identified as being a good fit for microtransit. Service has continued to expand in Framingham and Natick to now include weekday night service as well. In addition to allowing much-needed flexibility for customers for extended night periods, this service also helps to inform MWRTA where fixed route service may be the most appropriate for further expansion. Moving forward, Catch Connect service is being absorbed into the general agency budget and additional grants for pilot projects are being applied for where available. MWRTA anticipates being able to maintain Framingham and Natick weekend service for the foreseeable future and will continue to market and improve the platforms to its customers.

Lessons Learned

- Application Feedback

During the development of our microtransit application, one critical lesson we learned was the nature of user feedback. Users are more likely to provide feedback when it involves critique or criticism rather than praise. Although we were able to maintain our rating goals throughout the project, we needed to view any harsh criticisms received in a light to help us improve. In addition, this caused us to see the importance of proactively seeking out positive feedback to gain a balanced understanding of user satisfaction. To do this, customer information stickers were placed in all vehicles encouraging customers to rate the app and provide feedback. Including this encouragement did provide a noticeable improvement to the feedback provided. Incorporating this feedback has been pivotal in fine-tuning our app's functionality, enhancing user experience, and fostering a more engaged user community.

- Application Usage

Despite the convenience of the application, the ability for the customer to manage all aspects of the trip on their phone, and the real time updates about the trip provided throughout the life of the trip, we observed that application adoption plateaued at around 50-60% of our user base targeted for this improvement. Despite encouragement to use the app and readily available training resources, some customers preferred traditional communication means, choosing to call into both book their trips and to seek updates regarding their trips. This behavior emphasized the need for a call-in option for customers to ensure that all customers are able to access the service. Generally, customers who adopted the app kept using the app, while customers who would call in did not try to use the app and were not interested at this time to do so. This feedback at least provided insight that it was not any type of functionality deficiencies in the app causing customers to call in. This additional unexpected demand for telephone support did result in additional resources than initially considered required for the call in support of the service. The value of personal and direct communication for some customers outweighed the advantages that the application provided. Also, for some, calling a number to book a trip is deemed easier and more accessible than using an app regardless of feature set or accessibility considerations made in the app.

-Vehicle Types for Service

As our microtransit service gained popularity, we encountered an unforeseen challenge: the initial fleet of 5 passenger transit vans could not efficiently accommodate the increasing ridership demands. This surge in user engagement highlighted the necessity for larger vehicle types that could transport more passengers per trip, leading us to introduce 8 and 12-passenger fully accessible vans into our fleet. These vehicles also proved to be easier for customers to get in and out of than the vans with sliding doors and a higher entry step. As the service continued, we have found that a blend of all three vehicle types has been the most optimal fleet configuration, allowing for flexibility for more passengers with the 12-passenger vehicle while maintaining more efficiency with the smaller 5-passenger van, now with some vehicles being fully electric.

Impacts of COVID-19

COVID-19 had an impact on the implementation of this grant program. The initial delivery of service was delayed with an approved extension to allow for improvement in conditions, as this project was scheduled to begin at the height of the pandemic. Once service began, the rollout of services to the general public occurred at a slower pace than what was originally envisioned. This was to ensure that proper social distancing and capacity protocols were followed on this service. As the service transported some of the most vulnerable community members, it was critical that MWRTA do all that it could to protect its customers and staff. Long term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic included an incredibly difficult driver availability environment, where there were significant worker shortages experienced by our operator as the public emerged from the pandemic. This workforce shortage was identified as one of the primary consistent hurdles in the program and MWRTA's project oversight resources provided excellent support in talking through these hurdles and providing MWRTA available resources. Workforce shortages did dictate some of the expansion timelines, restricting the agencies' ability to expand service even with observed demand and reducing the overall capacity of the system. Throughout the program, MWRTA worked closely with its operator to ensure that services were rolled out in a responsible manner that took shortages into account. As a result, once service began, there were no major interruptions or cancellations of service due to driver availability. In addition, reaching out to key community stakeholders as originally envisioned in the grant application presented significant challenges. With the pandemic, the priorities of organizations shifted, and addressing the pandemic became the top priority. Restrictions and limitations on physical gatherings and the abrupt change to virtual communications meant a reevaluation of our outreach strategies. Traditional outreach activities, such as in-person training and classroom workshops, were not viable during the period. In addition, the emergence of telehealth meant that travel patterns to medical centers changed. Despite these challenges, new opportunities were presented. MWRTA created an informational video on how to use services. As organizations become more comfortable and accepting of virtual platforms, outreach activities that would normally require in-person instruction could sometimes be done virtually, allowing for more flexibility for travel trainers and customers alike.