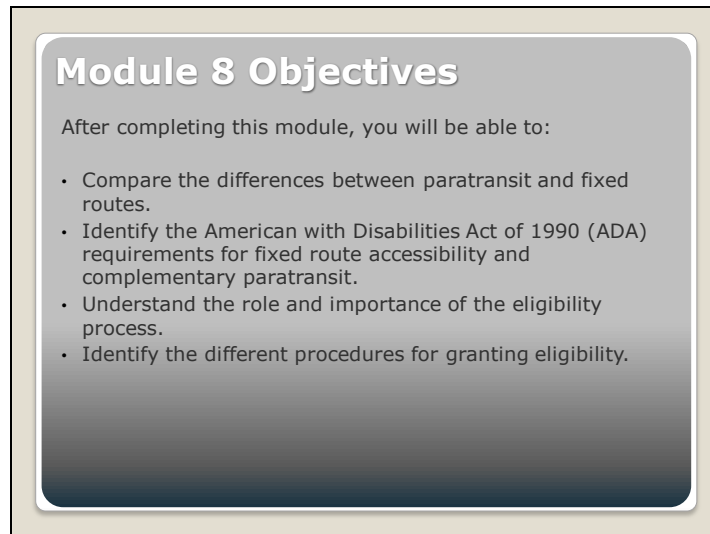


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Module 8

Paratransit Operations



Learning Objectives

This module provides you with a basic understanding of paratransit operations. After completing this module, you will be able to:

- Compare the differences between paratransit and fixed routes,
- Identify the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requirements for fixed route accessibility and complementary paratransit,
- Understand the role and importance of the eligibility process, and
- Identify the different procedures for granting eligibility.

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Differences between Paratransit and Fixed Route

Let's look at what makes paratransit different from fixed route. To remind yourself of the definition of fixed route:

Fixed-Route Service – Service that operates according to fixed schedules and routes (for DART that service is bus, light rail, commuter rail, and streetcar).

Contrasted with Paratransit Service, a quick definition:

Paratransit Service – Any transit service required by the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), generally characterized by pre-arranged curb-to-curb service provided by accessible vehicles.

However, let's explore this more fully.

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Differences between Paratransit and Fixed Route (cont.)

First of all, paratransit service is provided to accommodate passengers whose disabilities don't allow them to use normal fixed route (bus/rail) services, in accordance with the ADA. Also, paratransit service is provided "on demand", which means that this service operates more like a taxi service (shared ride concept) than a bus route. Because of this basic difference, it is not unusual for public transit agencies to contract some or all of this service out to local vendors.

Paratransit service is expensive compared to fixed route service - about 10 times as expensive! (The average cost per paratransit trip is about \$30 (2018 dollars), while bus service is closer to \$3 per trip.) For this reason, it is in the best interest of the public transit agency to have a comprehensive eligibility determination process to ensure only ADA eligible riders are using paratransit services, and ensure that fixed route service meets or exceeds ADA requirements.

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ADA Requirements

We are now going to go through the ADA requirements for both fixed routes and complementary paratransit.

Fixed Route Accessibility

The following are the major ADA requirements for fixed route accessibility:

- Accessible vehicles and facilities
- Lift and securement maintenance and use
- Announcement of stops
- Identifying vehicles and/or passengers
- Priority seating
- Permitting riders to board and disembark
- Employee training to proficiency
- Access to communication and information
- Accommodating life systems and mobility aids
- No additional charges
- Operator assistance

Complementary Paratransit

The ADA requires that paratransit service be comparable to fixed route service with respect to each of the following criteria:

- Service area
- Fares
- Days and hours of service
- Response time
- Trip purpose
- Capacity constraints

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ADA Complementary Transit

Now we will take a closer look at ADA Complementary Transit. The ADA requires that public transit agencies provide services that are accessible to riders with disabilities. In order to comply with ADA, the transit agency has three basic areas of responsibility. They are:

- Meeting ADA requirements for fixed route accessibility,
- Meeting ADA requirements for complementary paratransit service, and
- Meeting ADA requirements for determining which riders are eligible for paratransit service.

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Fixed Route Accessibility

The ADA preference is to have riders with disabilities integrated into the regular fixed route service instead of segregated into paratransit service. For this reason, there are a number of basic requirements placed on the regular fixed route service to accommodate riders with disabilities (e.g., accessible vehicles, priority seating, etc.)

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Complementary Paratransit Service

Despite the preference for integration, ADA recognizes that not all riders with disabilities will be able to use the fixed route service. The transit agency is required to provide paratransit service for such riders who are eligible for paratransit on demand. The ADA places several requirements on paratransit so that it will provide a level of service comparable to fixed route offerings (e.g., service area, days and hours of service, etc.)

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Determining which Riders are Eligible for Paratransit Service

Factors to be Considered

The ADA outlines what factors must be taken into consideration when determining eligibility for paratransit service for any given trip. They are:

- The accessibility of the fixed route system (e.g., does the bus have a wheelchair lift?)
- Architectural barriers and environmental conditions that affect accessibility (e.g., could someone get to the bus stop in a wheelchair after a heavy snow?)
- The functional, cognitive, visual limitations caused by the individual's disability (e.g., can the person get up and down hills?)

Steps in Determining Eligibility

Determining eligibility for paratransit is not as simple as getting a note from a doctor. Eligibility can be determined on a trip by trip, seasonal, or feeder service on a "conditional" basis, taking into consideration the unique circumstances of a specific trip and how they relate to a specific passenger's disabilities. Other passengers will be granted "unconditional" eligibility if they are not able to use fixed route services under any conditions.

There are two steps in determining eligibility.

1. The first is to gather information about the three key factors mentioned in the first section of this module,
2. The second is to make a judgment call based on the facts and apply certain standards. Let's learn more about these two steps.

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Eligibility

Step 1 – Gather Information

Evaluation of the Accessibility of the Fixed Route System

The whole “system” should be taken into consideration – getting to and from the stop, getting on and off the vehicle, and navigating. Remember “accessibility” means different things to different riders, depending on the disability (e.g., a person that is blind might be able to climb a high step, but they cannot read a bus schedule that is not in Braille.).

Architectural Barriers and Environmental Conditions

While these are factors that are usually not under the control of the transit agency, they can have major impact on whether a passenger can access fixed route service (e.g., could someone get to the bus stop in a wheelchair after a heavy snow?).

Functional, Cognitive, and Visual Limitations

The emphasis here is on what functions an individual can perform, not the type of medical disability they have. For example, two riders with the same medical condition may both be in wheelchairs. However, one rider may be capable of going up and down hills unassisted and the other may not – resulting in different eligibility.

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Eligibility

Step 2 – Make a Judgment Call Based on the Facts and Apply Certain Standards

Is the rider “prevented” from using fixed route service? Just because a rider may be inconvenienced or made uncomfortable by a trip does not mean they are eligible for paratransit – they must be prevented from making the trip because of the disability.

What would a “reasonable person” do? If the inconvenience or discomfort goes beyond what a reasonable person would endure to make the trip, then the passenger may be eligible for paratransit.

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Knowledge Check

Let's check your knowledge of eligibility. In the following scenarios, you need to determine if the person in the scenario is eligible or not eligible.

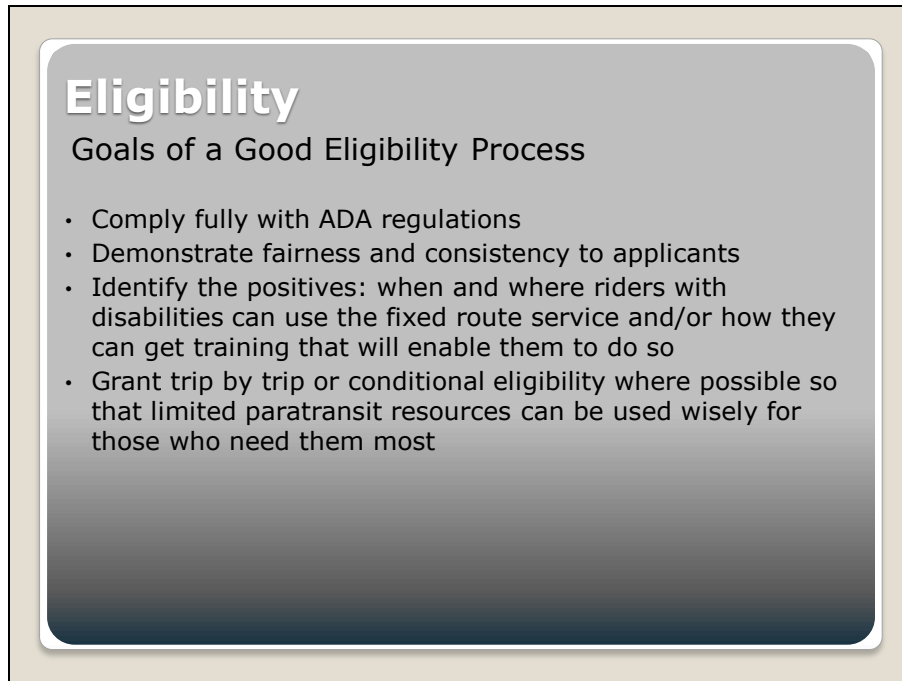
1. A woman with a mobility impairment, who uses a walker, has taken the bus to her doctor's office. The five-block walk to the bus stop takes her more than half an hour. She has just qualified for ADA paratransit and seeks eligibility for the trip to her doctor's office.
2. A woman with a mild cognitive disability has traveled with her parents on the bus since she was a child. However, she cannot travel alone without becoming lost even when using a paratransit service. Her parents are seeking paratransit eligibility for the woman and an attendant.
3. During the long winters, snow piles up on the curbsides of Pittsburgh streets. This often prevents the operation of the lift that a man needs to use the bus. He therefore requests "seasonal" eligibility permitting all trips during the winter to be made on paratransit.

Answers:

1. ELIGIBLE.
2. NOT ELIGIBLE
3. ELIGIBLE

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Paratransit Operations



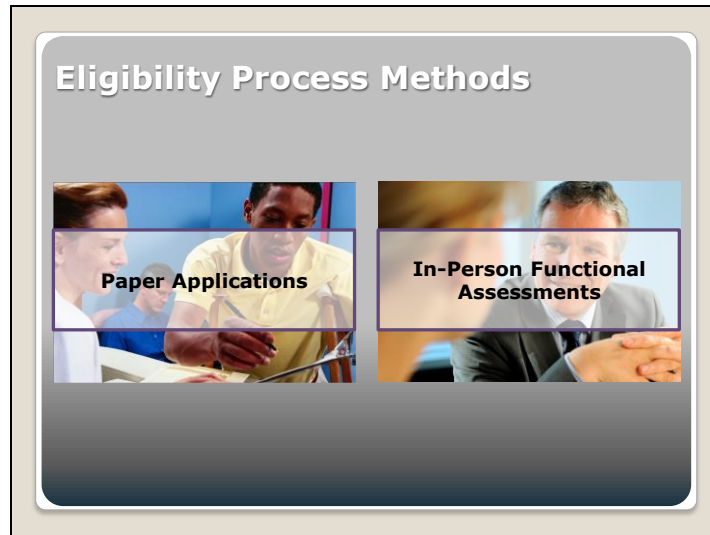
Now that you know something about ADA eligibility requirements, could you design a fair and consistent process for granting paratransit eligibility in your transit system? Probably not - it's a difficult challenge even for experts! The different procedures for granting eligibility can impact the cost and quality of your paratransit service. First, let's consider what some of the goals of a good eligibility process might be:

- Comply fully with ADA regulations.
- Demonstrate fairness and consistency to applicants.
- Identify the positives: when and where riders with disabilities can use the fixed route service and/or how they can get training that will enable them to do so.
- Grant trip by trip or conditional eligibility where possible so that limited paratransit resources can be used wisely for those who need them most.

A good eligibility process designed to meet these goals can make a big impact on your paratransit service. How big? It can eliminate at least **one third** of total paratransit trips by moving ineligible riders onto fixed route service! Let's learn how.

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Methods to Process and Determine Eligibility

Let's take a look at two methods that can be used to process and determine eligibility: paper applications and in-person functional assessments.

Paper Applications

Most transit agencies employ a very simple process for granting paratransit eligibility. The typical process requires only a paper application signed off by a health care professional. (For example, a woman with a medical condition that requires the use of a walker could mail in an application signed by her physician and receive unconditional eligibility for paratransit service.) There are typically no interviews conducted and no efforts made to evaluate how her specific condition impairs her ability to access specific fixed route services.

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Paper Applications (cont.)

Over 95% of all applicants are granted unconditional eligibility and only 1% to 2% are ever denied. Conditional eligibility is rarely used. (For example, the woman who uses a walker might only be prevented from access to fixed route service by steep hills. Since there is no process in place to determine the specific terrain conditions under which she would be eligible, she must be granted unconditional eligibility.)

In practice, virtually anyone with any disability might become eligible to use paratransit service for any trip in the system at any time. While this is greatly convenient for many people, it puts the transit agency in the position of providing expensive paratransit service for people who don't really qualify for it under ADA regulations. Those are precious dollars that could be used to provide better service for the people who truly need it the most.

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Paratransit Operations

In-person Functional Assessments

Process for in-person functional assessments

Many transit agencies in the United States have begun using some form of in-person functional assessments to determine paratransit eligibility. How does it work? Trained interviewers meet with the applicants and get enough information about their abilities to determine under what conditions the applicants would or would not be able to access the fixed route system.

Typical outcome of using an in-person functional assessment process

- About 25 to 30% of applicants "self-select" out and don't pursue eligibility.
- About 10 to 15% of applicants are denied eligibility.
- About 25% of those accepted are granted conditional eligibility vs. 75% granted unconditional eligibility.
- Clearly, significant savings result when ADA eligibility requirements are consistently enforced by the interview process.

Other benefits

- It applies more consistent and objective standards for eligibility.
- It assesses transit-specific functional abilities, not medical conditions.
- It identifies not only what the applicant can't do, but also what they are able to do and what they might be trained to do to gain more access to transit services in their community.
- It provides the transit agency with valuable information about how to make their fixed route services more accessible.

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Knowledge Check

Let's check your knowledge. Using what you've learned, compare how the two eligibility processes would impact a mid-sized transit agency that has distributed 2,000 applications for paratransit eligibility. An average unconditional paratransit rider takes 50 trips per year, while a conditional rider takes 30 trips per year. Note that each paratransit trip costs about \$30 **more** than a bus trip.

Use this table as a guide:

	Paper Applications	In-person Assessments
Applications completed	95% or 1900	75% or 1500
Applications accepted	98% or 1865	90% or 1350
Unconditionally eligible	100% or 1865	75% or 1012
Conditionally eligible	0%	25% or 338
Annual rides provided	$1865 \times 50 = 93,250$	$(1012 \times 50) + (338 \times 30) = 60,740$
Annual cost	$93,250 \times \$30 = \$2,797,500$	$60,740 \times \$30 = \$1,822,200$

As \$30 per trip, how much money could be saved by the in-person assessment process?

ANSWER: \$975,300

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Here are some questions for thought...

- Would the in-person process seem more equitable to the community and to the applicants than the paper application process? What factors might influence their perception of fairness (or unfairness)?
 - The level of expertise and training of the transit employees who conduct the assessment interviews. If contracted out, the credibility of the organization conducting the assessment interviews.
 - The overall track record of fixed route service for complying with ADA accessibility requirements.
 - The degree to which the transit agency gathers political support before making any changes to the eligibility process.
 - How well the transit agency communicates the benefits of any changes in the eligibility process to the local disabled community.
 - The media reaction to high-profile cases of denied eligibility.
- Why would this perception of fairness be important to the transit agency?
 - Controversial eligibility cases could result in expensive lawsuits or bad publicity.
 - The public would be very sympathetic to the plight of older adults and passengers with disabilities who are denied eligibility.
 - The transit agency relies on public trust and funding for its continued existence.

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Quiz

Now that you have learned about paratransit operations, let's assess your knowledge.

True or false?

1. Transit buses are not required to be specially equipped to handle riders with any and all types of disabilities.
2. Paratransit vans are required to charge much higher fares because they are more expensive to operate.
3. Paratransit is not required to run at night or weekends.
4. Weather can affect paratransit eligibility for some riders.
5. If a rider with mental disabilities can step on and off a bus, the rider will not qualify for paratransit service.
6. A rider with a disability might be eligible for paratransit service for some trips and not others.
7. Paratransit service is offered so that rush hour commuters do not have to be inconvenienced by wheelchairs on the regular buses.
8. Paratransit eligibility is a very clear-cut legal standard that leaves no room for judgment calls.
9. A medical doctor is always the best judge of whether a rider should be eligible for paratransit.
10. An in-person functional assessment typically results in a lower percentage of applications accepted for paratransit service eligibility.

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Quiz (cont.)

Select all that apply.

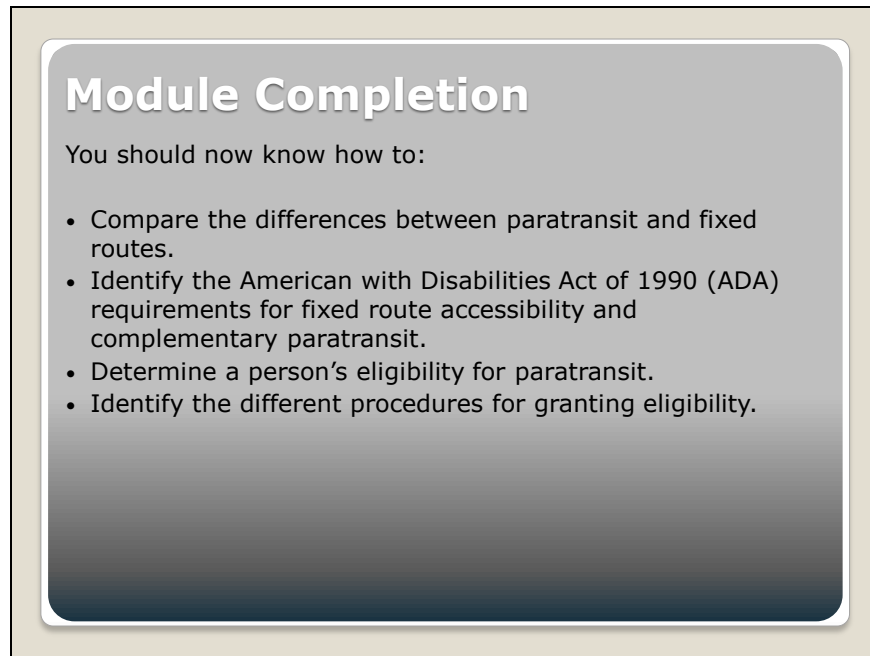
11. A man with limited vision has applied for paratransit eligibility on your bus system. Which items of information would be relevant to his eligibility.
- a. How far can he see.
 - b. His age.
 - c. Which bus route he wishes to take.
 - d. The hilliness of the terrain near his home.
 - e. Whether he has a guide dog.
 - f. The accessibility of the crosswalks at his destination bus stop.
 - g. The accessibility of the buildings at his destination.
 - h. Whether or not the stops are announced by the bus driver.

Answers:

- 1. F
- 2. F
- 3. F
- 4. T
- 5. F
- 6. F
- 7. T
- 8. F
- 9. F
- 10. T
- 11. a, c, e, & f

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Paratransit Operations



Congratulations! You have completed the **Paratransit Operations** module. You should now know how to:

- Compare the differences between paratransit and fixed routes,
- Identify the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requirements for fixed route accessibility and complementary paratransit,
- Determine a person's eligibility for paratransit, and
- Identify the different procedures for granting eligibility.

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Paratransit Operations Glossary

Accessible

As defined by FTA, a site, building, facility, or portion thereof that complies with defined standards and that can be approached, entered, and used by persons with disabilities.

Accessible Service

A term used to describe service that is accessible to non-ambulatory riders with disabilities. This includes fixed-route bus service with wheelchair lifts or paratransit service with wheelchair lift-equipped vehicles.

ADA Paratransit Service

Non-fixed-route paratransit service utilizing vans and small buses to provide pre-arranged trips to and from specific locations within the service area to certified participants in the program. Federal regulations restrict fares to no more than double the base fare of fixed route service.

Ambulatory Disabled

A person with a disability that does not require the use of a wheelchair. This would describe individuals who use a mobility aid other than a wheelchair or have a visual or hearing impairment.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

This Act gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities that are like those provided to individuals based on race, sex, national origin, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, transportation, State and local government services, and telecommunications. See “Half Fare” below.

Certified Riders

Passengers who have been deemed eligible for Paratransit services because their disability inhibits them from functionally accessing fixed route services. Eligibility is determined in accordance with the criteria outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

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Demand Responsive

Paratransit passengers call to request service; therefore, that service is provided on demand, and is considered to be demand responsive, rather than scheduled service. In addition, transit agencies may provide some non-traditional demand responsive service that may not be Paratransit related.

Fixed-Route Service

Service that operates according to fixed schedules and routes (for DART that service is bus, light rail, commuter rail, and streetcar).

FTA (Federal Transit Administration)

The FTA is the federal agency that helps cities and communities provide mobility to their citizens. Through its grant programs, FTA provides financial and planning assistance to help plan, build, and operate bus, rail, and paratransit systems.

Half Fare

Federal Transit Administration (FTA) regulations require “For fixed route service supported with Section 5307 assistance, fares charged elderly persons, persons with disabilities or an individual presenting a Medicare card during off peak hours will not be more than half the peak hour fare.

Off-Peak

Non-rush hour time periods.

Paratransit Service

Any transit service required by the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), generally characterized by pre-arranged curb-to-curb service provided by accessible vehicles.

Passenger Canceled Trips Ratio

Measures the percentage of times that Paratransit users schedule a trip, then cancel the trip. Total scheduled trips include actual trips made, cancellations, and no-shows. Calculation = [# of Canceled Trips / Total # of Scheduled Trips].

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Passenger No-Show Ratio

Quality measurement for Paratransit service that measures the number of times a Paratransit user makes a reservation and does not show-up for the ride. This measurement is different from a cancellation. The transit agency's objective is to reduce this number so that other trips can be scheduled in that timeframe. Users can lose the ability to access the Paratransit system if they have an excessive number of no-shows. Calculation = $[\# \text{ of No Shows} / \text{Total } \# \text{ of Scheduled Trips}]$

Percentage of Trips Completed

Quality measurement for Paratransit service that measures the number of times DART completes a scheduled passenger pick-up. Management's objective is to increase this ratio. Calculation = $[(\# \text{ of Actual Trips} - \# \text{ of Trips Missed}) / \# \text{ of Actual Trips}]$

Zero Denials

A Federal mandate that in effect states that a provider cannot systematically deny Paratransit trips on an on-going basis.