

Operating Volunteer Driver Programs in a Pandemic

Volunteer drivers are a critical piece of the transportation systems around the country. Many volunteer drivers are now on the front lines and are deemed “essential” for the services they provide.

We know local volunteer programs are facing conditions that are changing every day. Below are issues to consider as you review your program and services for the safety of your volunteers and passengers. As a reminder: check with your local health department for the latest information and abide by their recommendations and all local, state and federal declarations.

- Screen and prioritize rides for urgency and life-sustaining purposes.
- Reduce frequency of non-emergent, but essential trips like grocery shopping.
- Provide sanitation supplies and masks and directions as needed and available. This may depend on what type of trips they are taking.
- Have drivers sanitize vehicles before and after rides. Provide supplies and instructions on correct sanitation and hygiene practices.
- Dedicate one driver to one person if possible, especially for those needing dialysis. Ensure these drivers do not take other rides to reduce the potential of contamination.
- Ensure tracking of rides, drivers and riders is accurate should it become necessary to alert riders or drivers of possible infection.
- Provide all riders information on the symptoms of COVID-19 and what to do if they think they have it.
- Screen riders on the day of their ride by asking a series of questions: Do you have a cough or trouble breathing not related to a chronic condition? Do you have a fever? Transportation may not be given for those who are symptomatic. Have them contact their healthcare provider immediately.
- Have riders sit in the rear seat of the vehicle.
- Restrict drivers from offering assistance to riders.
- Do not allow drivers to enter medical facilities. They should wait in the car, socially isolated from others. It is likely the medical facility may not even let them in as most have locked doors and screening for necessity upon entry.
- Reduce the number of riders allowed in a vehicle if the vehicle is a van or usually a shared-ride vehicle.
- Discontinue fare or donation collection.
- Recruit drivers who may be on furlough, like school bus drivers who may have reduced risk of serious infection. You may want to implement a process to ensure the new drivers are abiding by appropriate social distancing rules and not engaging in “risky” behavior outside of volunteering that will endanger your vulnerable riders. You may require an MOU be signed that they will not congregate, will use excellent hygiene, and will alert management if they become symptomatic.

Other questions to consider

- If there is a lock-down of all non-essential travel by all residents in your community, will your drivers and volunteers be considered “essential” and allowed to continue service?
- Can your agency vehicles be driven by a volunteer, National Guard, or other emergency personnel who can provide rides, drop off food and prescriptions to those confined to homes? Goods can be left outside the home in designated locations and residents alerted they have been delivered.
- Can transit drivers use larger vehicles to accommodate social distancing to transport one person at a time to life-saving appointments ?
- Can you offer fuel assistance for riders to get their own rides by trusted family or friends?

- Can your volunteer drivers who are choosing or can no longer drive due to their situation, call riders from home to ensure they are aware of online delivery options, absentee voting options and connections to 211 and other local assistance centers and provide a connection to reduce isolation?
- Are there 5310 or other wheelchair vehicles not being used due to lockdowns of healthcare and nursing home facilities? Can these be redirected to emergency purposes? FTA Circular 9070.1G Section VI which provides guidance for 5310 programs, encourages the use of vehicles outside the original purpose if it does not interfere with that service. See below for the FTA circular language.

FTA Circular 9070.1G Section VI

https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/C9070_1G_FINAL_circular_4-20-15%281%29.pdf

5. VEHICLE USE. FTA encourages maximum use of vehicles funded under the Section 5310 program. Consistent with the requirements of 49 CFR parts 18 and 19, vehicles are to be used first for program-related needs for which a Section 5310 grant is made and then to meet other federal programs or project needs, providing these uses do not interfere with the project activities originally funded. If the vehicle is no longer needed for the original program or project, the vehicle may be used in other activities currently or previously supported by a federal agency. Vehicles may be used:

a.....In some situations it may be appropriate to provide Section 5310 assistance to an agency to provide transportation exclusively to its own clients, but even in situations in which it is not feasible for the agency to provide services to those in the community beyond its own clients, that agency must, when practicable, make the vehicle itself available to provide transportation service to other seniors and people with disabilities at times the agency is not using the vehicle for grant-related purposes. The recipient shall use the vehicle in the project or program for which it was acquired as long as needed, even if the project does not continue to receive federal funding.

b. For Other Federal Programs or Project Purposes. During the period the vehicle is used to serve the project or program needs for which it was acquired, the recipient or subrecipient shall make it available for use on other projects or programs, as long as such other use does not interfere with the service for which the vehicle was originally acquired. First preference for such other use will be given to other projects or programs sponsored by FTA, and second preference will be given to projects or programs sponsored by other federal agencies. Finally, vehicles may be used by non-federally funded providers, first to

meet the needs of seniors and people with disabilities, and then to serve the transportation needs of the general public on an incidental basis.

d. For Meal Delivery. Transit service providers receiving assistance under this section may coordinate and assist in providing meal delivery services for homebound people on a regular basis if the meal delivery services do not conflict with the provision of transit services or result in a reduction of service to transit passengers. The number and size of vehicles applied for under Section 5310 must be determined only by the number of passengers to be transported, not meal delivery capacity. Section 5310 funds may not be used to purchase special vehicles to be used solely for meal delivery or to purchase specialized equipment such as racks or heating or refrigeration units related to meal delivery.

Partnerships are crucial during this time. Ensuring you and your partners understand and use all resources to the extent possible is really important.

What challenges are you facing as you change, adjust or expand your services? Let us know what is happening on the ground, contact us at contact@nadt.org or 1-866-983-3222.