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Transportation

Nearly 30 years after the ADA, the nation’s transit agencies report successes and shortfalls

FIX OUR BUSES

After being left on the side of the road by a broken-down bus in 2016, Scott Crawford of Jackson, Miss., started riding in the street with a sign to raise awareness about accessible public transportation. (Scott Crawford)

By **Matt Alderton**

June 26, 2020 at 7:00 a.m. CDT

Scott Crawford hasn’t driven a car in 20 years.

A retired clinical neuropsychologist, Crawford relocated from Miami to his hometown of Jackson, Miss., in 2006, seven years after developing primary progressive multiple sclerosis. When his illness put him in a wheelchair, the bus became his lifeline — that is, when it didn’t leave him behind, which happened often and sometimes still does.

“Many of our buses were decades old with nonfunctioning wheelchair lifts, so I was frequently being left on the side of the road,” said Crawford, 54.

The Americans With Disabilities Act, or ADA, requires government agencies with 50 or more employees to designate an ADA coordinator to oversee compliance. When a frustrated Crawford called city hall to speak with Jackson’s coordinator, he discovered that the city didn’t have one. He subsequently rallied the local disability community and became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the city, which he won in 2010 when a federal judge ordered Jackson to comply with the ADA’s transportation provisions.

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"I didn't win any money. I won the ability to get on a bus. That's all I wanted," said Crawford, adding that a decade later, Jackson's JTran public transit system is still working to satisfy the court's requirements.

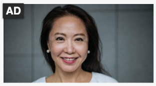
Finally, though, progress is evident. Not only in Jackson — which now has an ADA coordinator and a fully accessible bus system — but across the country. "Things are, overall, getting slowly better," Crawford said.

President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA into law on July 26, 1990. As the legislation's 30th birthday nears, advocates say the increased mobility of Americans with disabilities is evidence that it was the right thing to do. That gaps persist, however, is a reminder that work remains.

[Metro speeds up safety upgrades on new rail cars after federal funding threats]

'Mobility is freedom'

Title II of the ADA protects people with disabilities from discrimination in public transportation and guarantees them equal access to public transit systems. For accessibility advocates, however, it's not enough to know what the law says. They want policymakers, transit agencies and riders to appreciate why it exists in the first place.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"Mobility is freedom itself, period," Crawford said. "Accessible transit gives people with disabilities the opportunity to work, engage and contribute to their communities. The alternative is tantamount to house arrest."

Nearly 25 million people have a travel-limiting disability, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, which says 1 percent of all Americans — about 3.6 million people — are homebound because of a disability.

"We're not talking about an insignificant number of people," said Jordana Maisel, director of research at the University of Buffalo's Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access. "Millions of people experience transportation barriers, and those barriers are worse for people with disabilities because they rely on the transit system more than anyone."

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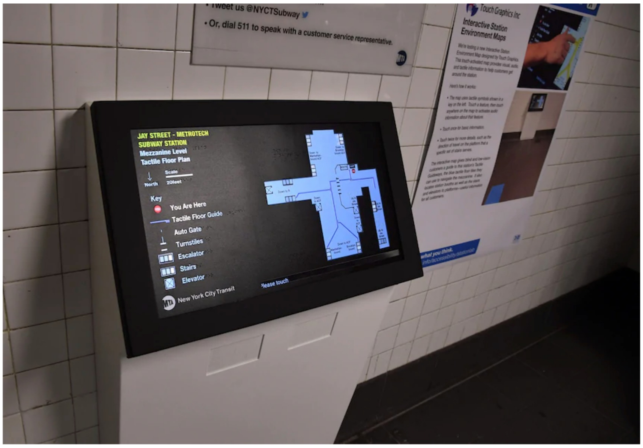
Although some have fulfilled their ADA obligations better than others, public transit systems are aware of the need.

“We look at mobility as a basic human right,” said Scott Bogren, executive director of the Community Transportation Association of America, whose members include approximately 1,400 providers of community-based and public transportation. “Whether it’s accessing health care, work or any other destination, it’s hard to achieve a good quality of life if you don’t have mobility.”



Features including digital signs, Braille and tactile maps are tested in October at the Jay Street-MetroTech station in Brooklyn. (Marc A. Hermann/MTA New York City Transit)

Rebuilding rail

Public transportation “has come a long way” since the ADA’s passage 30 years ago, Bogren said. “We’re doing above average, but we could do better.”

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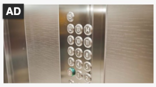
Accomplishments and deficiencies alike are most apparent in the nation’s oldest transit systems. Because facilities built before the ADA are exempt from its requirements, the New York subway — which dates to 1904 — remains largely inaccessible. Only a quarter of New York’s subway stations are accessible.

“One-hundred and twenty-four of our 492 stations are ADA-accessible. That’s by far the biggest number of any system in America, and it covers half our ridership. . . . But it’s obviously not enough,” said Janno Lieber, chief development officer for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. “It’s become a huge priority for the agency to alter that equation.”

To that end, the MTA in 2018 hired its first accessibility chief, Alex Elegudin, and in January announced plans to spend $5.2 billion in the next four years making accessibility improvements to 70 subway stations, with work already underway at 25 locations. Over half of its stations will be fully accessible by 2029, according to the MTA, which has promised “maximum possible systemwide accessibility” by 2034.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“We’re more than tripling the rate at which we install accessible stations,” Elegudin said, adding that by 2024 no MTA customer will be more than two stops from an accessible station. “We’re fully committed to accessibility, and we’re showing it not only through things we say but by putting funds forward and putting forth the right planning.”

The Chicago Transit Authority has made similar commitments. When the ADA became law, only 6 percent of Chicago’s rail stations — the oldest of which dates to 1892 — were accessible. Now, over 70 percent are accessible.

“The majority of the CTA system is decades old, and because of that, there are a lot of physical constraints to making stations accessible,” CTA spokesman Brian Steele said. He said old train stations typically have small footprints with narrow platforms and often abut private property in ways that limit their expansion for elevators and other accommodations. Still, in 2018, the CTA promised to retrofit or rebuild each of its 42 remaining inaccessible rail stations by 2038.

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Boston’s “T” is yet another centenarian rail network. Although 98 percent of its traditional subway stations are accessible, the metric it most likes to tout is elevator uptime, or the time elevators are operational, said Laura Brelsford, assistant general manager for systemwide accessibility at the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

[Metro’s 7000-series trains still lack protective barriers for visually impaired riders]

The MTA’s senior adviser for systemwide accessibility, Alex Elegudin, right, at the Jay Street-MetroTech station in October. (Marc A. Hermann/MTA New York City Transit)

Brelsford, a wheelchair user, recalled moving to Boston in 2004 and having to leave at least 45 minutes early when she rode the T to account for unplanned detours from out-of-service elevators. After its settlement of a class-action lawsuit brought by riders with disabilities in 2002, the MBTA restructured its elevator service contract to focus on preventive maintenance instead of repairs.

“Some of our most popular elevators were out of service more than 50 percent of the time,” recalled Brelsford, who said systemwide uptime for MBTA elevators now averages 99.5 percent.

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Because they generally are more accessible at the outset, newer transit systems often outperform older ones. San Francisco’s Bay Area Rapid Transit, which began operating in 1972, and Washington’s Metro, which debuted in 1976, are 100 percent accessible, officials said.

“Around the country, you may find some stations without any elevators,” said Christiaan Blake, managing director of access services at the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. “Metro has at least two elevators at every station in the system.”

Metro Access

MetroAccess is Metro’s door-to-door paratransit service that serves the Washington region. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

Problematic paratransit

Buses typically are more accessible than trains. All major U.S. cities boast bus fleets that are 100 percent wheelchair-accessible, and many — including Boston, Chicago, New York and Washington — have fleets consisting entirely of low-floor buses with ramps, which are easier to use and maintain than traditional lifts.

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But disabled riders in many locations cannot reach accessible buses because of impassable roads and sidewalks. Those riders rely instead on ADA-mandated door-to-door paratransit, which typically requires advance reservations — 24 to 48 hours before a ride — and usually offers only imprecise pickup windows.

“Imagine at the end of your driveway is a fence and that fence only opens once every 48 hours,” Bogren said. “That’s how I describe paratransit to people who have no limitations on their mobility."

Paratransit isn't just inefficient — it's expensive, costing up to 10 times the per-trip cost of fixed-route service, according to Paul Hamilton, senior manager of paratransit services at Denver's Regional Transportation District, which spends $57 per person, per trip on paratransit.

[How problems with MetroAccess have left D.C.'s most vulnerable commuters stranded]

To make paratransit work better for everyone, the RTD this year plans to try new logistics software that will use real-time tracking of passengers and vehicle capacity to enable on-demand paratransit via the RTD and external providers, including taxis, senior centers and ride-hailing services — also called transportation network companies, or TNCs — that the RTD might broker with to provide faster and more responsive service.

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"We know that TNCs, like Uber and Lyft, tend to be a lot faster," Hamilton said, "so we'd love to collaborate with them. The challenge is, they don't have a large enough fleet of accessible vehicles in many cities."

"That's something we're working on right now to overcome," he said.

In Boston, the MBTA has been piloting an on-demand paratransit program with ride-hailing companies since 2016. Paratransit riders who sign up can book a wheelchair-accessible ride using their smartphones; they pay their usual paratransit fare, while the MBTA subsidizes the rest of the trip, up to $40.

"It's allowing customers a lot more flexibility to be spontaneous," Brelsford said.

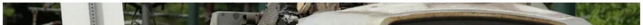
In Denver, the RTD in March began offering free grocery delivery to paratransit customers amid stay-at-home orders during the coronavirus pandemic. Later this summer, it plans to try a similar service for food delivery via Uber Eats.

"If this works in the long term, it will reduce the burden on our system by reducing two trips — a trip to and from a grocery store or restaurant — to one trip, while still giving our customers what they want," Hamilton said.

Forging ahead

Clearly, public transit has become more accessible since 1990. Just as apparent, however, are the ways in which it has not. "It's a total mixed bag," said Maisel, of the University of Buffalo. What separates the most accessible systems from the least is not infrastructure alone, she said, but also leadership.

[An engineering student is helping envision a self-driving future for people with disabilities]



A Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority train in Boston in 2015. (Steven Senne/AP)

Brelsford agreed. “Early on, MBTA like many other agencies only did what it was absolutely required to, if that. That’s why we were subject to a major lawsuit in 2002,” she said. “It took a new general manager coming in a few years later with fresh eyes to say: ‘Wait a second. These people aren’t in this for celebrity status or money. They just want to get on the bus and ride the subway like everybody else.’ ”

Having leaders who actually belong to the disability community is as important as having leaders who empathize with it, said the MTA’s Elegudin, who uses a wheelchair. “It says a lot about an agency when there is an executive-level accessibility position,” he said. “Having a person with a disability at the table . . . means accessibility is thought about and addressed in almost every decision that’s made.”

That shift from accommodation to integration will define the next 30 years of accessibility, according to Crawford, who stressed that everyone benefits from accessible design — from older adults and people using crutches who need low-floor buses that can “kneel” for them to board, to parents with strollers and travelers with luggage who are beneficiaries of elevators and curb cuts.

“What helps the disability community helps everyone,” he said.

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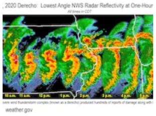
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Viewing Options*arrow_drop_down*

jojopuppyfish 1 month ago

ADA is probably Bush's best law that he put his signature on.

I was in Paris last year and while their metro is the biggest (and one of the best) in the world, they are woefully lacking in the ADA department. I saw one old women helping another in a wheelchair down a flight of steps......no ramps in the Paris metro. Even little things like making the subway accessible when the doors open are a problem at the Paris Metro......the rest of the world needs to learn and adopt USA's ADA laws for public transportation

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Rockvillers 1 month ago

so where are the sign language interpreters for the deaf to announce the next stop and the now stop?

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jazzbirder 1 month ago

In Chicago, the CTA instituted a policy of having all bus users enter or exit the bus from the rear doors from March until June 26 due to the coronavirus ! The result was that a wheelchair user could not enter the front door of the bus because the front was blocked ! That is how the CTA is celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the ADA !

Like *thumb_up* Link *link* Report *flag*

leanne1 1 month ago

"Washington’s Metro, which debuted in 1976, are 100 percent accessible, officials said." Um, no. Haven't there been at least two people who were badly injured or killed, trying to access the stairs, because the elevators were not functional?

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