



Amalgamated Transit Union

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Statement of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) LD 331 – Task Force to Study Paratransit in Maryland February 6, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the largest labor organization representing transit workers in the United States and Canada. The ATU is comprised of nearly 200,000 members in 267 local unions spread across 46 states and nine provinces. ATU Locals 689, 1300, 1764 and 1777 collectively represent nearly 2,000 paratransit operators in Maryland who work in WMATA's MetroAccess system, and at MTA Mobility and Anne Arundel County Office of Transportation.

My name is Raenelle Cole and I am a paratransit operator and shop steward for ATU Local 1764's paratransit unit at MV Transportation, a subcontractor for MTA in the Baltimore area.

I take pride in the vital paratransit service my coworkers and I provide to community members who rely on it to get to work, school, medical appointments and back home safely. But unfortunately, systemic issues make it difficult for us to do right by the community.

Here are some of the issues I see every day at work:

- Low wages and insufficient benefits lead to high turnover and understaffing. That means passengers can't always get rides in a timely manner because there simply aren't enough operators.
- There hasn't been investment in the paratransit fleet or in the GPS routing technology, which means buses aren't able to operate at full capacity.

We believe that at this point we know the issues facing Maryland's paratransit system, and it's time to reach consensus on solutions. To that end, we have several suggestions to improve SB 331 that we would appreciate if the committee considered.

The task force formed by SB 331 would benefit from the voices of paratransit workers and riders. We do this work every day and my colleagues and I care deeply about ensuring we are serving our customers as well as possible and want to be part of the solution. We therefore support amendments to **include labor representatives and paratransit riders on the task force.**

In addition, while funding is an important consideration when thinking about paratransit, it is not the only one the task force should study. We also support amendments to **ensure that the quality of paratransit service and the role that working conditions play are also studied.**

Finally, we do not believe that public-private partnerships are the answer to the issues faced by Maryland's paratransit. In fact, we believe that bringing the service in-house with the transit agencies will help with staff retention and the quality of service. We have been working together with members of the disability community to introduce SB 891 which will study contracted and in-house models of paratransit service to compare what is best for Marylanders.

In closing, the Amalgamated Transit Union supports SB 331 with the amendments discussed. We appreciate the Committee's interest in this issue and commitment to improving paratransit service for workers and riders.

Proposed Amendments:

(b)(8) three representatives from the labor organization representing the plurality of transit workers in the state of Maryland, designated by the labor union.

(b)(9) one current paratransit rider from each of Maryland's five regions: western, capital, central, southern, and eastern shore

(f) The Task Force shall study paratransit in the State, including:

(1) current, needed, and expected funding for paratransit;

(2) reasons for current funding and spending gaps;

~~(3) the role public-private partnerships could play in meeting funding and service gaps.~~

(3) service quality issues addressed in the Federal Transportation Administration's Americans with Disabilities Act guidance including: reservation system and response time, untimely pick ups, trip denials, excessive trip length, poor telephone performance, practices that discourage use of service, and any additional matters the task force identifies as important to paratransit service quality; and

(4) workforce issues that may impact paratransit service including: turnover rate, average length of employment, accident and preventable rates, workplace injury rates, workers' compensation claims rates, career training opportunities, career advancement opportunities, average wages and benefits, morale and satisfaction, and any other additional matters the task force identifies that impact the paratransit workforce.