

Riders with disabilities say bus system a hassle

Rochester's specialized transit services have been disrupted by staffing issues

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Devin Hamilton is thankful for his friends, especially when short-staffed transportation systems make life a little more difficult.

Hamilton, who has cerebral palsy, typically uses the Regional Transit Service (RTS) Access system, Rochester's paratransit program that provides coordinated ridesharing transportation for people with disabilities in the Rochester area.

But recently, the system has made transportation from Hamilton's home in Webster to classes he helps teach at Rochester Prep High School in downtown more difficult, he said.

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Short staffing led to a recent temporary change in the program's coverage area, according to RTS, which means Hamilton isn't sure whether he has a reliable ride until the day before he needs one. Since then, Hamilton, 35, has been relying on a friend's pickup truck, to which he added a lift attachment, for transportation.

"This is that current solution in action," Hamilton, who spoke to us with the help of his assistant, Alexis Pena. "It's not ideal, but Devin is very close to a motto of trying to do what he can with what he's got."

Despite the great need for the service, which RTS recognizes, said RTS public information officer Tom Brede, inadequate staffing made the scheduling alteration necessary.

How the system works

The RTS Access system consists of multiple zones spanning a total of 320 square miles, according to Brede.

The main section, which stretches a 120-square-mile swath from Ontario Beach Park in Charlotte, Watson Road in Fairport, part of Calkins Road in Henrietta and just past Black Creek in Chili, is required to maintain 100% guaranteed service due to American Disability Act (ADA) requirements and isn't affected by the short staff-related alterations. Supplemental areas have been added throughout the years, including an extra 3/4 mile to all sides of the required area and extensions out toward Brockport, North Greece, Webster and the Eastview Mall in Victor.

"There's a great need for this and we're constantly getting requests to go beyond what we already provide," Brede said.

Typically, those within the required area and most of the supplemental areas could schedule and confirm a ride up to seven days in advance. Currently, rides coming to and from the supplemental areas can still be scheduled a week ahead.

But for riders, scheduling their day is still difficult, because RTS can't confirm their scheduled rides until the day before because trips in the required area need to be prioritized.

Once rides in the required area are scheduled, then RTS can start scheduling rides in the supplemental areas.

“We don’t like it,” Brede said. “We don’t want to have to do this because we know how much people rely on this; we know how important the service is.”

How staffing issues affect users

Brede says this is the first time they’ve had to make this kind of adjustment as they typically try to run all areas with 100% guaranteed service, even though it’s not required.

Brede said, the change was necessary as “it was threatening our ability to meet that 100% guaranteed requirement in the required area.”

RTS Access is able to meet about nine of 10 requests for service in those supplemental areas, according to Brede. However, Hamilton’s already experienced a handful of denials.

“The difference is now, in the experience with RTS, is that if he scheduled his rides now to go from Webster to Rochester Prep, it’ll remain unscheduled until the day before, where they’ll give him a confirmation or denial on if they’ll give him the ride or not,” Hamilton said. “Yesterday, he received a cancellation of it ... for four trips.”

When will service be restored?

It’s a temporary change, Brede said, but as for how long it will last, he’s not sure.

“It’s just going to depend on how quickly we can get people hired and trained,” Brede said.

Recently, RTS has hired a few more people, Brede says, but it’s still not enough to return to full service. And new RTS recruits can’t get behind the wheel until they’ve completed a lengthy training process.

“Unfortunately, it’s not the kind of thing where we can just go out and hire a dozen people and train them in a couple weeks and get it back into place,” Brede said. “It takes a few months.”

Other available options

With the uncertainty of when RTS Access may return to its previous service capacity, there are a couple other Rochester-area agencies who can provide transportation assistance.

- Lifespan’s Transportation Access (TRAC) program – For more, call [\(585\) 244-8400](tel:5852448400)
- NY Connects at Lifespan – For more, call [\(585\) 325-2800](tel:5853252800) RTS Access customers may also ride for free on RTS On Demand and RTS Connect with their RTS Access ID. More information is available at myRTS.com or by calling [\(585\) 288-1700](tel:5852881700).

And those interested in applying for a position can visit myRTS.com.

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Devin Hamilton typically uses Rochester's RTS Access paratransit system to get to the classes he helps teach at Rochester Prep High School. Recently, the system made some temporary changes as a result of staffing issues. EMILY BARNES/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Devin Hamilton created an attachment to help transport his wheelchair when he can't use the RTS system. PROVIDED BY DEVIN HAMILTON



Getting in and out of vehicles is more difficult for Devin Hamilton, who has cerebral palsy, than using the RTS Access paratransit service offered throughout the Rochester area. EMILY BARNES/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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