Good morning everyone and welcome to the accessibility and disability policy webinar series. We are recording this morning. My name is Randi Turner and I am with the Governor's Committee on people with disabilities. I am the accessibility and disability rights coordinator.

We have a number of representatives from different types of paratransit systems to talk about paratransit services this idea came about from one of our committee members Richard Martinez. I am going to turn it over to Richard and he is going to make introductions.

Thank you so much for joining us.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Richard Martinez. As Randi noted, I am a member of the Governor's Committee on people with disabilities but also equally important I am a staff member at via metropolitan transit. The webinar idea came around because at different meetings people who were long time advocates for different disabled communities would ask basic elementary questions. It was obvious that more information needs to be put out there.

Thank you again for coming. Basically what this is going to be as far as the webinar goes is it's going to be a primer. We're very fortune to have a
number of experts in the field. To begin with I would like to introduce Jeffrey C. Arndt.

Jeff Arndt is president and CEO of Via metropolitan transit. Via provides transportation services to the fastest growing city of San Antonio. And he's been in the business for over 40 years. He has a broad range of experience in operations, planning, and finance. Since joining Via Mr. Arndt has focused on improving service and introducing innovation. Mr. Arndt holds an MA in public administration from the University of Houston. And BS in Civil Engineering from the University of Notre Dame. Please welcome my boss Mr. Arndt affectionately known as El Hefe as he gives a description of what is paratransit and what separates it from fixed transit. Mr. Arndt, you may continue.

>>: All right. So first I would also like to welcome everyone and hopefully you will find this useful. And I also want to tell you Richard reminding people that I've been doing this for more than 40 years implies something about my age. So it would be good to say extensive experience instead. We don't want to quantify that necessarily. I have been in public transportation now going into my 42-year, 25 years at Houston METRO and ten years here at Via. And then in between with Texas Transportation Institute a great
deal. My task this morning is to set the table, if you will. So not a lot of detailed information but I'm going to set the table and various additional presenters are going to give you more of the nuts and bolts of some of the pieces, if you will. Let's start with, what is paratransit?

If we go to the next slide and we take that paratransit and break it into two words. The transit side refers to at the time this term came up, pretty much all transit was traditional fixed-route, operates on the same route, operates at specific stops, to a specific schedule. So it's a kind of service that you just show up for and vehicle shows up and you get transported.

When you put para in front of transit, para means similar but distinct from. Let's talk about the similar but distinct from transit, traditional fixed-route transit. If we go to the next slide and the next slide deals with how it's distinct. Let me start with similar. It's similar because it's a way to provide mobility to the public, obviously. It's a way to get from point A to point B. It's similar in that it's typically operated by a public entity that is going to provide some level of (inaudible) to those kinds of trips.
It's fairly similar to your bus system in the area that it covers et cetera, but there is growing exceptions to that. It is distinct from fixed-route in that it requires the customer to interact with the system in order to get the service. It depends on what the conditions of that service are. I think Art Jackson is going to speak about ADA paratransit which is a specific type and the kinds of customer interactions. But because it's not running on a fixed-route or fixed schedule, it doesn't run necessarily to fixed stop, then customers have to do something in order to get the vehicle to show up and take them where they need to go. It also does not limit to the fixed-route stops, a lot more flexibility as to exactly where the vehicle stops.

It's a transportation method, a public transportation method but it varies because from the fixed-route perspective, you just shows up. Nobody knows in advance that you're going to show up you just go to the stop and take the vehicle. In paratransit it does require advanced work by the customer to make sure the trip is made.

Let's talk about other terms that are often used instead of the term paratransit. That's on the next slide. So this is like a rose by any other name. So the federal transit administration which is the arm
of the Department of Transportation at the federal level typically are going to refer to it as a demand response service. And demand response is a very good name for what paratransit is because you're responding to a specific demand that goes back to the fact that the person using the system have to take steps in order to -- in order to get the trip.

There is a specific kind of paratransit service, ADA complementary paratransit service and Art Jackson is going to talk a great deal about that. This is paratransit that was made a federal mandate in 1990 with the passage of the ADA laws and those law specify a great deal of both eligibility kinds of requirements and operating kinds of requirements. They are limited to a specific audience and that is what makes them distinct from some of the other paratransit services we are going to talk about because one has to meet the requirement that the system places for use of that complementary paratransit service.

A growing kind of paratransit service in the transit industry is called Mobility-on-Demand. Mobility-on-Demand works like complementary paratransit service in that one schedules a trip, but unlike complementary paratransit service it's typically available to anybody within the area you're providing
the service. So as I describe -- I'm going to talk about the Via version of this shortly but if you think in terms of again demand response through an App or through a phone you ask for trip, a vehicle is dispatched and takes you and perhaps other people on routes to your destination and lets you off.

That is like paratransit but the only requirement is that you be within the area itself, we won't go from outside that area. This is a growing type of service that is being used increasingly by transit systems across the United States and it's particularly useful in areas where fixed-route transit, the traditional transit, don't work well.

The best example of that might be a suburban community with low density -- with discontinuous streets so it's hard to route a bus through. Those are areas where transit has struggled to serve well anyhow. So in some cases you'll take -- instead of running those fixed routes, you'll run Mobility-on-Demand.

Ride share is another element similar to Mobility-on-Demand but it can include van pool programs, both and subsidized van pools programs and simply matching van pools. Carpool, same deal, same kind of carpool matching. And various systems like Uber and
Lyft are in effect a kind of paratransit service. Jitney you have to include because jitney is an idea that has kind of come and gone because so many other services provide the same kind of model of service but jitney would operate informally in corridors. I know that in Houston it required approval of the city council in order to operate jitneys. And Houston metro operated a jitney light service for several years to relieve the peaking on that service.

But again this is a service that does not necessarily run fixed-route and fixed schedule. That is what makes it distinct. Those are the general kinds but the most common kind are ADA complementary paratransit service and Mobility-on-Demand services which in rural areas all they provide is Mobility-on-Demand services.

I'm going to go to the next couple slides.

In urban settings like Houston, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Corpus, El Paso, all those systems, if you have fixed-route transit and all those cities do, then you're going to have paratransit because you'll be mandated to cover the ADA complementary paratransit. In those same cities there is a increasing tendency to introduce, at least in some limited areas, another form of paratransit which is the Mobility-on-Demand. In urban settings it's not unusual to have van pool
programs, ride share matching, those kinds of things. Those are the forms of paratransit that dominate urban environments. On the next slide in the rural settings there are examples where in some rural settings there are small fixed-route networks but generally rural settings have demand response service that is open to the general public. So you can think of it as Mobility-on-Demand but for a much larger area. Sarah knows 100 thousand times more than I do about providing rural service. She will be joining in a bit to talk about how in rural settings paratransit is used. Next slide.

So I said I was going to give you a few examples of what we do at Via. At the top is Via trans. That is our version of ADA complementary paratransit. We operate according to all the rules which I'm not going to go through because that is Art's job. We carry roughly 1.1 million passenger trips a year pre-COVID. It's down, obviously, for COVID. At the bottom -- I'm going to skip to the bottom, we have Via van pooling. This is a third party provider. So someone else owns and operates the vehicles and essentially leases the vehicles. Our primary purpose is to create the van pool itself and to provide some level of subsidy to the users of that van pool.
The middle one is Via link. I call Via link Via's version of Uber but at Via's prices and we never charge a surge price. When we have seen special events in San Antonio the surge prices can get up there. Our prices are always going to be the base price of $1.30. We treat it within specific geographic areas. We have a 17 square mile on the far northeast side of town. And 14 square mile on the northwest side of town. And you don't have to preregister but on an App you ask for a trip anywhere within that zone and it will send back information that looks like Uber-esque, you know, the vehicle number and name of operator. The vehicle will arrive and take you where you're going. About 50 percent of the time it picks up other passengers. 50 percent of the time it has direct service. When you can also rate the driver on a scale of 1 to 5. Our average rating is between 4.8 and 4.9 out of 5. There is high customer satisfaction.

The part of Via link that we make very specific is that if someone wants to travel outside of that zone that we always have a connection point between that zone and the line hall service, the fixed-route service. So if you want to travel from the far north side of downtown, northeast side of downtown, to downtown, you can transfer at a specific point and get
on a bus that will continue that trip. And we treat Via link as though it were a bus system. And therefore, since we don't charge for transfers between busses, we don't charge for transfers between Via link and traditional fixed-route services. So those are examples of paratransit type systems and services that Via Metropolitan Transit runs. With that I believe that concludes the basic information and now the geniuses will join us and share with you the specific information about some of those elements. I think the first genius is Art.

>>: Thank you, Mr. Arndt. I would like to introduce Arturo Jackson Vice President of Specialized Transit Services. A native Houstonian and a graduate of North Texas, Mr. Jackson serves as vice president and manages contracted paratransit and microtransit services with metropolitan transit authority of Harris county, Houston metro. Having served with Metro for over 32 years, Arturo's responsibilities include directing one of the companies largest nonunion departments with over 140 employees. When the subject came up as far as ADA eligibility everybody said Arturo Jackson, he was at the top of everyone's list. So I welcome here and look forward to what he has to share with us.

Go ahead, Mr. Jackson.
Richard, thank you so much for the opportunity. And thank you, El Hefe, for the kind words. It's always been a pleasure to work with Jeff, his time here in Houston was very beneficial and he was instrumental in the development of our paratransit services. So we would like to thank him. On behalf of the folks here at Houston metro we would like to thank you for being on this call and we are excited about it.

Before we jump into paratransit eligibility I would like to tell you about Houston metro and METROLift is our paratransit service here in Houston. We have some of the best customers and riders in the nation. They're very supportive, very instrumental in our program. We have over 20,000 registered paratransit riders pre-pandemic. We provide over 2 million passenger trips each year. We use a dual model for providing the services. We have a contractor that operates about 175 METROLift vans with the lifts on them. We have about 240 minivans that are operated by a contract provider. And metro is responsible for the dispatching eligibility, the customer service, all those different aspects of the service. Our service area is about 772 square miles, 215 which are beyond what is required under the ADA. METROLift began in 1979, eleven years prior to the Americans with Disabilities being signed
into law. We have a long history and great expectations by our customers.

As Jeff pointed out it all starts with the eligibility process. That’s what I am going to talk about right now. Next slide, please. One of the questions people ask is how is paratransit eligibility determined? The key thing we need to help people understand as they apply for paratransit eligibility that we're not making a determination as to whether or not a person has a disability.

> We're trying to assess whether or not an applicant paratransit service can utilize or has the availability to ride the local fixed-route bus system. We're not making a determination whether a person has a disability, we almost accept that as a fact, what we're trying to do as a transit agency is assess whether or not a person has the ability to use the local accessible fixed-route bus service. Next slide please.

Again, one of the things that the federal transit administration, the Department of Transportation let us know is that we want to as a transit agency is work with the local communities to look at what that eligibility process looks like. The eligibility process is not always the same from city to city. People do it a little bit different from city to city and it evolves
over time as with the consumers. Years ago we would accept an application, review it, and make a determination as to whether or not the person was granted eligibility on the paratransit service. Over time we started conducting in-person interviews, using metro staff to conduct those. And now it's evolved further where we conduct in-person interviews and functional assessments and now we use healthcare professionals to be a part of that. One of the key things we want to encourage is give as much information as possible. Next slide please.

So there are different eligibility categories that the ADA spells out for us. That is what guides how we formulate the process and guidelines that oversee it. The categories include the person cannot navigate the system independently. The second category would be the person -- the applicant needs an accessible vehicle. Third, there are obstacles which prevent the person from accessing the bus or rail system. In most cities -- in Houston the second is not really an obstacle because all of our local fixed-route bus systems are accessible. But years ago when the ADA first came about not all of our busses were wheelchair accessible for people with mobility devices but over the years all our busses are now wheelchair accessible with
ramps or lifts on them. Now we primarily focus on the person cannot navigate the system independently or there are there obstacles which prevent the person from accessing the bus or rail system. Next slide, please.

So what are the types of eligibility that are granted by the local transit agency? Unconditional eligibility. A person has a -- with unconditional eligibility you can take trips under all circumstances, you have full access to the service. Or you have conditional eligibility. Some folks may have a disability that impacts them under certain conditions and a transit agency has the ability to set certain conditions and grant conditional eligibility under these conditions a person can utilize the service. There is also temporary eligibility where you have a situation where a person may break their ankle or break their leg skiing or something and need temporary eligibility because of the broken leg. After their leg heals and they're back to being able to move around, they no longer need eligibility. Let's go to the next slide.

What we provided is the METROLift application. There are several pages to that application. We want information from the customer. Next slide. So we get a lot of information. Tell us about yourself, tell us about the mobility devices, tell
us about where you catch the bus, where you want to go.

The intent of this is not be burdensome to
the applicant. Again, we just want as much information
as a transit agency as to -- so that we can make the
best possible decision so we can identify what type of
service best meets this person's needs. Next slide.
And so again -- next slide. And so we also rely on
information from the healthcare professional. It
doesn't have to be a doctor but it does need to be a
healthcare professional that can give us more
information. Again, we're not making a medical
determination but we do need information about the
person's disability. What are they able to do, what are
they not able to do. So we collect all that information
through the in -- through the application process, send
us the information, have your doctor send us the
information also, and then we set up what's called an in
person interview and a functional assessment. Next
slide.

So the purpose of a in person interview and
functional assessment. We provide the transportation
for a person to come in and meet with folks. As I
mentioned before, based on our community's feedback here
at Houston metro they ask us to consider utilizing
healthcare professionals to be a part of that process.
So we have partnered with Memorial Herman here in Houston and they have offices here in Houston and they provide the in-person interviews and functional assessments. We bring customers into our offices here at metro's headquarters located in downtown Houston, we meet with each individual personally and we talk about the different services that metro offers. We talk about the local bus and we talk about the rail and we talk about our paratransit services and we share information and get information from the customers. Next slide, please. And what we're doing is on the functional assessment is we're talking to the customers, we're explaining how the service works. One of the advantages that Houston metro has is that because our headquarters -- adjacent to our headquarters on the left we have a picture of our downtown transit center. So customers have an opportunity to navigate the transit center and interact with the busses and see the accessibility of our busses.

On the right hand side of the presentation we have a picture of our rail line. So, again, people are able to go and go out on the rail platform. And the person that is conducting the in-person interview and functional assessment all the time is sharing information, gaining information, and at the end of the
day Memorial Herman takes all that information and they provide the metro staff with a recommendation and we take a look at that recommendation. Next slide, please.

The majority of people who apply for the paratransit services are granted eligibility. However, there is a process if a person is denied service. You have a appeals process. We have an appeals officer. They will review a person's information and gain more information. And the applicant has an opportunity to say, well, the Memorial Herman and Metro didn't consider this. And whatever decision that that hearing officer makes in the appeals process, Metro abides by that. That person is independent, if they gain more information, if they feel that metro hasn't made the proper decision, then again, we respect the hearing officer. If they uphold Metro's decision then we accept that also and we ask that our customers accept that decision also. If there is a change in the person's -- in applicant's condition, they are welcome to come back and reply for Metro lift services at a later time. Next slide, please.

One of the things that we do offer here in Houston for riders with disability, people with disabilities, if they want to learn more about the local bus service, some people with disabilities are capable
of utilizing Metro's bus system but they just need a little help. They need travel training. And we have a travel training department that operates one-on-one. They come out to your home and map out where you want to go, they will take a look at whether or not it's feasible for a person to utilize the local bus service, they will ride with the customer and work with the bus operator. And they will go out and ride with a person on trips that the person may be taking, going to and from a doctor's office, going to and from work, wherever they want to go. So we work very close with individuals with disabilities to teach them how to utilize the local bus and rail system. Next slide please.

Again on the screen you have pictures of individuals, travel trainers, mobility coordinators. We even go out with groups of individuals. If you have a group of seniors that would like to go out and learn how to utilize the bus and rail system, we will go over to facilities and we'll take groups out on group outings and teach them how to utilize the local bus system and rail system. Again, some people do not have that knowledge or experience. For many people with disabilities it's a process where many people were independent for years and years and never had a need for public transportation and now they find themselves in
different situations and public transportation is something they need to become familiar with. Well, that's our job is to help them become familiar and confident how to utilize the local system. That talks about the eligibility process, the different options. Next slide, please.

One of the things we want to encourage people with disabilities that may be participating in this webinar is to -- the importance of being engaged with your local transit agency. We can't emphasize enough -- and I know that our CEO chief Tom Lambert really listens to our customers. And I know having worked with Jeff for many years -- El Hefe as he likes to be referred to for many years, he likes to interact with customers and wants them to be a part of decision making process. Here at Houston metro we have several different opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in different -- different groups and to share their experiences. We have a METROLift advisory committee which is open to the public, it is open to our riders and they're able to share ideas concerns, suggestions on ways to improve, things they like or don't like. We have a METRO Accessible task force which works on facilities and the local bus and rail system. And they provide feedback as
to how things are going, what is the infrastructure, bus stops, the transit centers, all of those facilities, what do we need to do to improve upon that. When we're about to make changes they give feedback. We have a community leaders briefing team where we have representatives from different organizations. The lighthouse, the -- different places will definitely give us feedback as far as the community leaders briefing. It's something that we've amplified during this pandemic where we bring people together and share all the different things we're doing during this COVID pandemic period and we listen to their feedback also. Finally --

You know, it's not unheard of people with disabilities serving on the board. Pictured here to the left in a blue shirt we have Metro's president and CEO Tom Lambert and he's talking to a gentleman in a red shirt in a motorized wheelchair, Dr. Lex Fridman, one of the authors of the American with Disabilities Act and one of the best advocates that you can have as a person with a disability. He serves on METRO's Board of Directors. He was appointed to the METRO board several years ago. And under chief Lambert's leadership and Dr. Fridman and the METRO board, guess what METRO's number one priority is, METRO's number one goal in
Houston? Universal accessibility. After 32 years in the transit industry to have as your number one priority universal accessibility, accessibility for all, not only meeting the requirements of the ADA but going above the requirements of the ADA is Houston METRO's top priority. And that benefits people with disabilities here in Houston and across the region. With that I'll turn it back over to Richard. Thank you.

>>: Arturo, thank you very much. That was a really great presentation. I'm glad you recognized Dr. Fridman. As you know, the Governor's Committee on People With Disabilities presents a special award every fall to those companies that hire people with disabilities. And as the architect of the ADA it's awesome he sits on your board of trustees. Again, Arturo, thank you very much. The next person I would like to introduce is Sarah Hidalgo-Cook. Sarah has over 32 years of rural transit experience. She is from a Sul Ross Lobo family. Not only is she a graduate of Sul Ross, her parents graduated from Sul Ross, as well as her daughter. So she is definitely about the Lobo community. Sarah is well-recognized as a leader in rural transit -- in fact, southwest area regional transit district which she serves was one of six transit providers nationwide that received a connecting rural
communities award from the FDA. Sarah has probably one of the greatest quotes from COVID. And that is, COVID forced SWART the agency she works for to be a little creative in their approach. Sarah, I turn it over to you, as you know Texas has a great many rural communities and if you could please share with our listeners a little bit about your agency and your experience and provide some more information that will be useful for folks to know. Take it away, Sarah.

>>: Thank you, very much, Arturo.

Southwest Area Regional Transit District is located in the middle Rio Grande region of Texas. We cover eight counties in this region. And that is about as rural as you can get. Our furthest community or county has to travel three and a half every single day to get to San Antonio for doctor's and appointments and dialysis and so forth. So this is extremely rural in our area. And so what I wanted to say a little bit about SWART is that we've actually been providing services in this region since 1981. First under a community action agency and then in June of 2012 we became a stand alone transit district. The history of rural transit dates back 30 plus years. And my quote that Arturo referred to is not just that we were creative during the pandemic, I think we're more creative during the pandemic, but those of
you that know me and that have been around me for many years I've always felt and referred to the fact that rural transit systems in Texas have to be creative to survive. I will explain that a little bit.

We have challenges as rural transit systems compared to the METRO systems like Via or capital METRO or Houston METRO. We don't receive funding the same way as they do, we do not have a dedicated source of funding like a tax base like most metropolitan transit systems do. Although we are federally and state-funded we have to raise our own local match, 50 percent of that match for our federal dollars. So because of that that is forced rural transit districts over the years to become extremely creative as possible. And so for us our challenge in our area for many years has been the fact that we have to compete against salaries or wages of the oil shell, and we also have the issue of an influx of immigration that comes through our borders in Del Rio and Eagle Pass as well as other rural transit systems that lay on the border or Texas and Mexico. Because we have been creative throughout the years I think we've been able to be successful because we've been able to form partnerships. That's how we survive. SWART for instance has partnerships over 35 different partnerships throughout our region that allow us to provide the
service that we do with their support. And their support can come in the form of service contracts or rental income, these are all ways that we can raise our local match that is required. SWART raised about $400,000 on an annual basis to match its federal dollars to provide rural transportation in our region. Other services that we do to raise money we also have referral contracts as well and that is very important as well for our region. We also provide a avenue or platform for special population groups to speak about transportation and their needs. We actually host several focus group meetings throughout the year with special populations like the ADA writers as well as those that are suffering with mental health, veterans as well and of course one of our biggest groups is the renal care facilities. A good majority of our transportation is trying to access renal care facilities, not only within our region but outside our region to San Antonio and Laredo which are 2 to 3-hour one way trips, so those are long distance. One of the things about SWART is that we're going to be encountering in the next year or so is transitioning in Eagle Pass Texas into a small urban transportation system. And with that that is for SWART to look towards other experts within the field to help us plan for that transition. We have been working on that transition or
planning of that transition for close to about six years now. So hopefully it won't be as much as a painful transition as we think it might be. But with small urban transportation that is going to force us to look at paratransit services with fixed-route services in Eagle Pass much like what was discussed earlier by Jeff and Arturo but in the scheme of things we still are committed to public transportation in the rural areas.

To give you an idea of what our drivers go through on a daily basis, our drivers begin their pretrip at 2:30 a.m. By 3 o'clock in the morning they're already out in the different ranches and colonias in our region, picking up clients to get them to dialysis by 5 a.m., 6 a.m., or even to a doctor appointment in San Antonio by 7:00 a.m. or 8:00 a.m. Much of these routes last more than 12 or 13 hours. It's just something that the rural areas have to do to access healthcare or access work or access shopping, although we do provide local transportation in our larger communities, the smaller communities really struggle to access all the things that everybody else is really fortune to be able to access like being able to go buy a carton of milk or to get a haircut or visit a friend or to go do a specialized healthcare facility.

With that said, I do want to mention that
one of the reasons why SWART has been so successful is not only the support that we have with the 35 different agencies that we have partnerships with but also the understanding of our board of directors which are the county judges that we serve but then also a 17 member regional advisory committee that is very active in the support of transportation. They are our biggest advocates within our region because many of the clientele that they serve are also the same clientele that we serve. We all have the same goal and that is to enhance the quality of life for those that live in rural communities. And if you've not ever been out to a very rural area of Texas, which I'm sure most of you might live in a rural area, you understand that the infrastructure that we have in the rural part of Texas is, you know, not up to par. Many of our roads are not paved, many of the roads do not have signs or lights. So you can imagine how difficult it is for drivers at 3 o'clock in the morning to be picking up clients, trying to get them to where they need to go on very -- as safe as possible, as quickly as possible, trying to battle not only deer and others on the highway but also when they get to San Antonio and Laredo having to battle traffic. Drivers have the most important job even more important than a brain surgeon because a brain surgeon
operates on one life at a time, and they have up to 20
to 25 people on their vehicles at one time trying to get
them where they need to go and get them home safely. I
want to go ahead and discuss one of our champions that
has ridden SWART for many years. I think if you could
bring up that picture. This is Jennifer. Jennifer has
ridden our services now for more than 20 years. This is
a picture of her at the airport in San Antonio and I
will give history about Jennifer. Jennifer began riding
our services once she graduated from high school. She
wanted to access transportation to college to attend
Southwest Texas Junior College. So every day she would
ride our services to Southwest Texas Junior College.
And within two years she received her Associate's
Degree. Upon receiving her Associate's Degree she felt
that she did not want to attend my alma mater
(inaudible) Rio Grande College which is an extension
here in Uvalde. She wanted to go to St. Mary's
University in San Antonio. So we decided to go ahead
and help her out by providing her transportation
services three times a week to St. Mary's University.
And she within two years received her Bachelor's Degree.
Jennifer decided to continue on with her education and
she continued on at St. Mary's and earned her Master's
degree within another two years. And then four years
after that she received her PhD in psychology from GTSA in San Antonio. All by riding SWART 2 or 3 times a week to San Antonio. It made a long day for her but she did it. Jennifer lives cerebral palsy. She's the most active and most confident person I have ever met in my entire life. Jennifer not only uses SWART to go by groceries or pay her bills or to visit friends, she actually utilizes SWART to access other transportation modes like air to travel all over the United States, by herself I would mention. Recently I assisted her to access Houston METRO, she traveled -- flew to Houston METRO to a conference. And then Houston METRO picked her up at the airport and took her where she needed to go. And then she road another service we assisted her with to access and went to Galveston. And while she was in Galveston she went parasailing. Jennifer has also been to Florida and has drove a NASCAR, she went high sky diving, she's been to the Boston marathon to watch it. This picture that you see is when she was flying to Las Vegas last year to go and join her first trip to Las Vegas. She does this with SWART services. Jennifer is the reason why SWART actually implemented its mobility management department. Several years ago our mobility specialist actually help our riders access different modes of transportation from start to finish, they also
provide travel training like what was mentioned that Houston METRO does, we pretty much do everything else that those larger metropolitan areas do, or even smaller or larger urban areas, but on a smaller scale but just as important to the riders and residents that we provide services to as any other major transportation agency.

Jennifer also has spread her wings out in politics. She has ran for mayor and is currently running for city council. She also sits on our 17 member advisory committee for regional planning as the ADA representative. You can see her wherever there is an event going on, whether it's something on the square or its the Palomino Fest, football games, you name it.

This is what we want our riders to see as an advocate for transportation, not just those that are living with some type of paralysis or some type of disability but also for anybody else that utilizes our services to travel to work or school or to travel to visit a friend. Sometimes transportation to rural areas are not just locally, we do have to take them out of town like I mentioned and they travel long hours. But that's just the way it is in our area and so people have become accustomed to this. Rural transportation is very specialized. Our needs are different. Our resources are different but at the end of the day it's about
making sure we provide affordable, safe, accessible transportation to the people that live in our area. The last thing I want to mention about transportation in general is we make an economic impact within the communities that we live in. And so SWART the economic impact that we make in our region is over six million dollars. So that is important especially when we're trying to garner support from other organizations within the region to let them know that because of transportation especially whether or not it's rural or urbanized, it does impact the economic -- the economy of each community. And so that is what makes public transportation like SWART, Via, Houston METRO, anywhere else across the United States important.

That's all I have to say about rural transportation in Texas.

>>: Thank you, Sarah. As a dialysis patient myself I appreciate you sharing everything you do for people with renal failure. One of the saddest things I see is people ride after dialysis exhausted, trying to find somebody to give them a ride home. What you do is fantastic. Thank you.

>>: Thank you so much.

>>: Our next guest I guess could very easily be described as my boss' boss. Athalie Malone is
originally from the Virgin Islands a place known for beautiful beaches and warm-hearted and beautiful people. She moved to San Antonio in 1980 and attended Bethune-Cookman University where she studied business administration. Due to health issues she was not able to continue and finish her last year. She has worked in the private sector and medical center of San Antonio. She lost her vision in 2007. She is a past president and current member of the National Federation of the Blind. She is also a past board member and current secretary of San Antonio lighthouse. She has co-chair at the national level for White Cane Awareness Day. She is chairperson for Disability Accessibility Advisory Committee. And please congratulate her as last night she was named secretary of the Via Board of Trustees. Yay! If you would please share your experiences as a paratransit rider, I'm sure everybody would like to know the stories you could tell us.

>>: One correction, Richard. The Lighthouse -- it's not the lighthouse -- it's the Lighthouse Lion's Club.

>>: Thank you for the distinction.

>>: All I can tell you is this. I have always ridden Via from the start. When I came to San Antonio I finished high school here riding Via. So I
was pretty much familiar with using transit organization
but in 2007 losing my sight and realizing I could no
longer really just get out there and ride, I had to use
paratransit. And I am here to say there is not much
difference, it's just the same as riding the regular bus
service. The only difference is you make a reservation
and you go straight to where you're going. Yes, there
are others on the ride with you so you may have to stop
before you get where you need to get to but it is so
smooth it's just like riding a bus with no problems.
From 2007 to now it has improved. You know, services
are improved, they take very good care of you. They
have opened it up to more areas, more things, and
definite open times that you can get around. I will say
this to brag about Via. In San Antonio I have been -- I
wouldn't say all over this country but mostly in the
northeast and other than Washington DC, no other
paratransit system compares to Via's in San Antonio.
They do not come up to their standard. Via makes sure
you're on time for whatever you're going to, be it a
doctor, be it dialysis, be it even just going to grocery
store, or to meet a friend. Their on-time accuracy is
excellent. Some may say because I'm a trustee I'm
saying this. No, I'm not. I only got on the board two
years ago and they were doing this long before I got on
the board. The care and level that people -- the
employees give to the paratransit system is what makes
it perfect. Like Ms. Hidalgo was talking about, the
southwest rural area, how they came up with mobility
management team to get members to where they need to for
such long distances is a reflection of people who care.
And that is what Via does, they care. And they make
sure that their clients are well taken care of. If
there was not paratransit in any shape or form it would
be a hindrance to the disabled community and would cause
a lot of us a lot of us not to be able to do the things
that we do or want to do. Thank you.

>>>: Thank you, Ms. Malone.

>>>: One of the things that the committee
on people with disabilities always encourages people to
do is apply to different boards and commissions. Not
always those that are just exclusive to people with
disabilities but also sorts of boards, the parks boards,
obviously the transit authorities but if there is any
words of encouragement that you could give our audience,
I would really appreciate that.

>>>: Well, like I said, you heard Richard
list all the different committees and so forth that I'm
on. It was about three or four years I think that I
decided I wanted to get on the Via Board and it wasn't
because they were doing anything wrong, I just felt that they needed another aspect to, you know -- insight more to the disabled community. I felt if they had someone on there that was disabled it could be well utilized. It took two years for me to finally go through the process and be named. September of 2019 is when I walked on to the board. And I must say it has been a learning experience for me and I believe it has been a learning experience for them also too. I encourage anybody, I don't care whatever board it is, go for it! You never know what you can bring to a board or to a commission until you step onto that board or commission.

>>: Thank you very much, Ms. Malone.

Again, congratulations on being named secretary. I'm very very proud to know you.

>>: Thank you.

>>: Randi, if we could move onto questions?

>>: We have a couple. Anyone interested post a question in the QA box. If you're connected as a presenter or panelist, please open your microphone or camera and you can chat with us. One of the questions came up and I -- Art, you might be able to answer this but probably it affects any area was the question about professionals, healthcare professionals determining
eligibility. And sometimes it might be somebody like an
orientation mobility trainer that might have a better
idea of exactly what that individual needs. Can you
talk about that Arturo and your perspective on that and
how Houston handles it.

>>: Thank you so much for the question.
And I apologize if I wasn't quite clear. Healthcare
professionals here in Houston METRO play a part in the
decision making process. They conduct the interviews
and functional assessments but they are providing
information as well as the applicant's healthcare
professionals providing information, and then we take
all that information and make a final determination. We
will send folks to -- if there is some question as to
the person's abilities we will send that person to
outside individuals for -- to help us gain even more
information in order to make a proper decision.

Again, we just want to match the individual
with the proper services that METRO has to offer. I
think the person also asks should every person with a
disability who is kind of new to a disability be granted
eligibility? Again, that type of broad statement isn't
what most transit agencies go by. We want to work with
each individual to assess their ability so we can't say
all people with disabilities should be granted
eligibility. Thanks, Randi.

>>: Sure. I'm curious -- kind of related to that I was thinking if somebody becomes disabled like physically disabled where it's obvious they will have difficulty and maybe it's a new injury or condition, is that escalated in any way to -- or is it just you have to go through the same application process as everybody else?

>>: Great question. The process both in Via and in Austin and across the different entities is we try to process the applications as quickly as possible. Here at Houston METRO we offer permanent eligibility. So if a person has a disability that is not likely to change or improve or give the individual the availability to utilize the local bus service, we will grant eligibility so the person doesn't have to come back in. But we work really hard to -- as soon as we get that application -- actually, the ADA talks about that you have a certain period of time to respond to the individual and to make a decision. So, yes, we try to get everybody in as quickly as possible.

>>: Very good. Thank you. We have another question. Is there a penalty on no-shows on the ridership use of paratransit.

>>: So let me start with that and Art I'm
sure you can add the Houston perspective. That's going
to vary by first of all the way no-shows are handled is
going to vary by agency. Every agency has their rules.
I can share with you from our online document what it
has to say. First of all, no show is when a customer
fails to board the vehicle within five minutes after it
arrives or they violate the ADA policy such as refusing
to pay a fair or when they cancel trip less than one
hour before the scheduled pick up time. If they cancel
trip with more than one hour that's a cancellation but a
no-show then there is not much time to redirect that
vehicle, if you will. If a passenger has four or more
no-shows in a month and so that is in a full month, then
they would be considered in violation of the policy.
And the penalties are progressive. So the first month
that that happens is simply you get a warning. And then
it proceeds from there to have suspension of service
from one week to three weeks actually when you get to a
fourth and fifth month. We may have an occasionally
suspension the second month, I don't think we get past
that because our customers understand that the resources
out there need to be fully used. And that if they don't
show up for a trip there is somebody else that may have
been able to avail themselves of a better trip time.
That is the way our system works you may want to talk
about similarities you have or differences with vias'.

>>: Thank you, Jeff. A couple of quick points. We recently implemented -- well not recently, it went through and revamped our system. We implemented a no-show and late cancellation policy. And customers realize that no-shows and late cancellations have a negative impact on service when a driver is knocking at a door and the customer comes to the door in their PJs and elect not to call. Then that slows down the service and impacts the timeliness of the service. So we have a slightly -- we have a process in place where we ask the customers to cancel at least two hours in advance of their trip. We give a person five excused no-shows or unexcused no-shows and late cancellations in a month. The other part of it is it has to have -- it has to represent at least ten percent of the person's trips. Again, you want to make sure that it's not just an occasionally no-show. You want it to be a pattern. If someone has a pattern of no-shows and late cancellations that's when we address it. Again, as Jeff pointed out, very similar. The first situation in a month's time, we give a written warning. Then if it happens again during a twelve month period, then there is a five, ten, fifteen day suspension progression. Again, what's really important about that is this policy was
formulated based on community engagement. The community was very informed and involved in establishing this. So that's important.

> : Sarah, would you like to chime in on that too since you have a different perspective of being in a rural community?

> : As I mentioned, you know we are looking a lot transitioning into a small urban system and so we're hoping that we don't have to run into a lot of no-show issues. Currently our no show rate is less than one percent. It's been on the low side but I attribute a lot of that to our dispatchers and making sure that they follow up with our riders, they confirm their appointments, you can understand it's difficult for a driver to drive out hours and get to the door and there is a no show at the door, cancellation at the door, or someone doesn't show up, so it's costly. That's a costly trip for us. I think a lot of it has to do with communication, follow up. And then the riders themselves, just making sure they're responsible.

Technology makes things easier now. They can cancel on an App. We have an app where they can locate where their ride is at and how soon it will be there, they can cancel on that app and request a reschedule. So technology has made things easier in the form of dealing
with no shows.

>>> Thank you, Sarah. We have another comment. At CCRTA we utilize and OT side, I'm assuming occupation therapist, and COTA -- I don't know what that is, to assist with interviews and functional assessment process. So I think that ties back into what Arturo was saying about they get information not only from the medical people but from the individual as well. And they can bring in other assessments. We've got another question here. If a person is on dialysis and spikes a fever or heart rate goes up and the person is asked to stay until stable and misses their ride back home, is that counted as a no-show and what can be done on transportation back home?

>>> Jeff, would you like me to answer first?

>>> Yes, please.

>>> Okay.

>>> I mentioned that it needs to be unexcused no-shows or late cancellations. As transit agencies we recognize there are unforeseen circumstances and that situation that you described is definitely beyond the customer's control. In that case it would not be counted against the individual. We want to keep in mind that PJ example that Sarah and I give you where
somebody just doesn't call in, that is not good for the service. We also if a person misses their ride we have a no-strand policy, we will definitely send back for any customer under any circumstances we won't strand anyone away from home. Thanks.

>>: I will simply say our process is extremely similar. No one would ever punish someone because they were not well or oftentimes people have doctor's appointments and the doctor's are running behind. That's, again, outside the passenger's control. So many times when people -- we have an on -- kind of an on-demand return trip procedure. So if you're going to the doctor you don't necessarily book your return trip. You notify us and then we send a response at that point. But if you did book a time, especially like dialysis patients they are going to typically do that and something happened, obviously we're not going to count that as a no show. And we're going to simply say, please notify us when you are ready to be transported and we'll send something for you.

>>: Any difference with you, Sarah?

>>: No, not so much. Again, we have a good communication with our riders as well as with dialysis centers and doctor's offices and so forth. The communication has to be open the other piece to it I do
want to mention is that it's very important for the
transit agency to ensure that healthcare facilities
understand how rural public transportation works or
paratransit transportation works. Because if they
understand how the system works and the time it takes to
get from one place to the other, how the time it takes
to board or unboard somebody in a wheelchair or has a
walker or whatever, if they understand the process then
that's also have the battle, when the healthcare
facilities understand that. I myself am visually
impaired and so you know one thing that I've learned
with -- over the years with living with my disability is
that it takes time. You don't go as quickly, you don't
move as quickly, and so you know paratransit
transportation is a time consuming service. One thing
that is important is everybody from family members to
healthcare facilities, to those that are going to
employment, whatever it is, understand that this is not
like a taxi that is going to pick you up right away and
get you there right away. It's a time consuming service
but it's so vital and so it's important.

>>: All right. Thank you, Sarah. I
appreciate that. We have an additional comment about
being automatically found eligible. And the individual
says that my thinking was that perhaps paratransit could
work with an individual and their cane travel instructor to figure out when that individual has truly reached the point where they are ready to take on a fixed-route system. So my real question is, do most paratransit agencies take this approach or is that something the disability community would work with agencies to integrate into the process?

>>> Do you want to go first?

>>> I'll simply say that we have -- we partner with a number of agencies for that kind of assistance and we'll partner with anyone else who is willing to partner with us. Because as Sarah said, at the dialysis center, if they understand how the service works they can be more helpful to the customer. If things are not going well with the customer, they can notify Via for that matter. We're always working with partners to assist with things like travel training, how to navigate the system, those kinds of issues. And I know Art you talked about you have a travel training program, right?

>>> Yes, Jeff. Again, it's really important to know that as Jeff pointed out, we're here -- we're in the transportation business. Our goal is to provide transportation to individuals. Again the overwhelming majority of people with disabilities
qualify for the paratransit system, they go through it, those individuals that don't, we work with those individuals to truly assess whether or not they're able to utilize the local fixed-route system. When Jeff and his team provide 1.2 million passenger trips and they're providing 2 million, if we have to provide a few more for a customer that may be questionable, we're always going to work to err on the side of the customer and provide those services to the customer until such time they're ready to transition to local fixed-route service. I hope that answers your questions.

>>: I see no other questions. So I'm going to thank you all for joining us today. It looks like we finished a tad early. There is one question that just popped up. Oh, she says thanks. Sounds like you did answer the question, Arturo. Thank you.

Thank you all for being here today Athalie, Arturo, Jeff, Sarah and Richard. I hope you have a good rest of the day. We will post this recording to our website. You will get an e-mail after the session with the link for that location and the training materials as well as the realtime captioning transcript. I wish you all a happy holiday. Thank very much and have a good rest of the day.

>>: Happy holidays to everyone.
Stay safe.

Congratulations, Ms. Malone.

Thank you, panel!

Congratulations!

Thank you.

(End of webinar.)