

2025-26 SENIOR TRANSIT OUTREACH REPORT

IN SUPPORT OF EQUITABLE,
ACCESSIBLE, AND DIGNIFIED
TRANSIT FOR OLDER ADULTS
IN THE GREATER NEW
ORLEANS REGION



JUNE 2026





ABOUT RIDE NEW ORLEANS

Ride New Orleans is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. *We envision a region in which taking transit provides full access to jobs, education, health care, and joy, ensuring the equitable, thriving community that all residents deserve. Our mission is to win world-class and equitable public transportation that works for all residents across the New Orleans region. Visit www.rideneworleans.org to learn more.*

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Introduction & Background

New Orleans' senior citizens have long been vocal proponents of tangible improvements to fixed-route and paratransit services in the region. For years, local seniors have made their way to Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Board Meetings, City Council meetings, meetings of Ride New Orleans (RIDE)'s Coalition for Quality Transit, and other venues to express the myriad ways in which our current system is failing to meet their needs.

The population of seniors aged 65 and older in New Orleans continues to grow, from 11.1% in 2010 to 18.8% of the city's total population in 2024, now exceeding the national average.¹ In Jefferson Parish, the percentage is even higher, at 19.6%. Within the core metro area parishes of Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard, there are now an estimated 145,868 seniors 65 years and older.²

Data on the rates of reliance of older adults in the New Orleans area on public transportation is currently lacking. A recent national study found that nearly 1 in 10 older adults in urban areas regularly utilized public transportation, and that over 20% of users relied on public transit to access regular healthcare appointments.³ Given the high proportion of New Orleans' senior households (those where the head of household is 65 or older) without access to a personal vehicle- an estimated 24% as of 2024,⁴ those numbers are likely significantly higher in our region. Yet the needs of our transit-reliant elders remain understudied and woefully unaddressed. Alongside a multitude of challenges facing our city and region's seniors- including increasing costs of living, extreme rates of food insecurity, poverty, and social isolation-⁵ inadequate, ineffective, inequitable transit places additional and undue hardship on our community's elders.

*"It is very difficult to stand for 30 minutes waiting for a bus in the hot sun or rain. I ride every day, twice a day, to go to church."*⁶

¹ US Census Bureau (2010). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: S0101 Age and Sex*. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2010.S0101>

US Census Bureau (2024). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: S0101 Age and Sex*. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2024.S0101>

² US Census Bureau (2024). *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates: S0101 Age and Sex*. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2024.S0101>

³ Gime et al. (2023). *Epidemiology of Public Transportation Use Among Older Adults in the United States*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9771957>

⁴ US Census Bureau (2024). *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates: B250045 Tenure by Vehicles by Age of Householder*. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2024.B25045>

⁵ New Orleans Council on Aging (2024). *State of Seniors Living In New Orleans 2024*. https://cityofno.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=42&clip_id=4971&meta_id=712135

⁶ All quotes are from senior transit riders' survey responses, unless otherwise indicated. Some quotes have been minimally edited for spelling and/or grammar.

Building upon successful efforts in reaching out to our region's youth and hospitality workers to assess their transit needs and provide transit literacy opportunities, RIDE embarked in 2025 on a pilot project to hold focus groups and survey New Orleans seniors about their transit usage, needs, and experiences, as well as to provide transit literacy and accessibility workshops. Partnering with Providence Community Housing, we held focus groups, surveyed, and interviewed residents at nine Providence senior living locations,⁷ collecting quantitative and qualitative data about their usage of our region's public transit services, their experiences on transit, and their needs for tangible improvements in the system.



Due to the range of technical and physical ability among the focus group and survey participants, surveying was made available in multiple formats, including digital, paper,

⁷ Annunciation Inn (St. Roch), Christopher Inn (Marigny), Delille Inn (New Orleans East - Plum Orchard), Metairie Manor (Metairie - W. Napoleon/Harvard), Nazareth Inn 1 & 2 (New Orleans East - Little Woods), St. Ann Square (Tremé), St. John Berchmans Manor (Gentilly - Dillard), St. Martin's Manor (7th Ward), Villa St. Maurice (Lower 9th Ward - Holy Cross)

and assisted surveying. Most participants chose to utilize interview-style assisted surveying, in which a member of the RIDE outreach team asked them questions and recorded their responses on our digital survey. Many seniors chose to participate in the focus group portion of our outreach, but not to fill out a survey. **It is worth noting that our outreach often followed shortly behind outreach efforts from the RTA, which many seniors described as a frustrating experience, leaving them hesitant to engage in further surveying efforts.**

"I have been to the meetings. Called in to operators & administration. Nothing that you hear from this survey will be new information. We spent months filling out surveys and attending public meetings... nothing changed."

In total, our formal survey received 61 responses. Due to the small sample size and the specificity of the survey population (residents of Providence Community Homes), *we make no claims that our sample is representative of New Orleans' senior population as a whole.* As a pilot program, we intended to begin the investigation into seniors' transit usage and needs and to demonstrate the urgent need for further engagement and outreach with senior transit riders, as well as to identify an initial set of 'pain points' among senior riders and develop initial policy recommendations. **Further outreach and analysis are urgently needed to better understand the transportation needs of our region's older adults more generally.**

By the Numbers

77% of respondents used some form of public transportation at least monthly (either fixed-route or paratransit). 52% reported using public transportation weekly or daily.

26% of respondents utilized ADA complimentary paratransit services. Paratransit is an ADA-mandated, demand-responsive and accessible complimentary transit service for those who may be unable to utilize fixed-route (bus, streetcar, or ferry) transit options due to physical or cognitive disabilities. *Many of the seniors we spoke to indicated a desire to utilize paratransit services, but an inability to do so due to issues with the application process or application denials.*

“Was approved for paratransit for six months, then denied thereafter. My condition has not improved- only deteriorated- but I was deemed ineligible the second time. Why?”

67% of respondents indicated some degree of limited mobility.

“I’ve applied four times for paratransit and been denied. I go to physical therapy for my leg, and have documented sciatica. I can’t walk far enough to get to the stop.”

Of respondents who ride the bus or streetcar, 37% regularly experienced wait times over half an hour. Many indicated that the stops at which they wait lack benches and shelters.

“I am 62 and disabled, taking care of a 75 year old dementia patient. We both suffer skin cancer. Waiting long times for a bus to show at a stop that has zero seats for anyone to sit, or shade, is a huge problem to start with. Connecting to another bus, the wait times are horrendous. Getting to a doctor from Bywater to Uptown is a three hour trip sometimes. If it's tourist season, it's even worse.”

Of respondents who utilize paratransit, 50% regularly experienced wait times over half an hour, and 31% regularly experienced wait times of over an hour.

“Waiting too long in sun and heat ... for paratransit or the bus does not work for seniors.”

57% of respondents indicated that they have chosen not to go to their destination at all due to public transit not coming on time. *Choosing to miss appointments for healthcare, trips to get groceries, or visits with family can have life-threatening consequences for older adults.* **46% reported relying on taxis or rideshares when transit was unreliable**, straining already limited finances for many living on pensions and fixed incomes. Others reported relying on rides from friends and family (39%), walking (16%), medical transportation (8%), or driving themselves (5%).⁸

“Right now Providence provides transit, but soon they will stop. More seniors will need to rely on RTA ... Seniors depend on these weekly trips. Without them they will have to take the bus.”

-Providence Community Home worker



⁸ Note: respondents were able to choose multiple answers.

Paratransit Issues Persist, from Application Through Delivery

“The application is arduous and rather irrelevant. RTA only focuses on walking ability. Not balance, stamina, and extreme weather conditions with no benches or shelters. I am a stage 4 cancer patient in treatment. My oncologist and nurse and I filled out all the paperwork twice. [The] first time, I received a yellow pass. Second time, the next year- denied! I will never not be a stage 4 cancer patient, unless I die. Doctors are not making the decision. The clerk in that office is rude, sharp, and accusatory. She claimed, ‘you don’t look like you have cancer.’ WHAT? I don’t look ill enough for a mid-level clerk? My apologies! I will try to look sicker, for her to grant me a paratransit pass for which RTA is totally reimbursed by the federal government. She acts like the [money] is coming out of her paycheck. I know many elderly and/or sick people who will not go back into that office. Restricted hours, rude treatment, cash only. Too many hoops. RTA prevents people from accessing [their] substandard services- that literally blocks us from getting to our destination: poor scheduling, never smooth transfers. No direct lines to many grocery stores, or any hospitals. Ridiculous. But no matter how long you wait, the fare is due upon entry. You are charging for a service that you rarely provide. [The RTA] knows all of this. [They] choose not to care.”

Throughout the outreach process, many of the most egregious and persistent hardships senior riders faced were expressed by the most vulnerable riders: those whose physical or cognitive limitations hinder their ability to ride regular buses and streetcars and who must rely on ADA paratransit services. From difficulties with the application process to undue denials, unclear regulations regarding personal assistants and groceries, poor communications with drivers, and extreme wait times, the riders we spoke to painted a picture of a deeply broken system.

RTA’s paratransit system has been under constant media fire for well over a year,⁹ highlighting issues ranging from poor on-time performance, inconsistent leadership, outdated software, and, most recently, hastily retracted efforts to limit service into outer areas of the city and neighboring Jefferson Parish.¹⁰ However, conversations with actual

⁹ Patterson, B. (2025). *New Orleans promised to fix its paratransit system. A year later, what’s changed?* https://www.nola.com/news/politics/new-orleans-rta/article_a94b307d-8380-4ed4-97b4-48ddd88336d0.html

¹⁰ Patterson, B. (2026). *RTA backtracks on cuts to paratransit in Jefferson Parish, New Orleans.* https://www.nola.com/news/new-orleans-rta-paratransit/article_10f10aba-a2f1-49cc-b3aa-5d799ea322ea.html

paratransit riders about their needs and experiences with the system have been largely lacking from these public debates.

For many, the troubles begin with the application process. Many seniors we spoke to found the process confusing, inaccessible, and unpredictable. Even with assistance from their doctors, respondents were denied service despite having disabilities that prevent them from using fixed-route service.

“I see lots of paratransit denials with doctors not getting enough guidance to fill out the form in a way it’s approved.”

-Providence Community Home worker

Paratransit application forms need to be filled out on paper and must either be retrieved and submitted in person from RTA headquarters or requested by phone and mailed. Two forms must be completed, one by the applicant and one by a medical professional. Seniors expressed a need for more accessible options, such as online or phone-based application submission options, or assistance filling out applications for those unable to do so themselves. Denials were often received with little or no explanation provided from the RTA on the reasoning behind the decision(s). Others were approved only for certain types of trips, again with no explanation provided.

“They denied Ms. April and told her that she would be approved ... only to [go to] the doctors’ and dialysis. She lives uptown. She can’t drive at night, she wants to go to church. She went to RTA to appeal the decisions, they just shut her down and said those are the only places she can go.”

For those who are approved for the service, their experiences with the service are often deeply unreliable. Persistent issues with the RTA’s outdated manual scheduling process cause bizarre, disjointed routes that leave some seniors stuck on vehicles traveling to distant corners of the region before they are taken to nearby destinations, or leave seniors stranded, sometimes for hours on end, waiting for rides in all weather. Despite recent attempts by the RTA to modernize the system, progress has stalled due in part to initial pushback from the RTA Board on approval of a contract for modern routing software. At the time of writing, a contract with Spare Labs has now been signed, with deployment of the updated software scheduled for September 2026.

“The schedules are weird. They’ll reroute and go somewhere else first, making me wait.”

One of the most consistent frustrations from paratransit riders we encountered in our outreach, aside from scheduling issues, was around the agency’s poorly communicated policy surrounding the transport of groceries. In addition to medical appointments, grocery shopping was one of the primary needs respondents utilized paratransit to meet. However, RTA paratransit guidelines officially limit riders to “two bags or packages” and prevent drivers from assisting with loading bags on or off the vehicle.¹¹ For those with restricted mobility, this limits the usability of the system for acquiring groceries. Even more concerning, however, is the lack of consistency and communication regarding the policy. Many drivers have told customers they are not allowed to bring cases of water on the vehicle, despite the apparent lack of any written policy on the matter. Some seniors reported being denied the ability to bring groceries in the vehicle at all. The lack of a clear and consistent grocery policy, combined with long and unreliable wait times for pickups that can cause food to spoil, makes it impossible for paratransit riders to rely on the system for basic needs.

“They don’t let us bring our grocery crates on the van. This is a new rule and means I can’t get groceries. Sometimes the van takes a long time to pick me up— hours. Especially after appointments.”

These and other persistent issues prevent many seniors from utilizing or relying on the paratransit system, forcing them instead to turn to costly rideshares, reliance on friends or family, or forgo travel and basic needs entirely.

¹¹ New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (2023). *ADA Rider’s Guide*.
<https://www.norta.com/getmedia/fdb7f073-afbb-42f4-b585-d66306b9da3e/ADA-Rider-s-Guide.pdf>

Driver Customer Service Issues

Across both fixed-route and paratransit services, many seniors reported consistent, often shocking, issues with communications and customer service from vehicle operators.

“Drivers and customer service, please be more courteous and professional when speaking to elders. One driver once told me ‘we don’t need y’all; we don’t make money driving older folks around.’”

Issues reported included rude language, drivers passing up seniors waiting at bus stops, failure to communicate detours and changes to routes, and failing to kneel the bus or account for seniors’ limited mobility.

“Sometimes the driver takes off when I’m still getting to my seat.”

“I’m often passed up at my stop (Franklin). During peak hours especially. This is a regular occurrence. 80 is good but 8 is problematic. Stop passing me up. It’s hot out.”

“For the kneeling bus I have to ask for them to kneel it even though I use a walker and often have groceries with me.”

“The bus drivers don’t want to help, the new ones don’t care.”

While these issues were widespread and consistent, they were not universal. Some seniors were satisfied with drivers’ customer service on their routes, and others indicated that their experience varied widely, depending on the driver or the route. Taken together, their words paint a picture of a widely inconsistent level of communications, customer service, and common courtesy, indicating a widespread failure of the agency to consistently train in these skills and monitor drivers’ customer interactions.

“This is a people skills job. Many of your drivers have few, if any, people skills. Train them.”

Reliability & Environmental Exposure

“The wait time standing in the sun or rain is very difficult. The bus is seldom on schedule and at times doesn't come.”



“It is very hard to stand for a long time waiting, especially when it is so hot, or worse when it is raining.”

For older adults, extended exposure to the elements while waiting for late or unreliable public transit is a serious health risk and a major deterrent from using the system. Across our outreach, concerns about exposure to weather and lack of amenities such as benches and shelters were the single most common pain point identified by respondents for both fixed route and paratransit service. While these systemic issues affect all riders across the system, they have a disproportionate impact on older adults and other more vulnerable populations. Of the estimated 12,000 Americans who die

each year from heat-related causes, over 80% are over the age of 60.¹² For seniors with disabilities, the situation is even worse. Even relatively shorter wait times with no protection from the elements can put seniors' health at risk.

“Have the bus follow the schedule, put a shelter to protect clients from sun and rain.”

While some operational improvements to address these issues- such as improving service frequency- may require capital expenditures outside of the agency's current budget, many other aspects of the service reliability and exposure issue do not. The agency is currently operating under a Board directive to spend \$500,000 annually on shelters; however, no funds have been expended towards new shelters over the past 2-3 years, according to sources within the agency, nor has a team been procured to implement rollout.¹³ Furthermore, existing benches and shelters are distributed highly inequitably, with facilities severely lacking in areas such as New Orleans East.¹⁴

“The differences are astounding & measurably worse for mixed working-class neighborhoods where people need public transport for daily life.”

System reliability continues to be a persistent issue- riders cannot effectively manage their wait time or exposure when scheduled buses run late or miss runs entirely. Delays in procuring and implementing modern paratransit scheduling software have led to continually abysmal on-time performance for the paratransit system. Improvements to service planning currently ongoing in the agency have the potential to reduce transfers and wait times for seniors, especially those living in areas of the city further from the downtown core and currently underserved by transit, such as New Orleans East. Proposed projects such as the Downtown Transit Center, Climate Adaptive Bus Shelters, and Transfer Hubs all have the potential to reduce wait times and exposure, but progress on these and other projects continues to move slowly.

“We need a downtown hub and a hub located ... in New Orleans East, preferably, with a park and ride attached and creating an express bus line from Bullard to downtown.”

¹² Climate Central (2020). *Seniors at Risk: Heat & Climate Change*. <https://www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters/seniors-at-risk-heat-and-climate-change>

¹³ Anonymous (2026). Personal Communication.

¹⁴ Ride New Orleans (2024). *Stop Facilities*. <https://rideneworleans.org/opendata/stops/>

Policy Recommendations & Next Steps

A transit system that fully meets the needs of older adults, those with disabilities, and others who are more vulnerable will meet the needs of everyone. This pilot survey highlights a range of major flaws within the current system across multiple modes and spanning communications, operations, customer service, and other aspects of the agency. Many of the changes needed can be addressed with improvements to internal policy and operating procedures at little or no cost to the agency. Others will require meaningful investment in creating a system that equitably serves those who rely on it. While this pilot represents a small subset of our region's older adults, the commonality and persistent themes in the responses we heard and the stories told during our outreach present us with the following initial recommendations and next steps for the Regional Transit Authority.

1. Further outreach and analysis are desperately needed to better understand the transit use patterns and needs of Greater New Orleans' older adult population. This pilot study, while insightful, is by no means a representative sample nor a comprehensive survey of our region's seniors. Outreach and engagement must be targeted, meaningful, and carried out with patience and respect. Feedback from prior outreach efforts must be addressed.
2. Reliability must be improved across all modes. Persistent reliability issues affect all riders; however, for vulnerable populations, including seniors and those with disabilities, the ramifications of late or delayed service can cause serious health impacts or potentially even death under extreme weather conditions common to our region.
3. The RTA must dedicate staff and resources to installing benches and upgrading and installing shelters. While improvements are needed across the system, special care should be taken to ensure that stops frequented by seniors are treated with priority, including those near senior living facilities, hospitals, healthcare facilities, and grocery stores. The agency must work internally, as well as with the City's Department of Public Works and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, to streamline processes surrounding design and construction. Funds dedicated to stop improvements, both from agency operating funds and grant sources, must be utilized in a timely, efficient, and equitable manner.
4. Transit vehicle operators and other staff, including Rideline operators and staff in the Paratransit Eligibility Department, must be retrained on customer service,

communications, and rider dignity. All customer-facing roles need comprehensive training on respectful interactions with older adults. Drivers should be trained to inform all passengers, regardless of age or ability, of any detours or changes to routes as riders board. Complaints regarding customer service and rider communications must be addressed immediately, with serious consequences for flagrant and repeat offenders.

5. The paratransit application and review process must be comprehensively reformed. Applications should be available in multiple formats, including online. Paratransit service should be provided to applicants for travel to medical eligibility appointments and to the RTA headquarters to speak with Eligibility Department staff pending the applicant's approval. Staff should be available to assist applicants who may have trouble completing applications for themselves.
6. The paratransit scheduling software should be immediately upgraded to a modern, dynamic scheduling system, as has been recommended by staff for several years. As of the report release, a contract for modern software has been approved. RTA leadership must ensure that drivers, customer service personnel, and other staff are fully trained as soon as possible and that riders are clearly informed of any changes to booking or other aspects of the rider experience to ensure a smooth and efficient transition.
7. Paratransit policies, such as those regulating personal care assistants, groceries, and other baggage, should be reviewed and reformed. Operators should be trained to enforce policies consistently, equitably, and with care.
8. The agency can and should look to peer agencies for examples of what improvements are possible and how they can be implemented. Seattle's Access Transportation paratransit service offers an online application and provides transportation to the medical appointment needed for application review. Riders are allowed 4 bags of up to ten pounds each, and carts are allowed.¹⁵ Boston's "The Ride" paratransit service likewise offers an online application, as well as round-trip paratransit service for required in-office eligibility appointments. Drivers will assist riders with groceries with one arm, and buggies and carts that fit by the rider's feet are allowed.¹⁶ Houston's Metro has committed to installing 400 modernized bus shelters per year, prioritizing stops with significant access to senior populations, those with access to communities with high concentrations of

¹⁵ King County Metro (2026). *Access Transportation*. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/metro/travel-options/accessible-services/access-transportation>

¹⁶ Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (2026). *The RIDE*. <https://www.mbta.com/accessibility/the-ride>

people living with disabilities, hospitals, and grocery stores.¹⁷ At agencies across the country, dedicated work is being done to ensure senior riders' needs are understood and addressed. There is no excuse for New Orleans not to do the same.

The Regional Transit Authority and other public transit providers across the Greater New Orleans area can and must make a dedicated effort to better understand and serve the needs of our growing senior population. Our elders represent the history and culture of our city, and they deserve safe, reliable, and effective transportation- as do all New Orleanians.



¹⁷ Metro Connections (2023). *METRO Bus Shelters Get an Upgrade*.
<https://www.ridemetro.org/newsletters/metro-connections/2023/november/metro-bus-shelters-get-an-upgrade>

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