

We Can Get There From Here:
Toolkit for Massachusetts Advocates Working on
Accessible Public Transportation
September 2025

Acknowledgements

This toolkit was developed by staff at AdLib Center for Independent Living. Contributors included Sally English, AdLib Executive Director; Valerie Peace, AdLib Advocate; Sophie Shrum, AdLib Advocate; Emi Bailey, AdLib Support Staff; Aliza Levine, SILC Coordinator. Information contained in this toolkit came from advocates across the state, who gave their time during initial coalition and individual meetings allowing us to learn more about best practices for transportation advocacy.

AdLib, an Independent Living Center serving the Berkshire County, would like to thank the following organizations which contributed their time, knowledge, and experience to information contained in this toolkit:

MA Statewide Independent Living Council
Transportation For Massachusetts (T4MA)
Stavros Center for Independent Living
Center for Living & Working
MetroWest Center for Independent Living
Southeast Center for Independent Living
Cape Organization for the Rights of the Disabled
Northeast Independent Living Program
Boston Center for Independent Living

And a special thanks for the generous funding from the Human Services Research Institute's Grassroots Project.

[The Grassroots Project - Human Services Research Institute](#)

Table of Contents

1. Background
2. Current State of Accessible Public Transportation
3. Understanding RTAs in MA
 - a. What is an RTA
 - b. RTA Governance and Oversight
 - c. Advisory Board, Councils and Committees
4. Transportation Advocacy—Cycle of Organizing
 - a. Listen and Share Concerns
 - b. Develop Leaders and Research
 - c. Action
 - d. Evaluate and Reflect
5. Putting it all together
 - a. Best practices
 - b. Success stories
6. Appendixes
 - a. Appendix A: Reference and Resource List
 - b. Appendix B: Speech on need for accessible affordable transportation
 - c. Appendix C: Points on transportation advocacy
 - d. Appendix D: Transportation log example
 - e. Appendix E: Transportation Acronym Dictionary

Background

For decades, staff and consumer leaders at Massachusetts's 10 Centers for Independent Living (ILCs) and members of the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) have been advocates for more affordable accessible transportation in the State. Historically, individual ILCs have advocated with their local Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) and have joined statewide organizations working on overall transportation priorities. The SILC has sponsored conversations about accessible transportation advocacy at their annual conference and in other forums.

However, during the planning process for the FY 2025-2027 State Plan for Independent Living, ILC leaders identified the need for more cross-state collaboration within the disability community on transportation advocacy goals. Cross-state collaboration would help to make systemic change in accessibility in MA's fractured transportation system (a Boston-area system plus 15 RTAs). ILC leaders planned to increase the capacity of the ILC network to maximize transportation advocacy by forming a new statewide coalition focused on advancing accessible, affordable transportation. In the Coalition, ILC Leaders would share advocacy strategies and build a statewide pipeline of leaders with lived experience of disability. This will prepare them to be advocates for transportation equity.

This goal led to the search for funding to allow one of the ILCs to establish a coalition for advocates working on accessible public transportation and produce a toolkit for current and future advocates. In March 2025 the project received funding from the Human Services Research Institute's Grassroots Project. This allowed AdLib, who agreed to be the lead agency for the project, to dedicate staff time to research, write, and organize the toolkit as well facilitate initial coalition meetings. During the summer of 2025 three initial coalition meetings were held with advocates from ILCs across Massachusetts. AdLib also met with Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA), the leader in transportation advocacy in Massachusetts, to leverage their expertise. Information contained in this toolkit has come from publicly available sources (listed in References section), as well as directly from advocates who shared their knowledge at coalition meetings.

Current State

Transportation is a key component to living a healthy, well-balanced, and independent life as an active member of your community, but, as one local advocate stated, “if you are disabled your life revolves around other people’s schedules”.

Massachusetts advocates have long noted issues with accessible transportation as a key barrier to employment and full engagement in community life. ILC advocates from across the state of Massachusetts met and identified key challenges with public accessible transportation. These include:

- A convoluted eligibility process for paratransit: each RTA operates its own eligibility process with some asking for detailed medical information unnecessary for determination of need.
- Inconsistent services: paratransit services often give pick-up windows which could be hours long, and do not arrive at scheduled times. Each RTA has different requirements for scheduling, with some requiring 2 or more days to schedule a ride, with higher fees for same-day service.
- Lack of availability: many communities in Massachusetts have limited or no access to public transportation, or transportation that is only 5-6 days a week.
- Cost: Paratransit is a higher cost per ride and does not have an option for daily or weekly rates. Even higher fees can be incurred for late or same-day ride requests. *Note: Fare free is now mandated in MA state law, subject to appropriation. FY26 appropriated \$35 million for fare free and mandated RTAs are free.*
- RTA Governance: each RTA operates independently, overseen by an administrator and advisory board. While subject to Open Meeting Law, meeting dates and times, Advisory Board member lists and meeting notes may not be posted on on agency websites, making it harder to find out about meetings in advance or review notes. Board members only have terms of 1-year and are on the board due to being in another elected position, meaning they lack personal experience with the system.
- RTA Disability and Rider Representation: each RTA board is required to have a seat for a disability and rider representative. While these are voting seats, the representatives rotate between towns in the RTA area and cannot be from the same town. If the town cannot identify a representative, then the seats go unfilled. At the time of writing this toolkit we identified 7 RTAs (44% of RTAs) with unfilled disability representative seats.
- Lack of statewide access: since each RTA operates its own fixed routes based on needs in their particular area, crossing from one RTA area to another is challenging. *Note: The FY25 and FY26 state budgets have allocated \$10 million per year for Connectivity Grants to improve travel between RTA service areas.*

All RTAs provide the following: ²

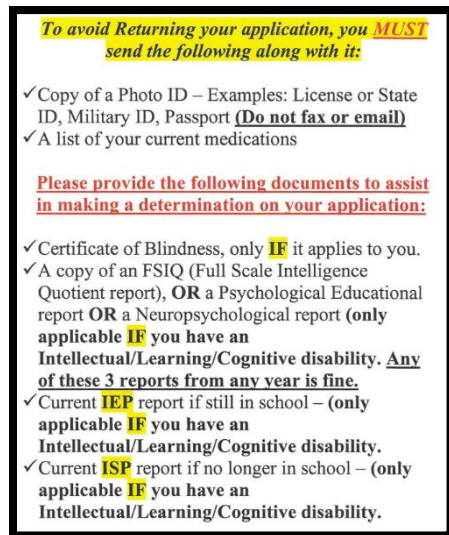
Fixed route services:

- Services by bus (or subway, with the MBTA) on a regular schedule.
- Services are open to anyone but may require a fee.
- Services are at set times which vary by region and are impacted by ridership.
- Most vehicles are accessible but may not work for everyone or may be impacted by breakdowns or lack of driver availability.

Paratransit: ADA paratransit is an eligibility-based service for people whose disabilities sometimes or always prevent them from using the fixed route. It is only required to be available within the fixed route area of service, but some RTAs receive grants or utilize other funding to expand the service area.

- Paratransit is an origin-to-destination service, sometimes called dial-a-ride.
- Eligibility is determined by the local RTA through an application process which varies by RTA.
- Rides are shared and subject to stops which may prolong the ride.
- Pick-up and drop-off times are within a window of the time requested.
- Pick-up and drop-off locations must be within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of fixed route service.
- Paratransit is only available at the times of fixed route transportation and may start late or end early to ensure the vehicle is finished at the same time as fixed route.

The requirements for eligibility for paratransit by statute are that the individual has clinical verification of a physical, psychiatric, or developmental disability that impacts their ability to use fixed-route service (in other words, a note from a physician, therapist, or other medical professional). RTAs are required to determine eligibility within 21 days of receiving an application.



In practice, RTAs vary widely in their processes for eligibility, with some requiring documentation outside of the application (which includes a clinician signature) such as medication lists, letter from therapists, psychological or intelligence evaluations, Individualized Education Plan (IEPs), or Individualized Services Plan (ISPs); or in-person appointments with photo identification.

Image: Screenshot of RTA website saying that you must include a photo ID, list of medications, Certificate of Blindness, and copy of evaluations or service plans with paratransit application so that they are not returned.

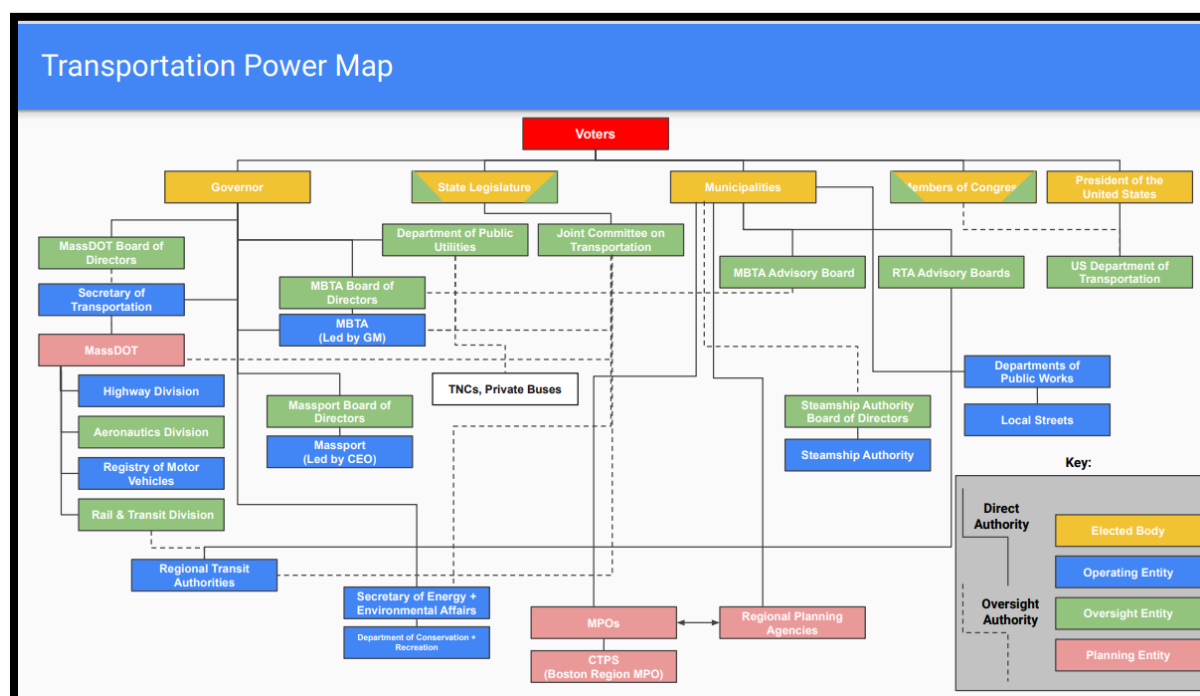
Other services:

- Transit authorities may operate additional services, such as micro-transit or shuttles, based on the needs and funding in their local area.
- Travel training may be available to support specialized instruction so a person can utilize fixed route transportation.
- Micro-Transit aims to connect areas that would otherwise require going to a centralized hub, to communities unserved by the RTA, or to connect RTA service areas. The service is for anyone who lives in the area that micro-transit serves, but there may be additional qualifications. Micro-Transit services do need to be wheelchair accessible, but not every vehicle needs to be accessible if there aren't any major time differences. Micro-Transit has different fee schedules than RTAs and different funding sources depending on the area.
- Transferring between RTAs: Getting from one RTA service area and connecting to another RTA service area is particularly challenging. There is little overlap and if there is, it happens at central hubs which may add significant time to commutes and not allow for access to all destinations. Paratransit only takes place within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of fixed route service and cannot cross RTA service areas. People determined eligible for paratransit in one RTA may request that their paperwork carry-over to another RTA for purposes of visiting, but exact process for this will vary by RTA.

Unfortunately, schedules, routes, frequency, and type of transportation vary widely within and between RTAs. While some communities may have fixed route service, the route may be limited to a main road with infrequent stops. Most rural communities have limited or no evening or weekend service, although since passage of the Fair Share amendment in 2022,

many RTAs have expanded night and weekend service, particularly on Sundays. Efforts to expand routes and operating hours are often hindered by financial constraints and lack of ridership, which is cited as a demonstration that there isn't a need. Despite this, we know that transportation is key to ensuring that people can work, play, and be active members of their communities.

RTA Governance and Oversight



2

Image: Transportation Power Map showing positions that oversee transportation in Massachusetts. Voters are at the top with RTA at the bottom showing they are overseen by MassDOT, Joint Committee on Transportation, and RTA Advisory Board. Image from: The Transportation Power Mapping Project, T4MA, 2024. [Transportation Power Mapping](#)

All RTAs fall under oversight by MassDOT and Chapter 161B of the Massachusetts General Laws⁶ ([Chapter 161B](#)), but each RTA is an independent government agency. While all RTAs technically operate under the same authority and regulations, each one operates under the authority of a local administrator who reports to an advisory board, with wide variances in operations and service. Funds are provided through annual state appropriations in the budget, as well as a mix of state and federal grants. RTAs traditionally receive revenue from ride fees, but most RTAs are moving towards a fare-free model to support increased ridership rather than direct revenue.¹

Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT)	
Responsibility for:	Executive branch transportation planning and policy-making of state government
Led by:	The Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation (appointed by the Governor, a member of the Governor's cabinet)
Accountable to:	The Governor, the MassDOT Board of Directors, the Massachusetts Legislature
Related organizations:	Oversees the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV), the Highway Division, the Rail & Transit Division, the Aeronautics Division, and long-term transportation planning
Funded through:	Appropriations by the Legislature, federal funding (formulas and grants), tolls
Other info:	MassDOT's headquarters, known as the State Transportation Building, is at 10 Park Plaza in Boston. The building also the home of the MBTA's headquarters
Key facts:	More than 70% of trips in Massachusetts are made by car
What advocates should know:	MassDOT is a vast bureaucracy that impacts small towns, Gateway Cities, suburbs, and inner-core communities across Massachusetts
For more info:	https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-transportation

3

Image: Chart showing MassDOT oversight, responsibility, and funding. Image from: "The Transportation Power Mapping Project". T4MA, 2024. [Transportation Power Mapping](#)

Each individual RTA is led by an RTA Administrator (Executive Director) who is hired and paid by the RTA. The administrator is responsible for all operations and management decisions and reports to the RTA Advisory Board. The Advisory Board's main function is oversight and guidance related to funding and policies, while in practice its role is to approve the plan that the administrator develops. Each Advisory Board member is a representative of a city or town within the service area, often an elected official such as a mayor, select board member, or city councilor. Since the members of the advisory board are chosen due to another position they hold, they may not have a good understanding of or investment in public transportation because most are not regular riders. There is also a disability representative and rider representative, who are chosen by individual towns on a rotating basis. Frequently, rider and disability representative seats are left unfilled because the town does not identify a person to fill the seat.

In order to be a disability Representative, a candidate must be one or more of the following criteria:⁶ [General Law - Part I, Title XXII, Chapter 161B, Section 5](#)

- Have a mobility impairment;
- Have a family member who is mobility impaired;

- Be a caretaker of a person who is mobility impaired; or
- Work for an organization that serves people with physical disabilities.

While the disability and rider representative have voting rights on the board, they are only appointed for one-year terms and cannot be appointed by the same city or town. Since the town who nominates these representatives rotates, advocates cannot effectively influence policy due to shortness of term, plus lack of engagement of other board members. A representative may be reelected but only after representatives from other cities and towns have served their 1-year term limit.

Advisory Board meetings are subject to Open Meeting Law. This means that meeting dates and times must be posted. Meetings typically include a period for public comment, although this may be limited to specific topics or times. Meetings are typically in-person, with frequency varying largely by region. Some boards have regular monthly meetings, while others meet only four times per year. Pandemic-era policies that allow for remote meetings have been extended, but not all RTAs facilitate virtual meetings in a way that allows for public input.

The next BRTA Advisory Board meeting is scheduled for August 28, 2025 at 4 PM in the BRTA's second floor Boardroom. This meeting will be in person. The meeting notice and agenda.

Home / August 21, 2025 Advisory Board Meeting Notice

In accordance with G.L. c. 39 §§ 23A-23C and 24, the Massachusetts Open meeting Law, the Worcester Regional Transit Authority has scheduled an Advisory Board meeting for:

Thursday, August 21, 2025 at 8:00 a.m. to be held at the WRTA 3rd Floor Conference Room, 60 Foster Street, Worcester, MA 01608, and via Zoom Webinar.

Due to the Governor's extending Pandemic-Era policies. <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/192/S3007> which include extending <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2025/Chapter2> remote public meetings. Join via Zoom from a PC, Mac, iPad, iPhone or Android device:

Agenda

- Chairperson Opens Meeting
- Clerk Calls Roll
- Approval of Minutes by roll call from June 26th, 2025
- Business from the Public
 - The WRTA Advisory Board is accepting questions/comments from the public via email: admin@therta.com, phone: 508.791.9782, website via csfeedback@therta.com. To request participation while in Zoom, please use the "raised hand" icon in your settings. The board will address inquiries during the "Business from the Public" portion of the meeting. Replies will be allotted time at the discretion of the Chairperson.
- Fiscal Year 2025 Ridership Update (Burnham)
- Comprehensive Service Analysis (Burnham/Winters)
- Administrators Report (Rickman)
 - Lobby Renovation
 - Update on Fixed Route Technology Upgrade
 - September 18th Rider Forum
 - Other Administration Items
- Advisory Board
- Adjourn

MEETING DATE: JUNE 12, 2025

Agenda

BROCKTON AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY

ADVISORY BOARD MEETING AGENDA

11:00 am, Thursday, June 12, 2025

Virtual Meeting

This meeting will be streamed live on BAT's YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/brocktonareatransit>

Call 508.638.5934 for more information or to submit a public comment

Images: Four screenshots of websites with announcements for RTA Advisory Board Meetings. The first image announces an in-person afternoon board meeting; the second announces an 8am board meeting that will be in-person and via zoom with a reference to extended pandemic era policies allowing virtual meetings; the third is an agenda with a section for Business from the Public; the fourth is an announcement for a Board Meeting stated as virtual with link to YouTube livestream.

So how do you become a member of the advisory board?

The RTA Advisory board members are appointed by the town mayor or other primary authority of the local government. Being nominated for the RTA board can be done by your town's elected official (mayor, city council, etc.) or the RTA administrator. Networking and getting to know officials currently on the board is the best way to be nominated for a disability or rider representative seat. Here are some suggestions on how to get connected:

- Attend an Advisory Board meeting. Being present even if you aren't planning to speak shows your interest and helps you get to know current members.
- Get involved in transportation advocacy groups or your RTA advisory council or committee. These groups often have more immediate impact because they make recommendations for changes to operations, while the RTA advisory board deals with financial and regulatory practices.
- The RTA board representative for your town is most likely the mayor, city council president, or select board member. Approach this elected official and ask to talk about RTA transportation. Have them get you connected to the RTA administrator or operations director or councils.
- Get to know the RTA administrator. They may be difficult to reach directly so call the RTA and ask to speak with their Executive/Administrative Assistant. This person knows their schedule, how things operate, and may be able to get you to a meeting.

- Make it known that you use and value the service and want to see it get more riders. A major measure of RTA success is ridership and on-time service.
- Some advocates have been able to be on the RTA board for back-to-back terms by being the disability representative and then the rider representative.
- Talk to other people who utilize and feel passionate about having good public transportation. There may be other advocacy groups you can get involved in.

Once nominated for an RTA board seat there will be an application and nomination process through your town. The RTA administrator or board president will have some onboarding session to ensure that you understand the role and rules for meetings.

Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs)	
Responsibility for:	RTAs provide bus service and paratransit service in 15 regions across Massachusetts.
Led by:	Each RTA is led by an Executive Director (ED). The ED reports to an RTA Advisory Board, composed of the chief elected official of the community served, or his/her chosen designee. In addition, a member representing the disabled community also serves on the Advisory Board.
Accountable to:	RTA Advisory Boards, the MassDOT Rail & Transit Division, and the Legislature
Related organizations:	The Massachusetts Association of Regional Transit Authorities (MARTA), which represents the interests of the RTAs with the Legislature and Executive Branch
Funded through:	Annual state appropriations from the legislature, tax assessments from cities and towns that receive RTA service, federal funds (formula and grant), and fares
Other info:	The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority has the highest annual ridership, with more than 10 million trips per year (pre COVID). The Franklin (County) RTA has the lowest ridership.
Key facts:	RTAs serve a total of 262 communities, provide over 29 million trips annually (pre-COVID), and have a combined annual budget of more than \$150 million.
What advocates should know:	RTAs are fiercely independent, but also rely heavily on state support. They lean on local stakeholders (e.g. Mayors) and legislators for help with advocacy on Beacon Hill
For more info:	MARTA website: https://matransit.com/

3

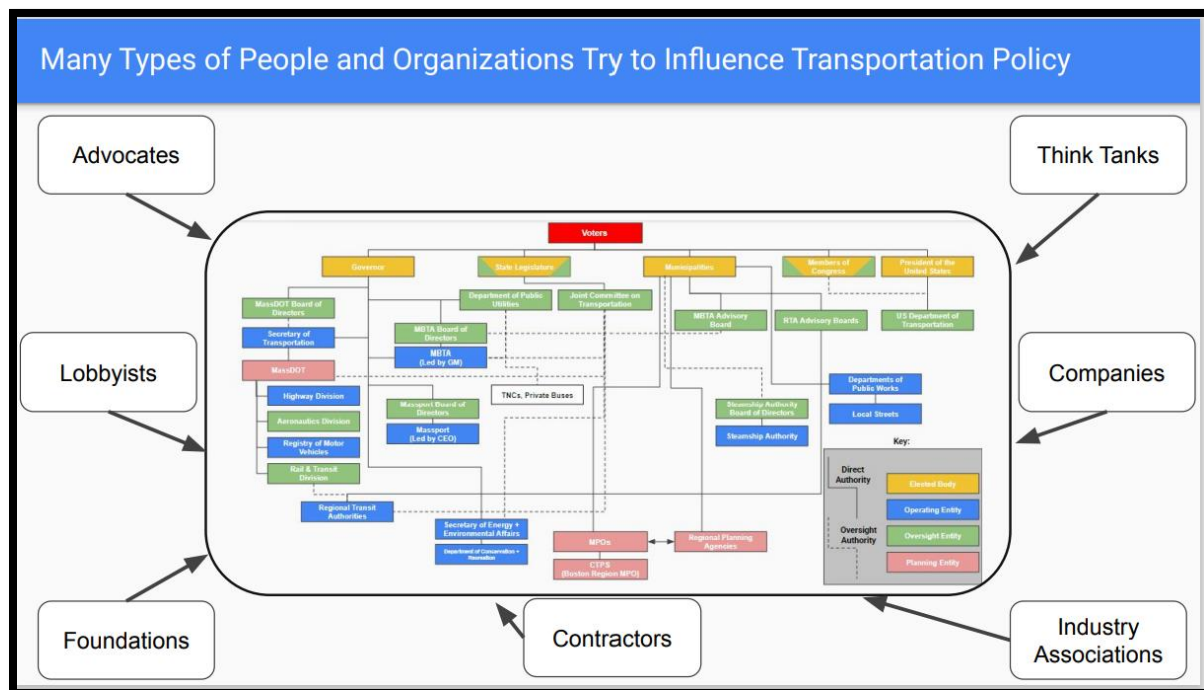
Image: Chart showing RTA oversight, responsibility, and funding. Image from: "The Transportation Power Mapping Project". T4MA, 2024. [Transportation Power Mapping](#)

Councils and Committees

Some areas have developed disability rider councils or committees. While these are a great way to gather information and discuss potential systemic improvements, it is important to understand the difference in authority between boards, councils, and committees.

- RTA Advisory Board: members are appointed by an elected official and have oversight responsibilities which include legal, financial, and management. Their purpose is to provide knowledge, insight and advice to the administrator who has overarching authority over the system.

- **Rider Councils:** these are groups of people who utilize the system and are gathered to provide insight and recommendations for system improvements. They are tasked with consulting, deliberating, and providing recommendations. While an official voting member of the board or RTA staff representative may sit on a council, the council itself does not have authority over RTA finances or policy.
- **Committees:** committees are larger groups of people and are issue focused. They can be composed of members of the Advisory Board, RTA staff, or a larger group of constituents. Committees can review an issue or focus area, discuss, and make recommendations. They may be time limited with specific goals and focus areas.



3

Image: Chart titled “Many Types of People and Organizations Try to Influence Transportation Policy” shows advocates, lobbyists, foundations, contractors, think tanks, companies, and industry associations on the outside of the Transportation Power Map. Image from: “The Transportation Power Mapping Project”. T4MA, 2024.

[Transportation Power Mapping](#)

Transportation Advocacy—how do I get started?

Advocating and creating change in a system that is often hidden or convoluted by design can be challenging. So how can you bring attention to the challenges you face?

The Cycle of Organizing

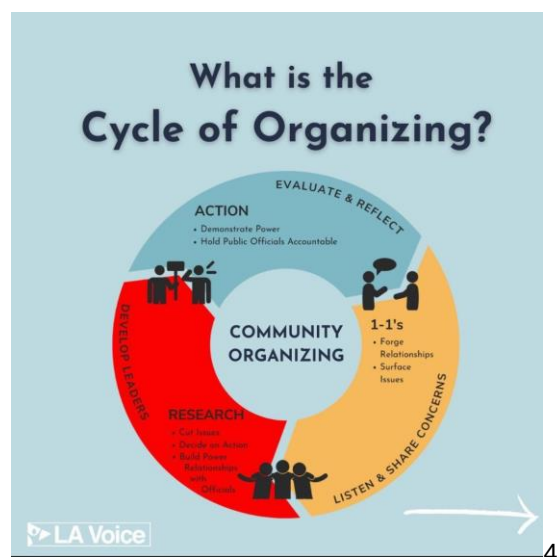


Image: Figure titled “Cycle of Organizing” shows a circle with three sections of different colors. Sections are Action: Evaluate and Reflect, Listen and Share Concerns, Research and Develop Leaders. Image from: Voice, 2025. [Instagram](#)

“A community that is engaged and working together can be a powerful force” Idowu Kayenikan

Understanding how public transportation works in MA is a key building block for successful change initiatives, but for advocacy to be truly successful it needs to be planned well. In the following sections, we are going to review a community organizing framework and then apply best practices for working with RTAs to help you plan your advocacy strategy.

Listen and Share Concerns

The best place for advocacy to start is by listening—have conversations with consumers or other paratransit riders and practice active listening to really understand their concerns. What you hear will directly feed into your analysis and next steps. This can be one-on-one conversations, or you can organize town halls or surveys to gather larger amounts of feedback. The people receiving the services need to be at the center of all the work that we do. Hearing directly from those being impacted, and sharing your own story with others, will help to identify and understand key issues. Remember-- listen to understand and analyze—what are the similarities in their stories? What is the impact of the problem?

Track the information that you are getting—take notes, ask for key details, get their contact information and find out how they would be willing to share their story. Information you gather

will help guide your analysis of the situation and the key issues that you want to address, focusing on one or two problems to prioritize. You may also get some ideas for solutions.

Develop Leaders

As you are listening, keep an eye out for people who may be open to becoming more involved. Community organizing involves identifying and developing leaders. There are many kinds of leadership roles a person can take on in a community organizing effort. These can include:

- Spokesperson (speak at community meetings, rallies or events, to the newspaper)
- Researcher (dig into details about how the current system is working, what approaches have been effective in other places)
- Connector (connect to other community groups, officials, people who may want to get involved)
- Strategist (help plan campaign strategy, debrief what's working)
- And so many more! (Social media maven, graphic design for flyers, song leader or chant leader at a rally, timekeeper for meetings, notetaker for meetings, bringing snacks to events...)

Most people need to be asked, individually, to take on a leadership role. Asking a whole room of people to volunteer often results in fewer volunteers than a one-on-one ask. Think about starting with one smaller ask (for example leading the introductions for the next meeting) and then building up to bigger asks.

By developing community leaders as you go, you are not only building a more effective campaign but building up a group of people willing and able to lead the next effort!

Research

The team of leaders you are bringing on together can take the next steps collaboratively.

Your research can involve

- Identify allies: Once you have identified key issues you want to get connected to community leaders who may be able to help. This could be an RTA leader, advisory board member, or local elected official
- Analyze information you are getting: what are trends, what are individual issues, what are systemic issues, etc.
- Research the system that you are working in: Researching the governing and operating regulations, funding sources, and leadership is key to structuring your work.
- Build a power map: Power mapping is a technique used to identify the best 'targets' (people, meetings, or other points in the system) to promote social change in a system.

Power map for your RTA to understand the leaders with decision-making authority and points at which you can make connections to influence changes.

- Identify stakeholders: find out who other key stakeholders are---unions, senior organizations, employers, and health care organizations all care about people being able to access good affordable public transportation. Find out what other local groups are working on and how collaboration may make you stronger. Most regional Planning Commissions are involved in transportation work and connected to area leaders and groups. They are likely willing to help get you connected and have in-depth knowledge of transportation in your area.
- Learn what the current priorities are for the system and its leaders: key performance measurements often impact funding or public perception—or what the leaders care about. These key measures will give you an idea of how you can influence leadership. Most RTAs want to see increases in ridership and on-time service as these two measures can impact funding and service availability.

As you move into action, remember that it is essential that advocates and leaders bring the people directly impacted to the front. An advocate may schedule a meeting with a decision maker, but the people being directly impacted should be centered in the meeting.

Action

Using your analysis of the information and system, develop a strategy for acting on the issues. Ask yourself:

- What is your ask/demand? Gathered from listening to consumers.
- Who is the target? Identified in your power mapping.
- What will move the target? The key measures that you identified in your research and analysis.
- What tactics will you use to move the target? These could include public meetings with decision makers, media coverage, a letter-writing or phone-banking campaign, or something else?
- What are the small victories on your way to the ultimate success?

It's then time to bring the pieces together! Leverage the relationships that you made to connect with the leaders that you are targeting. Be sure that actions stay focused on the key demands that you identified. Provide opportunities for people with lived experience to share their stories with decision makers. Connect with other organizations and groups that care about the same issue and bring them to the table. This is when you demonstrate your community power through numbers and stories of impact.

Evaluate and Reflect

Community advocacy work is a continuum—we are always trying to move issues forward knowing that we will be achieving our goals in small steps that keep us moving forward. It is important to regularly evaluate and reflect on your work. After any action provide an opportunity to reflect with the other leaders of the campaign:

- Was your ask/demand met? If not, did you move forward?
- What additional information did you learn about the issue?
- What went well and what could have gone better in each step?
- How many people took action?

Reflecting on these questions will help guide your next steps. Key to successful systemic change is persistence—many advocacy successes take years to fully to get a commitment and implement so don't stop asking and pushing.

When reflecting you do want to be aware of some common traps. The adage 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease' is very true; and it is common for targets in advocacy campaigns to fix a problem for a particular person or group to appease the situation. It's okay to get your situation fixed but keep pushing the system to change so that the problem doesn't happen again to anyone. Also be sure that groups are not being co-opted, or diverted from their goal/mission, by governing rules, lack of engagement, or a focus on complaining. Advocacy groups are most effective when they have identified specific issues and asks, and the steps to move them forward.

Best Practices When Working with RTAs

The best teachers are the people who have lived it. Information in this section has been developed through conversations and meetings with disability advocates in Massachusetts who have worked on transportation advocacy. Their insight is gathered here for ideas of how to act on the steps in the cycle of organizing for accessible public transportation advocacy.

Listen and Share Concerns

- *Develop relationships and keep calling:* RTA administrators and staff may be difficult to reach. Keep calling. Be polite but direct in your request for a call-back or meeting. If you don't get a response by phone, consider sending a letter and cc'ing your local elected official or a member of the RTA Advisory Board. If you have a new administrator or RTA board member, get in touch with them early in their tenure. This is usually when they are most likely to be receptive to meetings with riders because they are just getting their footing. Since you may not be able to reach the administrator directly, call the RTA

and ask to speak with their Executive/Administrative Assistant of the RTA administrator (refer to the administrator by name). This person will know their schedule and how to get on it.

- *Gather information:* Meet one-on-one in small groups or conduct surveys or listening sessions. Once you have started getting stories, recommend that those interested in supporting the advocacy work help with getting specific information to highlight the issues.
 - Keep a transportation log, blog, or vlog: if your paratransit is regularly late, early or leaves you stranded, or you utilize fixed route transit but face barriers due to accessibility--track your usage of the system. Log exact times rides were promised vs arrived, errors in rides, or cancelled rides (see Appendix D) and their impact on your life. Videos showing the challenges that you face can be especially effective for elected officials, and a good use of time when your ride leaves you waiting. Here is an example from Sophie Korpics, an advocate at NILP: [Sophie's After Work Commute](#)
 - Get details from others: ask other riders to count the number of times a ride is late or otherwise doesn't meet service expectations vs the number of times the system was used. This will allow you to present statistics highlighting your concern.
 - Collect stories of impact: did you miss an important appointment because your ride was late? Or get stranded after an appointment because of a cancellation? Were you unable to take a job because you can't get there? Write the story down with details about what you needed and why, what you received (or didn't receive), and the impact it had on you.
 - Add numbers: stories bring the human side to what we are saying, and numbers put it in perspective. For example, if you are describing how difficult it is to get your usual Saturday errands done using paratransit, add the amount of time you end up waiting for rides and the cost by the end of the day after each ride. For an example see a speech from an AdLib advocate, Valerie Pease, in Appendix B.
- *Get to know local leaders:* RTA advisory board members are usually elected officials. Ask to meet with your town's mayor, city council president, or other local representative. Tell them why the RTA is important to you and get them invested in the importance of accessible public transportation. Local leaders that are elected by you have a stake in your needs. Even if they aren't on the RTA Advisory Board they will know who is and can get you connected or become a champion for your cause.

Develop Leaders and Research

- *Review Publicly Available Information:* RTA meetings are open to the public and notes need to be publicly available. Review them to find out what issues the RTA Advisory Board is currently working on and their current priorities, funding, and names of board members and who regularly attends meetings.
- *Key Statistics:* Ridership and timeliness of services are key performance indicators for RTAs. Learn what else is important to administrators in measuring performance and what funding sources or concerns they have.
- *Survey the environment:* Who are other key stakeholders and how can you get connected? Regional Planning Commissions, Senior Organizations, unions, health care organizations, and business collaboratives (such as local chambers of commerce) all want people to be able to travel throughout the region to access their services. Learn what other RTAs have implemented that have made a difference in accessible public transportation.
- *Timelines:* Know key times in the year when budgets and legislation are being reviewed. Time your actions so that your ask can be heard well in advance. Priorities for spending and legislation are usually set six months before anything is finalized.
- *Identify Key Consumer Advocates:* Know who the people are who are willing to share their stories, attend meetings, or take on other leadership roles. These are the people who will lead the effort. Be sure that they know the importance of their role, and provide regular and specific appreciation for their efforts

Action

- *Show up:* Attend RTA Advisory Board, council, or committee meetings. Even if you don't plan to speak.
- *Invite RTA leadership to a meeting:* Do it in-person with small groups of advocates to tell their personal stories and help them understand the impact. In-person meetings are often more impactful than virtual. They build a sense of trust and relationship, and the people in the room are more active participants.
- *Expand your network:* Join other transportation advocacy groups, City Commissions on Disability, etc. and get to know their leaders. Join their efforts and learn how you can collaborate.
- *Keep the pressure on:* It's rare that you will get a yes to an ask right away, but don't stop. Keep showing up to meetings, sharing stories, and getting consumers to report concerns.

Evaluate and Reflect

- *If you get a small or partial win:* There may be small victories on the way to your goal, but keep asking yourself is it a means to an end or a distraction? Getting a win doesn't mean you stop working towards a goal, it means you celebrate and then remind everyone of what you are ultimately trying to accomplish. No matter what, take time to pause and celebrate with the leaders who were part of the campaign.
- *Values:* Money will always be the biggest barrier, but funding speaks to values, so the role of advocates is to help organizations and systems reprioritize their values.
- *What's effective:* Did a particular story get retold or seem to resonate more with RTA leaders? See if you can gather more. Have that person follow-up. Did a group meeting lead to an invitation for another meeting or to join a committee or council? Then something you are doing is being heard and they want to learn more. Watch for these signs that you are on the right track.
- *Adjust your strategy:* Get feedback from leaders on your requests, sometimes they will let you know if the timing was wrong or if it's something unachievable at this time. Find out if there is key information that you are missing and where you may be able to get it.
- *Keep the pressure on:* Keep asking for meetings, showing up, and raising your concerns. Successful advocacy initiatives can take years.

Success Stories

While we need improved accessible public transportation now, we also need to understand that changing the system doesn't happen overnight. Here are some stories about successes in transportation advocacy to help you stay motivated!

PVTA Paratransit Rider Council: The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) which operates in Hampden and Hampshire Counties, held public forums for paratransit riders three times a year to hear concerns about paratransit operations. These forums identified issues with scheduling and inconsistent time performance which regularly impacted riders. Advocates expressed the need for a Paratransit Rider Council to provide regular feedback and input to RTA staff about service and support implementation of improvements. The RTA heard this feedback and in October 2019 started the PVTA Paratransit Rider Council with the mission “provide a forum for paratransit riders to provide regular input to the PVTA and encourage positive change in the paratransit service with a goal of finding solutions to accessibility and rideability in the community.” The Council has bylaws and meets monthly, with the Director of Transit Operations and the General Manager of Paratransit Operations as members due to their position. While the Council doesn't have the same authority as the Advisory Board, so it doesn't oversee finances or policy, having the Director of Transit Operations and General Manager of Paratransit Operations hearing directly from users of the service means there can be a big impact on services. Due to input from the Council, changes to paratransit services have been made including expanding hours of service (including adding Sunday) for senior van service; ensuring a pick-up call is placed to the rider 10 minutes before the ride is going to arrive; and reducing time needed for scheduling rides from two days in advance to 4:30 the day before.

Link to Paratransit Rider Council Bylaws: [COMPARISON FILE](#)

WRTA Free Fare: In Worcester, advocacy efforts for free fare RTA services began in 2020 as an effort to reduce exposure for drivers and riders during the pandemic. After advocates were successful in securing the initial suspension of fares, advocates and riders saw the impact on ridership and the local economy. Advocates formed a task force consisting of elected officials and business leaders. They looked at data on ridership and the impact of the local economy, commissioning several studies to show all the benefits of the free-fare initiative. The free-fare services were scheduled to end in 2023, but local advocacy groups brought together riders, task force members, WRTA Advisory Board Members, and other local officials. Through this organizing campaign and continued pressure from the community WRTA extended free-fare service through July 2025, the longest running free public transportation system in the country.

Link to story about the Free Fare Coalition: [About Zero Fare – Zero Fare Coalition](#)

Worcester Area Accessible Cabs: The need for on-demand accessible transportation is felt widely in the disability community. In Worcester, a cab company had offered accessible vans,

but the service was poorly run and inefficient, so it stopped being offered. People started calling Yellow Cab Company seeking the service, but they didn't have any accessible vehicles. Local advocates in advisory groups saw this as a need and encouraged riders to keep calling to ask for the service. They also got connected with the owner of Yellow Cab and asked about accessible vehicles, but he was hesitant. Advocates kept calling to ask for the service and pushing the owner. After almost three years, the owner agreed and purchased three wheelchair accessible vans, with two operating at all times. Scheduling can be a challenge since it is a limited number of vehicles, but they are able to provide same-day transportation at a more affordable rate than the RTA paratransit. *Link to news article about Worcester Accessible Cabs:* [Worcester Yellow Cab now offers wheelchair accessible vans](#)

BRTA Pilot of Evening Paratransit Services: For years, advocates in the Berkshires raised concerns regarding the limited paratransit services available on evenings and weekends. Paratransit services ended at 7pm Monday-Friday and earlier on Saturdays. This severely limited paratransit riders' abilities to participate in evening and weekend classes, employment, activities, and groups. It was an issue regularly addressed by the Pittsfield Disability Commission and raised at BRTA Disability Advisory Committee meetings. The RTA grew more open to expanded service hours, though they did not have the funding to for it. However, in December 2024 the BRTA received a grant allowing for a pilot program to offer paratransit services from 7pm-10pm Monday-Saturday. *Link to article about BRTA Pilot Program:* [BRTA Announces New Pilot Pittsfield Paratransit Evening Service / iBerkshires.com - The Berkshires online guide to events, news and Berkshire County community information.](#)

MBTA Ride Fare Reduction: In 2012, the MBTA increased fares for services, but not equally. Most fixed route services went up 23%, but the MBTA paratransit service (The Ride) increased 100% from \$2 to \$4, which led to a reduction in ridership and hardship for seniors and people with disabilities. The Mass Senior Action Council joined together with the Boston Center for Independent Living, Bay State Council of the Blind, and the Public Transit for Good Coalition to work with legislators and transit officials to create a more equitable change in fares. The Mass Senior Action Council made sure that a small group of their members in the group's blue T-shirts were present at every MBTA Advisory Board meeting for a year, even if they weren't speaking, just so that they wouldn't be forgotten. After two years of coordinated advocacy efforts, they convinced the MBTA to agree to a fare reduction of \$1, to \$3 one-way. The Board also agreed to pilot a tiered fare structure based on income. *Link to Mass Senior Action Council website page about Transportation Advocacy:* [Transportation — Mass Senior Action Council](#)

CCRTA Long-Distance Medical Transportation: In 2001, CORD started hearing from consumers about the need to get to Boston for medical appointments. Boston was outside of the Cape Cod Regional Transportation Authority (CCRTA) but still a central area for medical care for Cape

residents. CORD organized listening sessions and shared consumers stories. They let consumers speak from the heart about the impact of not being able to access necessary medical care. Since on-demand paratransit to Boston would be extremely costly, they worked with the RTA to develop a weekly shuttle service to Boston Hospital. Rather than door-to-door it has seven stops throughout the Cape and then drops riders off, returning back in the early afternoon. The shuttle service still runs, now one trip daily four days a week. *Link to page about shuttle service:* [Long-distance Medical Transportation - CCAM-TAC](#)

Some additional examples of advocacy initiatives in progress are:

- *GPS trackers on paratransit vans:* In 2027 the Worcester Regional Transit Authorities (WRTA) will add GPS trackers to their paratransit vans, allowing riders to track the location of their van via mobile devices much like fixed route transportation.
- *Universal Paratransit Application:* There is a Universal Paratransit Application for RTAs, but many still utilize their own application or ask for additional information that is invasive. Advocates are pushing their local RTAs to streamline the application process through use of the universal paratransit application without needing additional medical documentation.
- *Free Fare Expansion:* Free RTA services are showing positive results through increased ridership and advocates are pushing for it to continue.
- *Bill S.2401 An Act Relative to Regional Transit Authorities and Advisory Boards:* This bill would expand terms for Advisory Board members to two years and add a rider representative from Gateway cities. The bill has been sent to the transportation committee for debate, as of this writing. [Bill S.2401](#)
- *Micro-transit:* Micro-transit continues to be explored in communities underserved by RTAs. Bill S.2366 An Act Establishing a Special Commission on Micro-Transit is in the transportation committee. It would develop an official definition for micro-transit in MA as well as create a commission to study existing and emerging micro-transit services and funding. Some examples of successful micro-transit are: [About | Quaboag Connector Home](#)
- *Connecting RTAs:* It is extremely difficult to travel from one side of the state to another, especially from outlying areas. RTAs are starting to work together to develop connecting points to make it easier for riders to go from one region to another. An example in the western part of the state is [Coming Soon, Link 413 Service - Berkshire Regional Transit Authority](#)

Appendix A

References

- ¹ “How Massachusetts Funds Transit (Not Just the T): A guide to how Massachusetts state government finances public transit services across the Commonwealth. M. Volcy. January, 2025. [How Massachusetts Funds Transit \(Not Just the T\) - Streetsblog Massachusetts](#)
- ² “Public transportation in Massachusetts”. Mass.gov, 2025. [Public transportation in Massachusetts | Mass.gov](#)
- ³ “The Transportation Power Mapping Project”. Transportation for MA, 2024. [Transportation Power Mapping](#)
- ⁴ “Cycle of Organizing”. LA Voice, 2025. [Instagram LA Voice | Who We Are - LA Voice](#)
- ⁵ “Regional Transit In Massachusetts: Where we are and where we need to go”. The Heath Foundation, The Center for State Policy Analysis, and Quaboag Connector, 2024. [RTA_Report_QC_HFCA_5-7-24.pdf](#)
- ⁶ “Massachusetts General Law Chapter 161B: Transportation Facilities, Highway Systems, and Urban Development Plans”. The 194th General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2025. [Chapter 161B](#)

Resources

Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA): T4MA is a statewide coalition focused on improving Massachusetts’ transportation systems. T4MA is committed to addressing the decades of inequitable transportation policies adversely impacting low-income, working class, Black, indigenous and communities of color. Their website is a wealth of resources and studies regarding transportation in MA [Home - Transportation for Massachusetts](#)

The National Transit Database provides information on transit agencies and other data. [NTD Transit Agency Profiles | FTA](#)

Information on Massachusetts Transit Connectivity Grants which are working to connect RTAs. [Transit Connectivity Grant | Mass.gov](#)

Western Mass Transportation Advocacy Network (WMTAN): A collective of transportation advocates, enthusiasts, and users imagining a more connected future for Western Massachusetts. Website has an interactive GIS map and blogs [WMTAN – A collective of transportation advocates, enthusiasts, and users imagining a more connected future for Western Massachusetts.](#)

RTA Website Info: spreadsheet developed by staff at AdLib with information from all MA RTA websites including RTA board, disability rider reps, councils and other information.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1L6EdhQRjvFlhuTexubvmA0siLYPvJEXs/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=108711238501795025853&rtpof=true&sd=true>

MA State Accessible Transportation Coalition: group of state ILC advocates working on transportation. Meeting notes and resources are shared in a google drive

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19bpwoYtllWguHm4gGhWEhdfBVXUFizU1?usp=drive_link

Appendix B

Speech for Berkshire County Legislative Breakfast, March 2024.

By Valerie Pease, AdLib

Good morning, everyone, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about some of my experiences with affordable, accessible transportation. Let me first start by saying that I am a divorced single mother of 4 adult boys and currently a grandmother of 2. I say this only because transportation does impact my ability to be involved in their lives. I am also my mother's Durable Power of Attorney and Health Care Proxy.

I can't even begin to stress the importance of good quality, affordable, accessible transportation in any of these roles. Our local transportation system currently requires that you book rides 3 days in advance. You must also have at least 30 minutes between your drop-off time and pick-up time. My mother being hospitalized for the flu could not be planned 3 days in advance. Apparently, her discharge and later transfer to another facility couldn't be either. During this difficult time, I had to pay for same day transportation at least once. (\$15.00). Even though it would have been free if I had been able to schedule 3 days in advance.

I am very grateful that most of my transportation is free right now. I often need to go to the bank, grocery store, and to visit my mom on Saturdays. This results in 6 trips that would cost \$15. Most days, I go to work, visit my mom and then go home. This would be \$7.50 per day. Last week the BRTA canceled my trips to go see my mom one day, because of staffing issues. Luckily, I was able to utilize AdLib's van service.

We need affordable, accessible, after-hours transportation. We also need Sunday transportation for everyone. I have had times where I have had to wait at places for an hour or more, because the system requires you to wait at least 30 minutes between your drop-off time and pick-up time. I have also had times when I have had to leave meetings early because my transportation arrived before the meeting was over. Right now, there is no way to change it at the last minute.

Transportation is a lifesaving and life sustaining tool and mechanism for many people with disabilities. It is what creates the difference between just surviving and thriving. It allows people access to good quality medical care, healthy food, job training and job placement. It also helps to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Without affordable, accessible transportation, many of us would be sitting at home doing nothing.

These are just a few of the many reasons why I am asking you to please support affordable, accessible same day transportation, on demand transportation, Micro-transit pilot programs and the continuance of fare free transportation.

Appendix C

Points on Transportation Advocacy with RTAs

From Bill Henning, BCIL

Following are advocacy points shared with advocates from independent living centers during a meeting in August 2025.

1. Work with people who use the system — let them tell the challenges— and the good of the system (it's good to be positive when it's warranted)— in their own words. Advocacy is human narrative, human stories! Also know facts as best you can.
2. Attend the board meetings of RTAs.
3. Invite RTA leadership to a meeting to discuss concerns, ideally in person— Zoom meetings can deflate our person power! Invite officials to ride (or not ride) their service with you to show the challenges. Developing and nurturing relationships is important.
4. Be focused and consistent in your requests.
5. Follow-up is vital—RTAs face numerous demands, don't rely on the validity of your concern. Your rightness on the issue is your power, but you can't rely on them kneeling before you. Attend meetings again and again. Be a presence. Be a squeaky wheel. Consider protest if need be.
6. Find allies, this can be a big asset. They may be senior groups or transportation advocates or programs for low-income persons or people with disabilities.
7. Ensure there is a consistent organizer for your advocacy— there needs to be someone to remind people of meetings, to help with talking points, to contact public officials, to keep people involved. Advocacy on transportation concerns, like that for any issue, should be focused. It is ongoing work; one-off advocacy seldom works.

Appendix D

Transportation Service Tracking Log Example

Date	Time Expected	Time Arrived	Call Received	Impact	Notes
8/31/25	10am	10:45	Y, said 10 min took 15	Late for appointment	Dr waived 15 min rule and let me be seen

Appendix E

Transportation Dictionary

- Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA)
- Brockton Area Transit (BAT)
- Cape Ann Transit Authority (CATA)
- Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA)
- Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA)
- Greater Attleboro-Taunton Transit Authority (GATRA)
- Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA)
- Martha's Vineyard Transit Authority (VTA)
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority "THE RIDE" (MBTA)
- Merrimack Valley Transit Authority (MeVa)
- MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA)
- Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART)
- Nantucket Regional Transit Authority (NRTA)
- Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVRTA)
- Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (SRTA)
- Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA)
- Nantucket Steamship Authority (SSA)
- AAA- Area Agencies on Aging
- ACL- Administration for Community Living
- ADRC- Aging and Disability Resource Consortium
- AFC- Automated Fare Collection
- ANSI- American National Standards Institute
- APTA- American Public Transportation Association
- ASAPs- Aging Services Access Points
- CAPs- Corrective Action Plans
- CCAM- Coordinating Council on Accessibility and Mobility
- CCAM-TAC- Coordinating Council on Accessibility and Mobility Technical Assistance Center
- CDC- Center for Disease Control and Prevention
- CECP- Clean Energy and Climate Plan
- CHNA- Community Health Network Areas
- CHST(P)- Coordinated Public Transit- Human Services Transportation Services Plans
- CIP- Capital Improvement Program
- CLW- Center for Living and Working
- CMS- Centers for Medicaid/ Medicare
- COA- Council On Aging
- CRTPs- Comprehensive Regional Transit Plans
- CTPS- Central Transportation Planning Staff
- EOEA- Executive Office of Elderly Affairs
- EOHHS- Executive Office of Health and Human Services
- FLSA- Fair Labor Standards Act
- FTA- Federal Transit Administration
- GTFS- General Transit Feed Specifications
- HRSN- Health Related Social Needs
- HST- Human Services Transportation Office
- ICAM- Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility
- ILC- Independent Living Center
- LRTP- Long-Range Transportation Plans
- MAPC- Metropolitan Area Planning Council
- MCO- Managed Care Organization
- MCOA- Massachusetts Council On Aging
- MEPA- Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act
- MPO- Metropolitan Planning Organization
- NCMM- National Center for Mobility Management
- NEMT- Non-Emergency Medical Transportation
- NEMTAC- Non-Emergency Medical Transport Accreditation Commission
- NET- Non-Emergency Transportation Advisory Committee
- OTP- On-Time Performance
- P3- Public Private Partnership
- PIPs- Performance Improvement Plans
- QVQDC- Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation
- RCC- Regional Coordinating Council
- REDOs- Regional Economic Development Organizations
- RMM- Regional Mobility Management
- RPA/C- Regional Planning Agency/ Commission
- RTAP- Rural Transit Assistance Program
- RTP- Regional Transportation Plans
- TDM- Transportation Demand Management
- TIP- Transportation Improvement Programs
- TNCs- Transportation Network Companies
- TOD- Transit Oriented Development
- RideMatch- Public website with info about RTAs and trips (MA DOT)
- Keolis- MBTA private company that reports to the general manager
- Independent Regional Transit Providers- Smaller than RTAs, think Quaboag Connector
- Bikeshare- An initiative to get more people using bikes around the city at low or no cost.

Notes on Your Plan for Transportation Advocacy