

MEMORANDUM

NTC-C 17-2024

**Subject: Commingled Services – Service Issues Update
(Board and Regional Council)**

Date: August 27, 2024

To: Niagara Transit Commission

From: Edward Zahra, Deputy General Manager of Customer Experience

Commingled microtransit service was launched on July 2, 2024, with the objective of improving service flexibility and efficiency for transit riders across Niagara and the Niagara Transit Commission (NTC). The service model is expected to enhance the overall customer experience by providing more versatile and accessible transit options, and NTC remains committed to resolving service challenges in the early rollout phase and building confidence in the new service model.

The transition to a single service provider was a significant change management endeavor, and it was assumed that incorporating five contracts into one would create change management issues and added customer care needs during the transition. As NTC and Voyago (new provider) entered the first weeks of service delivery, issues were triaged and NTC enhanced customer communication, scheduled more staff, reviewed vehicle allocation strategies, ensured transparency in service delivery challenges with our riders and the Board, and engaged local stakeholders.

Catalogued Challenges

NTC staff have investigated the operational and logistical challenges that have impacted both the NTC and its customers. We understand the impact these challenges have on our customers' lives and empathize with the difficulties they have experienced. The disruption of these vital services can lead to severe consequences, highlighting the urgent need to address these issues promptly and effectively. The situation is especially critical for specialized transit customers who rely on these services for essential travel activities, such as attending medical appointments or participating in specialized programs. For many, this transit service is the only means of transportation available to them, and without it, riders could become home-bound or miss crucial, potentially life-saving treatments.

1. **Vehicle Capacity:** The initial rollout faced an immediate shortage of WAV (wheelchair accessible vehicles) during peak periods, causing unmet demand, particularly for customers with mobility aids and or disabilities. Passenger accessibility needs were not interpreted from NTC's data appropriately, leading to a shortage of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the initial roll out of fleet.
2. **High Demand Periods and Extended Hold Times:** Call volumes substantially increased during the transition. Customers struggled to book trips during peak times, leading to significant wait times and frustration. Regardless of extending NTC live agent hours to 11:00 pm to address transition issues, many customers called during peak times for information about the new app and services, not to book rides. This influx resulted in extended hold times, frustrating customers and contributing to a perception of unreliability and inadequate support. NTC customer service staff worked diligently to respond to all calls and inquiries to ensure customers who could not access the information available on the website or in mailed out communications prior to the roll out could be assisted.
3. **Unconventional Payment Methods:** Payment methods have been aligned to mirror the methods offered on conventional and in-house specialty vehicles. As some previous service providers managed payments differently, this led to confusion for some customers.
4. **Abandoned and Delayed Rides:** Vehicle type and capacity challenges led to abandoned rides and significant delays, undermining rider trust in NTC's ability to provide reliable service.
5. **On-Time Performance (OTP) Confusion:** Rider misunderstanding about what 'OTP' metrics mean in the booking of their trips caused dissatisfaction, as customers had to adjust to expecting guaranteed on-time arrivals at their destination vs. having a guaranteed on-time pickup time.
6. **New Customer Base:** One hundred (100+) plus new applications were received for specialized service immediately following the launch due to increased public communication around the service. New riders require more information and care and this compounded call volumes and trip requests.

7. Other Issues: Pass purchase confusion, community day program vehicle assignments, accommodating 'ambulatory' customers requiring accessible vehicles, and unconventional previous subscription (standing order) booking practices also contributed to noted challenges.

Assurances and Actions Taken from Voyago

In response to these issues, Voyago has undertaken several immediate actions and proposed solutions. These measures include increasing the fleet of WAV vehicles, enhancing staff training, optimizing scheduling, and improving customer communication as detailed below.

1. Increased vehicle count: Voyago has assured and initiated the expansion of the specialized transit fleet. Initially rolling out the service with five (5) WAV vehicles on the road, there are now ten (10) WAV vehicles in service as of August 10, 2024. A total of seventeen (17) WAV vehicles are to be in service by October 1, 2024, which exceeds the original estimate of seven (7) in the RFP, at the provider's cost. This commitment aims to address the inadequacy of accessible vehicles identified in the initial rollout phase and to improve service reliability.
2. Booking Platform Improvement: Voyago is also working with their software provider on simulations to optimize scheduling and address operational delays, with a detailed update expected by September 10, 2024. This initiative aims to refine vehicle configurations needed as more vehicles are introduced into the service and improve overall efficiency.
3. Abandoned and delayed rides mitigation: A plan to manage abandoned rides was requested by NTC, including a detailed report on the costs incurred and proposed measures for NTC's cost recovery. This is an essential step toward minimizing future occurrences, managing financial implications, and regaining customer trust in the overall service.
4. Multi-Modal Integration: The proposed capabilities by the contractor for integrating different transit modes in the new app will be fully realized by expanding availability of multi-modal (bus to van to bus) travel options.

5. Staffing: An increase in staffing levels, to include the hiring of a dedicated supervisor and the addition of refresher training for new operators, was outlined. This is crucial to address the gaps in service delivery and to ensure all personnel are adequately and actively managed, trained and equipped to perform their roles.

Voyago has committed to providing timely updates and responsive communication to NTC staff, ensuring transparency in operations, and fostering a collaborative problem-solving approach.

Conclusion

NTC staff are actively collaborating with our contractor to ensure that the necessary resources, communications with the public and riders and supports moving forward into the final roll out are in place. Engaging with stakeholders and maintaining transparent communication are crucial in navigating this transition and improving the overall customer experience.

The NTC Board's support is essential in these efforts as we strive to deliver a reliable and accessible transit service for all residents, especially those who depend on it for their daily needs and well-being. We will continue to provide updates on our progress.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Edward Zahra
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