

The Top 15 Hot Tips for Wheel-Trans Consumers

by Nancy Barry & John Mossa

On Thursday, June 6, 2002, we went to a Toronto Transit Commission (TTC)/Wheel-Trans Open Forum on Accessible Transit. From a Wheel-Trans consumer perspective, this article will review the various initiatives brought forth at the Open Forum to improve accessible transit in Toronto. It will provide new and useful consumer information, strategies, and commentary on the services of Wheel-Trans and the TTC.

The Wheel-Trans Application Process

A consumer who wants to use Wheel-Trans must go through an initial in-person interview with a Wheel-Trans representative. The interviewee calls Wheel-Trans Customer Service to set up an initial meeting. There are 12 locations across the City of Toronto at which these meetings can take place, in order to accommodate the interviewee.

The eligibility standards are based on a consumer's level of physical/functional mobility, not on particular disabilities, general health or income. During the interview, the Wheel-Trans interviewer will ask the consumer a number of eligibility questions such as:

- What types of accessible transportation you currently use?
- How many steps can you climb?
- How far can you walk?
- Do you use assistive devices for mobility?
- Is your home accessible?

Each question has various categories that have a point value. Based on your answers, the Wheel-Trans interviewer records your responses and scores your answers on a points system. To be eligible for Wheel-Trans, you must score enough points. A letter will inform you whether or not you have been accepted onto the service within 10 business days.

If accepted, you will receive a registration card and an information package so that you can begin reserving your rides.

If you are not accepted, you will receive a rejection letter, a copy of your interview application and instructions on how to appeal.

You'll have 21 days in which to appeal this decision and will be required to meet with an In-Person Appeal Committee (there are four locations in Toronto). The

Appeal Committee consists of three members: a Wheel-Trans user, a physiotherapist and an occupational therapist. In 10 business days, they will inform you of their decision by letter.

If the Appeals committee turns you down, you can re-apply if your level of physical functional mobility has changed or if six months have passed since your appeal. You can also contact the Ontario Human Rights Commission at 416-326-9511 or get some legal advice from ARCH at 416-482-8255.

Strategies to Achieve a Successful In-person Interview

- a) **Get Peer Support.** Prior to going to an In-person Eligibility Interview, talk to other Wheel-Trans consumers who have gone through the application process. Ask them for advice, useful tips and strategies. Talk to disability groups or organizations such as CILT, Transportation Action Now (TAN) at 416-425-3463 x389, and the Anne Johnston Health Station at 416-486-8666.
- b) **Use your worst physical mobility day.** During your interview, answer questions using your worst day for physical mobility as a reference point. Wheel-Trans looks for any information that will deem you ineligible.
- c) **Use Wheel-Trans for your Interview/Appeals.** You will be demonstrating to Wheel-Trans that you have no other means of accessible transit to get you around the city.
- d) **Get Medical Documents to Support Your Application.** Get your doctor or health professional to write a letter stating that you have serious physical functional mobility limitations and thus require Wheel-Trans.

How to Book a Ride

There are three ways to book a ride with Wheel-Trans:

a) One day in advance trip Reservations

In the first case, Wheel-Trans consumers book trips one day in advance by calling the reservations line on a first come, first serve basis. The earlier you call to book a ride, the better your chances of having your ride accommodated. The problem is that the lines are always busy when the reservations line opens up at 7 AM. It usually takes up to 20 to 30 minutes to get through and another five minutes to reserve a ride. If you wait much longer past 8 AM, you may not be guaranteed a ride and may have to go on a waiting list.

b) Prebook Service

If you travel to the same destination (e.g. work, school, shopping or medical appointments) at the same time at least once a week for at least four consecutive weeks, you are eligible for Prebook service. Prebook eliminates the need to call one day in advance and deal with the waiting time to get through to the busy reservations office. But this service isn't for everyone.

c) RideLine

The RideLine is an automated computer based voice system requiring consumers to have a touch-tone service. Consumers without touch-tone service are required to call Reservations to book or find out when they have rides. When using the RideLine, you will be asked to enter your registration number and your personal password, which is simply your month and date of birth. For example, if you were born on October 8, your password would be 1008.

The RideLine allows you to: a) Get trip information and make cancellations; b) Make Express Trip bookings; c) Get Prebook Trip information and Temporary Cancellations; d) Phone Listings and Hours of Operation, and e) Get access to Wheel-Trans Operating Guidelines and Services.

RideLine's Newly Automated Express Trip Booking

Wheel-Trans has recently implemented a new and excellent initiative. You can now book your trips through a touch-tone phone and avoid long wait times when calling reservations. The RideLine has 24 additional phone lines to book your rides, thus improving access and chances of getting rides immediately.

In order to use the Automated Express Trip booking service, you must first call Reservations between 10 AM and 3 PM to create a list of your most common destinations and assign a number to each. Once you have set up your list, ask Wheel-Trans to mail you a copy and also ask for a brochure containing detailed information on how to use the new system.

Helpful Tip: It is a good idea to have a pen and piece of paper to write down your list of destinations and assigned number so that you can start to use the Automated Service immediately.

Wheel-Trans Cancellation Policies

Wheel-Trans now has two separate cancellation policies. The first is the one that

we're all familiar with, the "Late Cancellation/No-Show Policy." The second one is the "75 per cent Prebook Usage Policy."

Late Cancellation/No-Show Policy:

This policy refers to "Single Trip Bookings." It applies to any Wheel-Trans customer who exceeds one or more of the following conditions in a one-month period.

- a) Maximum six late cancellations (canceling after 11 PM the day before the trip).
- b) Maximum three no-shows (occurs you are more than five minutes late of your pick up time or vehicle arrival time) or rides cancelled at the door.
- c) Maximum seven combined late cancellations and no shows/rides cancelled at the door.

Cancellations and no-shows are recorded on a single one-way trip basis. A cancelled round trip counts as two cancellations.

Cancellation Policy Steps:

It should be noted that each of the policy actions listed below is subject to an appeal and the actions described below would only be taken if the appeal were unsuccessful.

The policy actions are as follows:

- a) After exceeding the Late Cancellation/No-Show Policy for the first time in a one-month period, an advisory letter is issued but no action is taken against you.
- b) A second occurrence within a twelve-month period from the date of the first advisory letter will result in a second letter advising you of a two-day suspension from service.
- c) A third occurrence within a twelve-month period of the second occurrence will result in a letter advising you of a seven-day suspension from service.
- d) A fourth violation within a twelve-month period will result in a 30-day suspension.
- e) If the registrant stays free of violations for one year, your record of past violations will be cleared.

Customer Appeal Process

An appeal process is available to all Wheel-Trans registrants as detailed below:

- a) For the first advisory letter and two-day suspension a registrant receives, the registrant must call Wheel-Trans to present their appeal to a Community Service Representative who will make a final decision.
- b) For the third and subsequent policy actions, the registrant must appeal in writing to Customer Service. In cases where a resolution cannot be achieved to the satisfaction of both parties, the appeal will be referred to an Appeal Panel consisting of two Wheel-Trans representatives and a member of the Advisory Committee on Accessible Transportation.
- c) All appeals must be received by Wheel-Trans within 14 days of the date that the suspension or advisory letter was issued. Appeals related to the third or subsequent letter of suspension must be made in writing, to the attention of "Late Cancellation/No-Show Appeals" and sent to:

Wheel-Trans Customer Service
580 Commissioners Street
Toronto, Ontario
M4M 1A7

- d) Failure to appeal within 14 days of the policy action will result in the automatic application of the appropriate policy action.
- e) While the appeal is in process, the registrant will continue to have access to Wheel-Trans service.

4. 75 per cent Prebook Usage Policy

Customers are required to use at least 75 per cent of their Prebook trips each month in order to continue being eligible for Prebook Service. For example, a customer who uses Prebook Service to travel 20 times a month (counting the ride there and back as two separate rides) will be required to use at least 15 of those trips.

If you have to cancel a Prebook trip, you must do so at least 48 hours in advance for it not to be held against you. No-shows and trips cancelled at the door are also counted in the 75 per cent.

Customers who have not used at least 75 per cent of the Prebook trips within a month will no longer be eligible for Prebook service and will not be able to use the service for a period of one month. During that time, you will have to advance book your trips by calling the reservations line the day before you require the trip.

After one month, the customer can request Prebook Service again, however the exact ride times may no longer be available and your request may be placed on a waiting list. In other words, if you become suspended from Prebook Service then you basically are starting from scratch after a month and you must apply for new Prebooks.

Customers who repeatedly violate the 75 per cent Prebook Usage Policy may become permanently ineligible for Prebook Service.

PLEASE NOTE:

- a) When you violate the 75 per cent Prebook Usage Policy, you do not receive a first letter of warning as you do with the Late Cancellation/No-Show Policy. You will receive a letter telling you in advance that your Prebook trips will be cancelled.
- b) When you are modifying an existing Prebook trip, as long as you are eventually going to your original Prebook destination, the modification will NOT be seen as cancellation. However if your modification doesn't include your going to your Prebook destination at all, then you must cancel at least 48 hours in advance.

The Negative Impact of Late Cancellation/No Show Policies on Consumers

There is a common fear by all Wheel-Trans customers regarding Wheel-Trans' cancellation/no show policies. Wheel-Trans implemented this policy to crack down on few chronic abusers who cancelled rides late or didn't show up frequently.

However, the effect of this policy has been to punish the majority of users with fear to just weed out the few bad apples. It is a terrible thing to live with constant worry or fear about how many cancellations or no shows you have this month or next month. To think that you might be suspended from service because you have cancelled or didn't show up for a ride. It affects your dignity as a human being and makes you feel like a child instead of an adult. How would the general public react if they were faced with the same punitive restrictions? The answer is simple. There would be tremendous public outrage and immediate policy changes.

Now Wheel-Trans says it will waive late cancellations or no shows if you have a valid reason such as sickness. However, it still does take into account that we are like the general population and have ever changing daily schedules.

In light of the most recent settlement won by six Ontario Human Rights Commission complainants with disabilities against Wheel-Trans/TTC, this ineffective and paternalistic policy that must be challenged and changed. Consumer based solutions and feedback must be sought to replace it or Human Rights case must be made.

Wheel-Trans Free Cell Phone Calls and Priority Line

Bell Mobility and Rogers AT&T have agreed to provide free cell phone calls for

Wheel-Trans customers calling Wheel-Trans by using either of the numbers listed below:

Bell Mobility - #88298
Rogers AT&T - *88298

By calling these numbers, you will be connected directly to the priority cancellation line in the Wheel-Trans Reservations Office at 416-393-4311.

These calls are answered in priority for customers who are:

- Canceling rides
- Reporting vehicle No-Show problems
- Inquiring about trips that are 30 minutes or more late

Wheel-Trans customers who do not have access to a cell phone may also call 416-393-4311 for the above purposes.

This is a priority line, to be used by Wheel-Trans customers for the specific reasons listed. Any other calls made to the Priority Line will not be served. Customers will be asked to call back using the regular Wheel-Trans Reservations number at 416-393-4222.

Bell Mobility or Rogers AT&T customers may contact Wheel-Trans Customer Service weekdays between 8 AM and 4 PM for more information about using this new service.

Wheel-Trans customers interested in subscribing to this cell phone service should contact their local Bell Mobility or Rogers AT&T agent.

Zone Bus Service

Zone Service is supposed to offer improved flexibility to handle increased demand while providing more spontaneous rides to Wheel-Trans customers. A 30-minute pick-up window is provided when the ride is booked, so there is no need to call RideLine or the Reservations office to obtain scheduled pick-up times. You will be given a 30-minute pickup window (e.g. 8 to 8:30 AM). You should be ready and waiting for your ride at the pickup point five minutes before your 30-minute window begins. For example, if your window is 8 to 8:30 AM then you should begin waiting from 7:55 AM. This means that your ride can come any time between 8 to 8:30 AM. Drivers will wait five minutes past the vehicle arrival time before leaving for their next scheduled pickup.

30-Minute Trip Booking Window

Beginning soon Wheel-Trans will be scheduling ALL trips within a 30-minute

window, similar to that of the Zone Bus service. So when you book your rides, you will be given a 30-minute pickup window. You will no longer be given an exact pickup and drop-off time so you will not have to call the RideLine after 7 PM to obtain your times because there won't be any exact time. You will be expected to be ready and waiting for your ride at the pickup point five minutes before your 30-minute window begins. As with the Zone bus trips, drivers will wait five minutes past the vehicle arrival time before leaving for their next scheduled pickup.

However, if your ride is late you will not have to wait an additional 20 minutes past the end of your window before you can call Wheel-Trans.

Callback for Service Updates

Accompanying this new "30-Minute Pickup Window" will be a callback feature for service updates if you desire. If your ride is running more than half an hour late, Wheel-Trans will call you at a number you can be reached at to let you know that your ride will be late. You must supply Wheel-Trans with the telephone number that you wish to be contacted.

This new service will begin once the 30-Minute Trip Booking Window has been implemented.

For more information, please call Wheel-Trans Customer Service at 416-393-4111, Monday to Friday, 8 AM to 4 PM.

Accessible Service Flashcards

Regular TTC Service has introduced the Accessible Service Flashcard for consumers who have difficulty communicating their needs to TTC bus drivers. Consumers can now show the Flashcard to indicate to TTC drivers that they require assistance boarding lift equipped regular buses.

The Flashcards are available by calling Wheel-Trans Customer Service or (in limited numbers) at the Collector booths at accessible subway stations.

Express Buses

Wheel-Trans has two Express Bus Services for consumers in the Scarborough Area and the South Etobicoke Area travelling to the Downtown Toronto Area. The Express Bus Service only works on weekdays. On weekends and holidays, for trips outside the Express Service Area, the regular Wheel-Trans door-to-door service applies. Rides and transfer points will automatically be scheduled when you call reservations to book your ride. The benefit of the Express Bus Service is improved shared rides, thereby improving ride availability. Wheel-Trans is encouraging consumers to integrate and transfer to accessible TTC

Subway/Rapid Transit Stations and Bus Routes.

The Scarborough Express Service area is from Lawrence Avenue in the south, Brimley Road in the West, Pickering Town Line in the east and Steeles Avenue in the North, to be dropped off at the designated location, which is the Scarborough Centre Station and then transfer to a new Wheel-Trans bus headed towards downtown Toronto.

The South Etobicoke Express Service area is from Lake Ontario in the south, Mississauga City Limits in the West, Royal York Road in the east and Rathburn Road in the North, to be dropped off at the designated location, which is the Kipling TTC Subway Station and then transfer to a new Wheel-Trans bus headed towards downtown Toronto.

Complaints

If you wish to file a complaint or give a commendation, you can call Customer Service at 416-393-4111.

Strategies for Filing a Complaint

- a) If an incident occurs with a Wheel-Trans Bus driver or Taxi driver, record the time of your ride, the date, the bus number or the taxi driver's name and what was said or done to you.
- b) If you are calling Reservations, Dispatch or Customer Service, always get the person's name. If an incident occurs, you always have that person's name. As well, record the information in point A.
- c) Be careful what you say when speaking to anyone at Wheel-Trans. You are being recorded and if you use abusive or threatening language, you could be cut off Wheel-Trans Service.
- d) Once you have all the information around the incident, call Customer Service and file a complaint.
- e) Ask for Follow Up. Tell the Customer Service Representative to call you back to inform you about what was done with your complaint. If you are not satisfied, ask to speak to their Supervisor.

Commendations

It is always nice to give recognition to Wheel-Trans staff who are helpful and courteous. It is important not to just complain but also praise Wheel-Trans service when it is warranted. If you wish to give a commendation, you can call Customer Service.

Other Wheel-Trans Operating Policies

Five-Minute Waiting Period

Consumers are asked to be ready at their pick up location five minutes prior to their scheduled pick up time. If you are running late, the bus or taxi driver will wait five minutes past your pick up time or when the vehicle arrived before leaving a "No Show" ticket and going on to their next pick up. For example, if you have a pick up time at 8 AM, you should be ready at 7:55 AM. If you are running late, the bus or taxi driver will wait until 8:05 AM before they leave and go on to their next pick up.

One-Step and Parcel Policy

Wheel-Trans provides door-to-door accessible transit service for trips within the City of Toronto. Drivers are required to escort consumers to and from the first accessible door at all locations.

Wheel-Trans drivers do not take wheelchairs, whether occupied or not, up or down more than one step. Electric wheelchairs and scooters must use ramps or lifts.

Drivers are not required to carry parcels/groceries to or from vehicles.

Doorbell, Entering Premises and Identifying Consumer Policies

Drivers are not required to ring doorbells or knock on doors. Drivers are required to enter public buildings and announce their presence. Drivers are not permitted to enter your home.

Consumers are asked to identify themselves to drivers who will confirm their name and trip destination.

Fares

Consumers are required to pay regular TTC fares. If you do not have proper fare, Wheel-Trans will still accommodate your ride but you will have a "No Fare" registered on your account. You will have up to 30 days to pay the fare by sending a cheque to Wheel-Trans. Failure to do so will result in suspension from service.

The 2002 Accessible Transit Network

The TTC are continuing to make an effort to make regular transit system more accessible for seniors and persons with disabilities (see enclosure). There are now 34 TTC routes with lift and low floor buses, four community buses, and two Blue Night routes. There are currently 15 subway stations with two Scarborough Rapid Transit stations, where elevators provide access to train platforms and facilitate transfers to and from Wheel-Trans or accessible conventional buses.

