



EL DORADO TRANSIT

Dial-A-Ride Focus Group Final Report

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DIAL-A-RIDE FOCUS GROUP FINAL REPORT

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I. Background

For many years the El Dorado County Transit Authority (El Dorado Transit) Dial-A-Ride (DAR) service has provided an important lifeline transportation link to the residents of El Dorado County, especially for the transit dependent senior and disabled community who reside in areas where there are no local fixed route services. DAR is used for a variety of purposes such as trips to medical appointments, pharmacies, and grocery stores to name a few.

DAR operates primarily using Americans with Disabilities (ADA) accessible minivan vehicles. This service operates within El Dorado County (EDC) in which the population density varies. Examples of some of the areas with a higher population density are Placerville, Cameron Park and El Dorado Hills. Areas served with a lower population density are Lotus, Rescue and Pleasant Valley.

To make the service as efficient as possible schedulers attempt to book trip requests together within a reasonable range of distance. However, there are factors which limit the ability to do so due to challenges such as the timeframe of the trip request, travel time in the van and capacity constraints. It's much easier to group like trips together when they travel at relatively the same times and same general geographical locations. It is quite challenging to provide a trip that originates in Lotus going to Cameron Park and others originating in Placerville with the same general destination.

Another factor for consideration is the cost of the trips in the more rural parts of the service area. It goes without saying that multiple trips grouped together in more populated areas with more services can be provided at much lower costs.

In January 2024, El Dorado Transit received the Final Report of the Short-Range Transit Plan produced by DanTec Associates. As cited in the document the study for Demand Response/ADA Paratransit/Sac-Med found:

Dial-A-Ride serving the fixed route service area and select communities beyond is available only to registered seniors and persons with disabilities. Trips are by reservation and can be requested up to three business days in advance of the desired trip. Service operates daytimes on weekdays and weekends. Fares are distance-based, paid with cash, scrip and the Connect Card cash purse. The same groups are eligible for SAC-MED a limited shared-ride, pre-booked, nonemergency medical service two days each week.

For evaluating El Dorado Transit (EDT), data was collected on nine peer agencies in similar communities in California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. Four peers were in California, one in Oregon, two in Washington, and two in British Columbia.

The major differences between El Dorado Transit EDT and the group of selected peers include the following:

- *Demand-response operating costs per hour are above average.*
- *EDT provides more services than most peers, including providing Sac-Med to Sacramento*

El Dorado Transit staff formed an objective ad hoc Dial-A-Ride Focus Group (group) consisting of users and stakeholders within the community. This group was asked to evaluate and make recommendations on service improvements and review the following customer service policies to determine if changes were warranted:

- *Implementation of new software*
 - *On demand reservations – no waiting*
 - *Self-Booking*
- *Fare Options – going to Flat Rate Fare*
- *No Show / Cancellation Policy*
- *Driver Responsibilities*

I. Summary of Dial-A-Ride Focus Group Recommendations

Through this process the DAR Focus Group recommended the following changes to the services:

- Move to “on demand” booking.
- Eliminate 3-day booking when the new software, is in place.
- Eliminate mileage-based fares.
- Adopt a Flat Rate
- No changes to the No-Show/Cancellation Policy
- No changes to the Driver Responsibilities

Dial-A-Ride Focus Group Members

The Focus Group consisted of the following members:

User / Stakeholders

Dan Bolster, Senior Transportation Planner, EDCTC
Jody Bailey, Mother Lode Rehabilitation Enterprises
Jonie Thompson, Dial A Ride Passenger
Colleen Whitcombe, Dial A Ride Passenger

El Dorado Transit Staff

Brian James, Executive Director, El Dorado Transit
Kristin Halverson, Operations Manager, El Dorado Transit
Breana Berry, Dispatch Supervisor, El Dorado Transit

Dial-A-Ride Service Overview

DAR has long been an important element of El Dorado Transit services. DAR is the only service that is accessible to the lower density rural and suburban portions of the service area, where fixed or flex route service is not feasible. Dial-A-Ride is an important additional service for the more urban areas as well. Dial-A-Ride services are a strategic part of the overall goal of addressing traffic congestion, air quality, and other “quality of life” issues.

DAR service began in 1975 and is a curb-to-curb demand-response service. The service is available weekdays between the hours of 7:30 AM and 5:00 PM and weekends between the hours of 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM.

Sac-Med is a shared-ride non-emergency medical appointment transportation service for seniors (60 or older) or disabled persons. Sac-Med only operates on Tuesdays and Thursdays for medical appointments in the greater Sacramento area made between 10:00am and 2:00pm.

Complimentary Paratransit (ADA) is an origin to destination transportation service operating during the same hours as the local fixed route services. The ADA Paratransit Service operates within ¾ of a mile of the local fixed route services provided within the Placerville, Pollock Pines, Cameron Park and Diamond Springs areas for ADA eligible passengers. ADA eligible passengers may schedule a complimentary paratransit trip during regular business hours, 8:00am to 5:00pm the day prior to the trip request. The complimentary paratransit fare is \$3.00 one-way.

Evaluation of Service Improvement Recommendations

This following section provides the service improvement analysis by the Focus Group and their recommendations.

A. Implementation of New Software

- Self-Booking
- On Demand Reservations (no/shorter booking period)

Study Comments

For possible improvements for Dial-A-Ride, respondents were asked to indicate, on a five-point scale, if they would be likely to ride more or likely to ride less. Changing the rules to allow same day bookings and introducing a phone app-based reservations received the most positive responses with 52 percent saying they would be likely to or might ride more.

If the advanced booking period were reduced to 2 days, 48 percent of respondents would be likely to or might ride more.

Committee Member Comments

Jody Bailey stated that on-demand reservations will help her clients become more independent. Jonie Thompson stated that passengers don't like the 3-day waiting/booking period.

Staff Comments

Staff agree that scheduling up to 3 days in advance has an advantage. It allows individuals a chance at a chosen date by not allowing another individual to book the same date/time continuously, thereby not allowing any others an opportunity for the same date/time.

However, with the implementation of the new software and the hiring of more staff, we could soon move to eliminate the need to schedule up to 3 days in advance.

B. Fare Options

- **Flat Rate Fares**
- **Mileage Based Fares**

Study Comments

Dial-A-Ride has a unique mileage-based fare system which results in some trips being more expensive than ADA Paratransit, which is double the price of fixed route buses. However, shorter Dial-A-Ride trips are less expensive than ADA Paratransit. The results show that about 19 percent of polled users say they use Dial-A-Ride because it is cheaper than ADA Paratransit, and 21 percent find ADA Paratransit less expensive than Dial-A-Ride.

Fares are calculated on a distance basis with trips of up to four miles at \$2.00 and \$0.50 for each mile thereafter.

The service plan recommends opening the Dial-A-Ride service to all passengers regardless of age or disability but only providing the service in areas beyond .75 miles of a fixed route transit service. The service area outer limits would be extended to include some additional areas on the fringe of the suburban area. It is recommended that the fare for the new Dial-A-Ride service be set at \$2.50 for all trips. A discount for seniors and persons with disabilities is not required by federal regulations for demand responsive services and it is recommended that the current policy of not offering a discount for students as well be continued.

The proposed fare of \$2.50 would include a free transfer to the local fixed route service. Passengers from an area without fixed route service to a distant point on the fixed route network would be required to transfer, at no cost, to the fixed route line to complete their trip.

It was recommended that the mileage-based fare system be eliminated, and a single flat rate fare be applied across the recommended service area. This will greatly simplify the service, aiding passengers' ability to use the system as well as making it easier for dispatchers, drivers, and management staff to market, explain and monitor. The recommended flat rate fare is \$3.00 per one-way trip.

Committee Member Comments

Jonie Thompson stated that she would prefer the flat rate fare and the option to pay at booking. Colleen Whitcombe also likes the flat rate fare option but suggested that maybe the Sac-Med be mileage based.

Staff Comments

Discussions with the Executive Director, Planning and Marketing Manager, and Operations Manager have concluded that the flat-rate fare would be \$3.00 for each one-way trip. The cost analysis shows that the average fare cost for the first half of this fiscal year (September-December 2023) was \$3.35. Moving forward with the \$3.00 flat-rate fare would show a loss of approximately \$.35 per one-way trip. The prior fiscal year showed the average fare cost to be \$3.96.

C. No Show / Cancellation Policy

- Currently states that “Passenger must call at least 1 hour before the scheduled pickup to cancel their ride. Non-Canceled rides will be declared a “no-show”.

**During the Focus Group meeting, it was noted that the new software could eliminate the above section of the policy due to the nature of the on-demand reservation process.*

- *The policy continues to read, “Any pickup “no-show” will result in the automatic cancellation of the return trip. Unless dispatch is contacted, it is assumed that the passenger will not need a return ride. Passengers accumulating 3 “no-shows” in a 30-day period will be suspended from using the shared ride service for 14 days. Passengers accumulating 6 “no-shows” in a 90-day period will be suspended from using the shared ride service for 30 days. Eight cancellations in a 30-day period will result in a 14-day suspension. Prior to any suspension, a written warning or the proposed suspension period and the reasons for it will be provided to the passenger.”*

Study Comments

The No-Show policy detailed in this document is missing an element required by the FTA/ADA. It is recommended that the policy be updated to include “10% of trips” required as valid no-shows in addition to the stated number of accumulated no-shows.

Sample Policy: Each verified no-show (or late cancellation) counts as one no-show. Customers may be suspended after they meet all of the following conditions:

- 1. Accumulate three or more no-shows in a 30-day period.*
- 2. Have booked at least ten trips that month.*
- 3. Have “no-showed” or “late cancelled” at least 10% of those trips.*

Committee Member Comments

There were no recommended changes to this section of the policy. The committee members were happy with the way it is currently.

Staff Comments

Staff concurs with the Committee.

D. Driver Responsibilities

- Drivers can only help with boarding and disembarking.
- Customers may only bring what they can carry.

Study Comments

El Dorado Transit appears to possess all of the elements needed to deliver high quality, safe and compliant transportation services for its growing population. EDT staff possess the knowledge and expertise needed to meet ADA Compliance requirements for all services offered.

The study did not cover the policy for what passengers can/cannot bring on board the vehicle.

Section 3.2 of El Dorado Transit Passenger Code of Conduct is written as follows:

3.2. Passengers must limit their carry-ons to only those items the passenger can safely carry on the vehicle in one boarding without any assistance from the operator or another passenger. Passengers must always have control over carry-on items. Carry-ons shall not block aisles or seats.

Committee Member Comments

While the committee members were generally happy with the rule, a question was raised to the possibility of a passenger being able to book extra space on a vehicle for the ability to bring extra items on board, such as groceries, flats of water, etc. This is especially important to seniors that may only get out once a month to do needed shopping.

Staff Comments

Staff agrees that the rules, as currently defined, are appropriate. The consideration for booking more room on a vehicle for extra belongings was not discussed further.