



**ITEM ID:** 2024-196-0

**TRANSMITTAL DATE:** May 17, 2024

**MEETING DATE:** May 24, 2024

**TO:** Board of Directors

**FROM:** Lisa Bahr, Chief Customer Experience Officer

**SUBJECT:** Service Disruption Mitigation Study and Next Steps

### **Issue**

The Authority implements a set of actions and responses to arrange to complete trips for Metrolink customers when unplanned service disruptions occur. A review of service disruption mitigation strategies was undertaken to explore opportunities for improvement. The Customer Experience team has taken these study recommendations and is moving forward to improve the process.

### **Recommendation**

Receive and file.

### **Strategic Commitment**

This report aligns with the Strategic Business Plan commitments of:

- **Customers are our Business:** Providing customers with a means of completing their trips with quicker response times demonstrates a level of dependability and commitment to our customers.
- **Connecting and Leveraging Partnerships:** The provision of alternate transportation services requires consistent and successful partnerships with a wide variety of organizations, including bus companies, Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), and paratransit organizations including Taxi companies.

## **Background**

Metrolink offers a Quality Service Pledge (QSP) to its customers that outlines Metrolink's service and compensation policies, as well as what customers can expect should an unforeseen disruption arise. According to the QSP, Metrolink pledges that:

“As Southern California's premier regional rail system, we do everything in our power to provide high-quality, dependable, on-time service. This commitment to excellence is a promise our riders have the right to expect.”

In instances of unplanned service disruptions that delay customers, Metrolink makes every attempt to restore train service. However, when service cannot be restored within 60 minutes, Metrolink arranges for alternative transportation using publicly operated or privately-owned buses (bus bridges). When buses are unable to be secured, Uber voucher codes, valid for up to \$50, are provided to customers. For those passengers unable to use the voucher, we provide reimbursement for out-of-pocket costs for self-service transportation, again not to exceed \$50 per passenger, including taxi services or a TNC.

Long delays in the provision of replacement service and challenges securing buses and ADA-compliant vehicles highlighted the need to investigate how Metrolink can improve its responsiveness in providing replacement service, especially for passengers with disabilities. New service models are emerging in the marketplace to suggest a potential for alternative service delivery models.

## **Discussion**

An exploration of different methods of mitigating the impact on customers during disruptions to service was developed by a consultant team led by Cambridge Systematics. Based upon the analysis of best practices, costs, and customer response time data, a set of short-term and long-term strategies are presented. The short-term strategies are designed to make use of existing agreements, assets, and tools.

The short-term strategies are presented in four categories.

1. **Replacement Service Delivery (RSD)** – Implementation of bus bridges, provision of Transportation Network Company (TNC) (or taxi) vouchers, and other customer-facing efforts.
2. **Internal Management and Coordination (IMC)** – Metrolink's internal responses to incidents, including internal decision-making & communication processes, work distribution, and incident management.
3. **External Communication (EC) – Communication** strategies with customers and partners such as law enforcement, emergency response, and freight railroads.
4. **Restoring Normal Service (RNS)** – Incident closure and service recovery.

The study suggested keeping the existing model for RSD, with some minor modifications. To justify a significantly different approach would require the collection of more definitive cost and response time data for many of the alternative revenue delivery models. Instead, a method was provided to improve the way Metrolink can deploy different combinations of vehicle types – including ADA-accessible vans, accessible buses, TNCs, and taxis. The method suggests

different thresholds of passenger loads for deploying different combinations of replacement services. The approach reduces overall delay by streamlining the decision-making process.

### Alternate Transportation Recommendations and Strategies

The study recommends Metrolink implement Replacement Delivery Thresholds, based on the number of impacted riders, for contacting service providers. Metrolink has implemented this strategy, however, bus service alternatives have been consistently unavailable since the COVID-19 pandemic due to limited operator availability. Uber vouchers and reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses have been the primary resources available and used.

In response to the challenge of securing ADA-accessible alternate transportation, Metrolink identified 13 companies within the service area that can provide ADA-accessible alternate transportation. A Request for Proposal/Quote/Interest (RFP, RFQ or RFI) is required to develop agreements.

Although not a recommendation from the study, Metrolink investigated procuring its own fleet of ADA-accessible vehicles and trained customer service supervisors and managers to operate them. It is not a feasible solution due to the high cost of equipment and maintenance, additional insurance, and liability concerns.

Also, according to research presented at the World Conference on Transport Research in a report titled, "Understanding Passenger Perceptions and Behaviors During Unplanned Rail Disruptions," we know that rail customers who have experienced unplanned rail disruptions involving bus replacement have the lowest level of satisfaction. In addition to this research, Metrolink customer relations staff have noted for years that rail passengers prefer advanced notice of a service interruption in order to make alternate transportation plans rather than riding a bus. With this data, Metrolink continues to transition away from offering buses during planned service interruptions and notifying customers at least 30 days in advance to attain the highest level of customer satisfaction.

### **Next Steps**

The Authority will pursue the short-term recommendations in the four categories of Replacement Service Delivery, Internal Management and Coordination, External Communication, and Return to Normal Service, including the expansion of bus operators and shuttle services to provide alternate transportation. The Authority is also collecting more detailed information about the cost and response times of various Replacement Service Delivery strategies, including wheel-chair accessible vans to support a more thorough analysis of tradeoffs in Revenue Service Delivery models.

As part of this effort, the Authority is preparing a Request for Proposal/Quote/Interest (RFP, RFQ or RFI) to expand the number of bus companies and ADA-accessible transportation providers. The determination of requesting proposals, quotes, or interest will be based on securing the broadest number of operators.

Once at least three more bus operators and at least one ADA shuttle operator in each of Metrolink's service counties are secured, the following RSD criteria will be implemented:

1. If the passenger count is below 27, Metrolink will be able to provide more cost-effective replacement service on a per-vehicle basis with TNCs, taxis, and ADA-accessible vehicles and will prioritize them unless these options have a longer response time.
2. If the passenger count is between 27 and 47, replacement service costs per vehicle will be comparable between buses and TNCs or taxis. The choice between buses and TNCs or taxis should be based on the response time between the two modes.
3. If the passenger count is greater than 47, Metrolink will be able to provide more cost-effective replacement service with buses due to the high number of TNCs or taxis that would be necessary to serve this number of passengers.

Among the top external communication strategies, Cambridge Systematics, Inc. encouraged “the use of tailored, customer-centric messaging with first responders and local authorities that humanizes passengers.” This has already begun, while the Customer Experience team is also moving forward with the procurement of an omnichannel communication tool that will manage all communication channels in a single platform to include, but not limited to email, Short Message Service (SMS-commonly known as texting), voice, live chat, and all social media platforms. Notifications will be integrated with GTFS-real-time technology so information will be automatically communicated rather than manually delivered by staff.

To complement the omnichannel communication tool and to further improve the customer experience, staff is working toward a chatbot website feature that will automatically respond to general questions and address QSP requests and issue refunds. This feature is anticipated to reduce the volume of general inquiries to the Agency customer call center and will enhance the customer experience.

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Approved by:                      Lisa Bahr, Chief Customer Experience Officer

**Attachment(s)**

[Attachment A - Service Disruptions Mitigation Strategy Study](#)