



Meeting Summary

External Stakeholder Meeting 3

November 13, 2023, 1 – 2:30 p.m.

Meeting Notes

Welcome and Introductions

Bill Schwartz, the consultant team project manager, summarized the study and progress to date. The study aims to ensure PAL service meets ADA requirements, is efficient, can meet current and future customer needs, is innovative and equitable, and provides excellent customer service.

The study consists of three phases. We are currently in Phase 1 evaluating the existing PAL service and soliciting input for improvements. Phase 2, which is just beginning, will estimate future demand, costs, and service delivery options including expanded service area. Phase 3 will develop an implementation plan. Engagement with stakeholders is happening throughout the study process.

Review of Existing PAL Service

Bill Schwartz summarized progress on PAL service evaluation and presented information covering three topics for which committee feedback was sought: service area, eligibility, and training. The main points are summarized followed by feedback.

Service Area

PAL service operates when fixed-route service operates, meaning PAL service is not available in the same locations throughout the day or on Saturdays and Sundays. This can be confusing to riders who may have to consult fixed-route schedules. There are gaps in service coverage in the middle of the day and late at night, and on weekends. One option being evaluated is to operate more PAL service during the middle of the day and to create just a few service area variants.

- Stakeholders asked whether service would be curtailed or expanded. Bill explained that the idea is to study how to offer more service where and when it is needed.

- One attendee shared an experience of a late PAL vehicle due to insufficient buses and drivers. She suggested NFTA get more buses and drivers.
- One attendee commented that any changes should be communicated clearly to consumers before becoming public.
- The group recommended that outreach be done with more members of the blind/visually impaired community and the physically disabled community separately. They also suggested involving independent living centers in eligibility assessments.
- One participant suggested considering expanding evening and weekend service.
- One attendee shared about her recent paratransit experience in New Orleans – she said they focus on transporting people without worrying about ADA requirements.

Eligibility

Bill noted that the list of “eligible treating professionals” that can verify an applicant’s functional ability to use fixed-route transit is not comprehensive of all types of (medical) providers. Therefore, some individuals may not be able to apply for PAL service. The consultant team has suggested that the list of eligible treating professionals be expanded.

In addition, the team has recommended that NFTA consider requiring in-person interviews and assessments as part of its eligibility process. In-person assessments would provide more accurate eligibility determinations but would require more resources.

- Stakeholders supported broadening the list of professionals that can verify eligibility but had questions about in-person assessments.
- One person questioned the need to reassess people with lifelong disabilities and felt that reassessments shouldn’t be necessary.
- One attendee has questions about eligibility for people with non-apparent disabilities like epilepsy that may not see certain specialists.

Trip Reservations

The consultant team explained that during the trip reservations process, PAL staff do not regularly negotiate pickup times with callers even though it is permitted by the ADA, which allow transit agencies to offer times up to one hour before or after the requested time. Trip offers must be feasible. Failing to negotiate times typically leads to too many trips being scheduled close together. This in turn reduces on-time pickup performance and late arrivals to appointments.

- Stakeholders were interested in this recommendation but stated they would like more information on how this would work in practice.

- Attendees emphasized that any change should be well-communicated to customers and must not limit service availability in any way. The consultant team reassured attendees that this recommendation would be towards improving on-time performance and customer satisfaction.
- One attendee reiterated her previous complaint about lack of PAL trip negotiations.
- One attendee commented that without NFTA transportation, she could not volunteer and help people in need.

December Public Meetings

Megan Morsch provided an overview of the upcoming meetings, which will explain the study and gather input on unmet transportation needs for the service expansion analysis. There will be one virtual and one in-person meeting scheduled for December 13 and 14. Meetings will include presentations from NFTA-Metro and consultants followed by discussion.

- Stakeholders provided feedback on location accessibility, advertising, and importance of clarifying the focus on PAL service expansion, not NFTA-Metro general service.
- Stakeholders strongly recommended focusing meetings specifically on PAL service users and their concerns and reiterated the need for clear communication about the purpose of the meetings and the needed focus on PAL service.
- Several stakeholders requested that advertising well in advance of the meeting date would help the disability community plan for attendance.
- Assistance was offered to help advertise the meetings to local non-profits.
- The following locations were suggested:
 - Buffalo: Schiller Park Senior Center, True Bethel Church
 - Amherst area: Amherst Senior Center
 - Lockport/Eastern Niagara area: Dale Association

Other Comments

Attendees provided other comments with respect to PAL service during the meeting. The following was shared:

- Pay PAL drivers more to improve retention.
- There is a need for better customer service training and monitoring.
- Suggest partnering with local organizations like UB Rehabilitation Science and the Dale Association to host the public meetings in multiple locations across the PAL service area.

- To improve staff training, partner with organizations like University at Buffalo (UB) Rehabilitation Science department and Homecare & Hospice Association of New York (HHCANY) (groups that create training content) to improve PAL driver and staff training.
 - UB has accredited occupational and physical therapy programs that could provide expertise.
 - UB has experience recording trainings that can be reused. One example training partner identified is HHCANY Training Academy.

Meeting Attendees

Steering Committee

First Name	Last Name	Organization / Title
Jordan	Bellassai	Program Officer Health Foundation of Central/Western NY
Mike	Billoni	Stephanie Speaker's Advocate and Communications Person
Frank	Cammarata	Executive Director for Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
Aaron	Carlson	Hearts and Hands
Mindy	Cervoni	Community Services for Every1
Jeanette	Grimaldi	Advocate for Deaf Access Services
Nick	Hester	Niagara County Department of Mental Health
Ericka	Miller	Independent Living of Niagara County
Kevin	Peterson	
Stephanie	Speaker	PAL Rider and Advocate

Project Team

First Name	Last Name	Organization	Role
Nadine	Chalmers	NFTA	Manager, Service Planning
Samuel	Gallivan	NFTA	PAL Study Project Manager
Robert	Jones	NFTA	Deputy Director
Rachel	Maloney	NFTA	Manager, Service Planning
Megan	Morsch	Highland Planning	Public Engagement Consultant
Emily	Oaksford	Nelson/Nygaard	Consultant Deputy Project Manager
Bill	Schwartz	Nelson/Nygaard	Consultant Project Manager
Julia	Spande	Nelson/Nygaard	Consultant
Evan	Mancini	Nelson/Nygaard	Consultant
Russell	Thatcher	Thatcher Consulting	Consultant
Patricia	Wiseman	NFTA	Paratransit Customer Service