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Assemblymember Buffy Wicks introduces legislation to provide equitable transportation services for older Californians and people with disabilities

SACRAMENTO – Earlier this month, Assemblymember Buffy Wicks introduced AB 540, the Social Service Transportation Improvement Act: Coordinated Transportation Sources Agencies. This bill improves access to transportation for older people and people with disabilities with the addition of a revenue stream, increased service requirements, coordination rather than consolidation of social service transportation services, and a strengthening of county-wide networks of transportation services.

“Transportation services for our elders and people with disabilities are substandard,” said Assemblymember Buffy Wicks. “Seniors are the fastest growing population in California, but our methods for services and network of transportation services have remained stagnant, resulting in inequitable access to transportation services.”

AB540 applies proven best practices and recommendations of the 2021 California Master Plan for Aging Stakeholder Advisory Committee and the Caltrans Mobility Action Plan so that every Californian, regardless of age or ability, has access to a systematically developed and funded, seamless, person-centered transportation system.

Right now, Californians with cognitive or physical characteristics that prevent them from operating a car or using conventional public transportation often rely on ADA paratransit to go to appointments, meet basic needs and see family. ADA Paratransit has significant limitations. Expanded accessible transportation services are needed to fill gaps left by ADA paratransit. AT services will provide riders person-centered assistance, accommodate special medical equipment and mobility devices, drop users off closer to their destination, and generally fill the many gaps left by ADA paratransit, all while increasing cost-effectiveness and reducing greenhouse gasses.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for a paratransit rider to spend hours in a vehicle for a trip of just a few miles, have to arrange for transfers between two or more paratransit services in the same county, or need to book a trip more than a week in advance.

“Elders and riders with disabilities endure increased isolation and loneliness, and associated health problems, as a result of not being able to access mobility when they need it,” said Debbie Toth, CEO of Choice in Aging and a member of the California Master Plan for Aging Stakeholder Advisory Committee.

“Access to transportation services is key to allowing seniors and people with disabilities to live independently in their community.”

“This issue has been studied for more than twenty years with no notable progress,” said Eric Harris, Public Policy Director of Disability Rights California. “California’s conventional transportation and transit systems have benefitted from increased funding and dedicated funding streams while this underserved population has unequal transportation options. AB540 will remedy this.”

AB540 will increase the transportation improvement fee \$10 per vehicle and require every county to set up “coordinated transportation service agencies” to improve transportation service to seniors and people with disabilities.

“This investment will result in effective, equitable local transportation services,” said Wicks. “I invite all of California’s transit advocates and providers to recognize this important need and support this long overdue fix to our transportation system.”

This legislation is supported by numerous non-profit and advocacy organizations throughout the state and region, including Choice in Aging, The Alzheimer’s Association, Disability Rights California, LeadingAge California, The California Foundation for Independent Living Centers, Justice in Aging, Senior and Disability Action, and others.

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Accessible Transportation Problem/Solution Summary

Transportation for Older Californians and Those With Disabilities



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Problem: A significant portion of senior and disabled Californians can't get where they need to go because the State's immense transportation funding and policy apparatus does not address their needs. In stark contrast to the rest of the transportation system, accessible transportation¹ funding, policies, and programs for this population have remained stagnant for decades despite the demographically driven increase in demand for services and the open acknowledgement by the State that improvements need to be made.

- Demographics:** The aging of society is a well-documented result of the baby boom. This demographic shift is placing increasing demands on a wide range of policy areas, transportation included. The State's 2021 Master Plan for Aging describes the situation: *"California's over-60 population is projected to diversify and grow faster than any other age group. Increasing from 16 percent in 2010 to ¼ of the population by 2030, when there will be 10.8 million older adults in California."*
- Study and Stagnate:** In the past 19 years there have been six State initiatives that have documented this problem and made recommendations. **No recommendations have ever been implemented.** See "Legacy of Stagnation" below.
- Inequities:** Every other segment of the transportation system receives increased funding and policy support with consistent implementation. Examples: In 2008 the California Complete Streets Act was passed which bolstered policies and funding to improve facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. In 2017, SB 1 included increased funding for road maintenance, cyclists/pedestrians, conventional transit, boating/park programs, university research, etc., but no dedicated funding for accessible transportation. Further inequities are found in rural areas, especially during disasters, due to limited services and population-based funding formulas resulting in inadequate transportation options which strand and endanger disabled and older Californians. **The "largest and most complex transportation system in the nation" is simply not providing equitable benefits to all Californians.**

"Current senior-oriented mobility services do not have the capacity to handle the increase in people over 65 years...the massive growth among the aging ...points to a lack of fiscal and organizational readiness...the closure and consolidation of medical facilities while rates of diabetes and obesity are on the rise will place heavy demands on an already deficient system."

Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan, Metropolitan Transportation Commission

Solution

- Legislation:** After 20+ years of attempts to solve these issues administratively, it falls on the legislature to bring improvements to this service area. The intent is to update the 1979 Social Service Transportation Act to fund and enhance coordination of services. To achieve this, the legislation will leverage two existing programs, the Consolidated Transportation Services Agency (CTSA) mechanism established in California statute and the Coordinated Public Transit – Human Services Transportation Plans established under federal law. In contrast to the current permissive and unfunded approach to this service area, the bill intends to establish a systematic, funded solution. *(Subsequent to the development of this white paper Assemblymember Buffy Wicks introduced [AB-540](#) Social Service Transportation Improvement Act: coordinated transportation services agencies. AB540 will implement solutions described in this document.)*

Legacy of Stagnation: California has *decades* of unsuccessful initiatives to address the problem, we are stuck in a “study and stagnate” cycle:

- **2003:** California Health and Human Services: Strategic Plan for an Aging California: Comprehensive accessible transportation recommendations. **No implementation.**
- **2004:** Master Plan *on* Aging: Transportation recommendations: **No implementation.**
- **2005:** CA Commission on Aging Transportation Task Team Report: **No implementation.**
- **2007:** CA Commission on Aging Transportation Task Team Report: **No implementation.**
- **2009:** Caltrans: Mobility Action Plan-Assessing Human Service Transportation Coordination. Extensive study on accessible transportation with recommendations. **No implementation.**
- **2017:** *Senate Bill 1 Road Repair and Accountability Act (\$5.2B Annual): No dedicated funding for accessible transportationⁱⁱ*
- **2021:** Master Plan *for* Aging: The Governor’s Stakeholder Advisory Committee drafted a robust, thoughtful set of recommendations based on widely accepted best practices. This input was not included in the final Master Plan for Aging report while recommendations in all other service areas were accepted. **No meaningful transportation recommendations were included.**
- The last success was the **1979** Social Service Transportation Improvement Act which has proven to be ineffective due to the lack of funding and permissive language which this proposal addresses.

Barriers

- Transportation issues related to aging and disability are overshadowed by every other segment of the transportation system. There is no seat at the transportation table for accessible transportation needs.
- This vulnerable population has a limited capacity for self-advocacy, there is no ability to be the “squeaky wheel”.
- Because of this limited ability for self-advocacy, issues around ageism and ableism are often left out of the many long overdue diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives underway.
- Reliance of Caltrans, CalSTA, the CTC and the legislature on the public transit lobby for guidance on accessible transportation. Public transit agencies are the minority providerⁱⁱⁱ of accessible transportation and are consumed with other priorities including commute, school, low-income, greenhouse gas reduction efforts, and ADA paratransit^{iv} services. See pullout quote to the right.

Political individuals and organizations with vested interests in “the status quo” will often view expanded transportation services as a threat to their own power or influence and may, therefore, take steps to derail both personal and organizational capital invested in the coordinated transportation system.

Transportation Research Board, National Academies of Sciences, on coordinating human service transportation and transit.

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ⁱ Accessible transportation is a term being used to refer to a broad range of transportation related services provided to persons with disabilities and elderly individuals. For the purposes of this paper, accessible transportation is defined as a range of transportation/transit and supportive services such as city/community programs, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandated public paratransit service, accessible wayfinding and public rights of way, transportation provided by private non-profits, mobility management programs, volunteer-based transportation programs, etc.

ⁱⁱ SB1 was not an initiative to improve accessible transportation but used to highlight that, in this grand restructuring and increase of gas taxes, virtually every mode of transportation and related issues were funded but no dedicated funding for accessible transportation.

ⁱⁱⁱ American Public Transit Association Fact Book

^{iv} ADA paratransit only addresses a small fraction of the needs of this population and due to numerous factors, cannot be scaled up to address the needs of older persons and those with disabilities.