

Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO)

March 23, 2011

Dear WMATA Board of Directors,

This is a particularly challenging year in the City as budgets across all departments are slashed and difficult decisions must be made. Those hardest hit by cutbacks are people with low to zero income, who face difficult decisions on a daily basis as programs they rely on are eliminated. Dependable, affordable transportation is key to their maintaining and improving other necessities, such as housing, employment, and healthcare. Without Metro, people cannot get from job, to doctor, to childcare, to laundry, to dinner, to home on time. The Coalition of Housing and Homeless Organizations (COHHO) is writing to you today because Metro's recent policy changes, although understandable, are detrimental to low-income Washingtonians and the organizations they work with. Fortunately, many positive changes can be made without extra cost to Metro. On behalf of more than 50 organizations and homeless individuals around the City working to end homelessness in Washington, we request that you consider the following concerns and suggestions regarding tokens, SmarTrip cards, and transparency.

1. Tokens. We would first like to thank you for keeping tokens available to social service agencies. In order to take full advantage of this resource, we would like to highlight the following:
 - Some agencies are able to access tokens, while others are being turned away when they go to Metro Center on a different day. The latter are told that tokens are no longer available, or that there aren't enough. All of this has occurred even after WMATA made clear that tokens are still available. We would like to know why this is and how it will be solved.
 - Agencies need to know the minimum and maximum amount of tokens they can purchase at a time.
 - It is not clear if tokens can also be purchased in MD and/or VA.
 - The process for becoming an approved social service agency is unclear. Agencies should be approved after submitting their name, address, phone number, and tax exemption number. We would like the process to be simple and transparent.

2. SmarTrip cards, Smart Benefits, and flash passes. SmarTrip cards are a useful tool, and we appreciate your efforts to provide some cards to social service agencies at no cost. The SmarTrip system could also be better utilized if the following concerns are addressed:
 - Now that Metro Center is no longer taking checks from social service agencies and will only accept cash/debit/credit, the ability of many agencies to efficiently assist clients in purchasing weekly passes has been dramatically hindered. In its place is the following new process: 1. The provider must purchase subway tickets in the amounts of \$5, \$10 or \$20. 2. It must then have the recipient take cards totaling at least \$15 to the subway machines and add them to the SmarTrip card. 3. After the person has put at least \$15-worth of subway passes on their card, they go to the sales window and have a weekly bus pass uploaded and the money deducted. We would like to see Metro accept checks again from approved agencies.
 - Currently, only two to four SmarTrip transactions per day can be made on one credit card, which is a considerable hindrance to employment programs and mental health programs that have only one credit card with which to serve hundreds of clients in need of flash passes. The

transaction limit needs to be raised.

- Many of the local retailers that are supposed to provide electronic flash passes have not received their technology yet, which creates a bottleneck at Metro Center and creates an accessibility issue to others for whom the distance and time pose problems. We would like a list of retailers to be readily available and to know when the technology will work.
- Survivors of domestic violence currently must register their own names in order to register their SmarTrip cards, which compromises their safety. Service providers should be able to register the cards on their behalf, or they should be able to use pseudonyms so that they can keep track of their cards.
- Organizations that use Smart Benefits now must enroll clients in the program a month before the fare is needed, which usually is impractical because a client's need is immediate and unplanned. Organizations are also finding that they can no longer pay for an individual fare for a verified appointment or a weekly bus pass, but must purchase a whole month's travel or can only put money onto a SmarTrip rather than a pass. These changes place many burdens on people who are unemployed and homeless and on the organizations that work with them. We respectfully request that the policy be amended.
- Like tokens, paper flash passes serve as critical engagement tools for employment, mental health and substance recovery programs to assist their clients in returning to multiple appointments per week. We are asking that paper flash passes remain for these organizations, who cannot use SmarTrips because of the credit card issue and who do not have staff time to go with every client individually to load his/her SmarTrip.

3. Transparency. Last month, agencies went to purchase their regular tokens and were denied. In response, they were told Metro would end all token use after February 28. They stated that the information about this and other changes could not be found anywhere on the WMATA website, and reported that different offices at WMATA gave conflicting answers.

Organizations found out through a grapevine of emails and word of mouth. It took until February 28, a full month, to glean the definitive answer that token use is being retained for social service groups. A great deal of time could have been saved if Metro had made changes publicly available. In light of February's confusion, we request the following:

- Provide up-to-date press releases on the WMATA website with information regarding changes and planned changes to services.
- Post notices about public hearings and WMATA board meetings in advance on the WMATA website in a quickly accessible location, and at Metro stations.
- Our attempts to follow up with Metro to find clear answers to our questions are largely unsuccessful because our conversations, phone calls, and emails have gone unanswered or took one month before there was a response. We would like to know the right channel to access information regarding Metro, specifically whom to talk to when we get conflicting information, such as what happened with tokens in February.

4. Bus passes and senior/disabled discount SmarTrips. Finally, COHHO believes that while all of the changes recommended above are necessary, a greater step could be taken toward ending homelessness in the District and allowing low-income Washingtonians to benefit from economic revitalization. Many people cannot afford to get to all of the appointments they require just to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and health care. We would like to see a program implemented that would allow Washingtonians who receive SNAP benefits or are part of DC Alliance healthcare to qualify for free weekly bus passes. Additionally, people who verifiably receive SSI or SSDI should not have to show further documentation in order to receive a senior/disabled discount SmarTrip.

5. Invitation. COHHO is eager to seek creative solutions together with WMATA in order to serve the needs of homeless and low-income residents and looks forward to working with you going forward. *We would like to invite you to our next meeting on April 14 to discuss our suggestions.* Thank you for your time and dedication, and we hope to meet with you soon.

Thank you,

Amanda Formica

On behalf of

The Executive Board and Members of COHHO