

December 4, 2008

Dear WMATA Board of Directors:

Many of the member organizations of the Coalition of Housing & Homeless Organizations have expressed their concerns regarding Metro's plans to make certain changes in 2009 that would negatively affect the destitute people we serve. Our clients primarily use buses, and they do not use SmarTrip cards. Our organizations cannot afford to pay for or add value to SmarTrip cards for their clients. Therefore, the most crucial change for us is the elimination of paper transfers in January.

Our clients are homeless and impoverished. For many of these individuals and families, public buses are essential for accessing much-needed services. Our clients rely on buses to access medical care, work, shelter, and food. For some, not having access to public transportation can be a matter of life and death, as they rely on it to get to appointments to obtain anti-psychotic medications and dialysis, chemotherapy, and radiation treatments. They take multiple buses to get to their destinations.

The nonprofit organizations that provide transportation assistance to their clients to access those services need a cost-effective and efficient way to give one-time fares. That is one reason why tokens and paper transfers are indispensable.

We thank the Board for retaining the tokens. However, new challenges have been created by the elimination of paper transfers and fee changes in SmarTrip cards for people making bus-to-bus or Metro-to-bus transfers.

First, to continue to receive free bus-to-bus transfers and discounted Metrobus-to-Metrorail transfers, customers will now be required to add the token value to a SmarTrip card. This our clients cannot do, for reasons discussed below. But to make a roundtrip without a SmarTrip card, a person would have to use two tokens at \$1.35 each. This will result in excess cost to them and significant confusion at the fare box.

Second, paper transfers provide an easy way for people with disabilities to navigate public transportation. While using SmarTrip cards may not seem difficult to people without disabilities, it may be very challenging for those struggling with psychiatric disabilities. In addition, providers currently cannot retroactively designate a SmarTrip card they receive from WMATA as a disabled pass. This system is very problematic for providers, especially when they do not know in advance to whom they will give the SmarTrip card.

Third, because homeless people have to stay on the move and are subject to physical danger, many homeless individuals have difficulty maintaining their possessions and keeping them from being stolen. It is not feasible for social service agencies to have to replace SmarTrip cards for those individuals on a regular basis, especially given the costs of SmarTrip cards.

Fourth, social service agencies simply do not have the resources for this type of expenditure—either for the initial cost of the cards or for the added value to cover trips. Nonprofits that provide transportation assistance also do not have the budgets to hand out double the amount of tokens to make up for the loss of paper transfers.

The 50,000 free SmarTrip cards that Metro is providing to nonprofits—only 18,000 of which will reach District organizations-- will be of some help, and we are grateful for your foresight in making them available. However, WMATA does not appear to have a plan to continue giving out free SmarTrip cards to nonprofits beyond this initial 50,000 or 18,000.

While we understand Metro's need to save money and prevent fraud and abuse, we respectfully insist that any changes must accommodate the urgent needs of homeless and low-income residents. The City cannot afford to impose additional obstacles, inadvertent as they may be, to our residents' obtaining employment, health, mental health and other social services.

Thank you for your consideration of this very important matter. Please let us know if you would like to set up a meeting to consider options.

Sincerely,

Coalition of Housing & Homeless Organizations

By:

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