

ASSEMBLY TRANSPORTATION AND INDEPENDENT AUTHORITIES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 4208

with committee amendments

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: AUGUST 24, 2020

The Assembly Transportation and Independent Authorities Committee reports favorably and with committee amendments Assembly Bill No. 4208.

As amended and reported, this bill reforms the State's system of providing paratransit services. The goal of the reforms is to better integrate the various types of paratransit service currently offered in the State, allow lower cost providers to provide more of the trips, and ensure that best practices are adopted across the State.

The bill requires the New Jersey Transit Corporation (NJ Transit) to better integrate its paratransit services with other paratransit services. Under the bill, this is achieved by requiring NJ Transit to ensure that all paratransit service that it directly manages, administers, or supports financially, utilizes a software package that will be compatible with the software used by other paratransit providers. The bill requires NJ Transit to begin identifying regular and recurring trips, and to develop a system where other paratransit providers can complete those trips on behalf of NJ Transit if the provider can meet applicable federal standards, provide the trip at a lower cost, and protect customer safety. The bill also requires NJ Transit to redesign the Access Link program under a brokerage model that allows NJ Transit to realize cost savings when reducing the number of Access Link trips fulfilled by contract providers, and to share those savings with paratransit providers that meet minimum federal standards and successfully compete for regular and routine trips under this new system. The bill also encourages NJ Transit to shift some trips requested under the Access Link program to other State based programs, especially if those trip requests are not eligible under the Access Link program. This is intended to provide greater integration of paratransit service across the State, so that NJ Transit can allow paratransit providers to compete for regular and routine Access Link trips.

The bill requires the establishment of a best practices pilot training program for paratransit providers. The program is to be run by NJ Transit and a qualified community organization to be selected by NJ

Transit. Under the first phase of the program, the qualified community organization and NJ Transit will develop a paratransit best practices training module. Under the second phase, NJ Transit is to select five paratransit providers, upon application, to receive training in paratransit best practices under the pilot program. The qualified community organization will then provide the training to each of the five paratransit providers under a training contract with NJ Transit. The training will include modern trip making software, trip confirmation, scheduling, a mobile phone application for customers, dashboard camera safety technology, as well as agency-wide and individual employee training and guidance. Depending upon the success of phase two of the pilot, phase three will involve either revising the training module into a training program that other paratransit providers can adopt without direct training from the qualified community organization, or NJ Transit and the qualified community organization will determine some other method of integrating paratransit service so that paratransit providers meeting certain standards can compete for regular and routine paratransit trips. The second part of phase three involves the establishment of regional paratransit coordinating councils.

The bill creates new regional paratransit coordinating councils (coordinating councils). There are to be six coordinating councils divided geographically by county. Membership on the coordinating councils include the Division of Developmental Disabilities, NJ Transit, NJ Transit Access Link contractors from each service region, county government, county paratransit system operators, and several listed community organizations. The coordinating councils are to meet at least quarterly and share best practices. They are also required to establish a system to exchange information between paratransit providers and share budget information. The coordinating councils will replace the county based councils used to develop county plans under the Senior Citizen and Disabled Resident Transportation Assistance Program, but the councils may establish county level subcommittees for this purpose. The county plans also must now account for the efforts of this bill to integrate Statewide paratransit service under a unified platform and improve Statewide coordination across geography and across agency. The coordinating councils are also to be utilized by NJ Transit to develop its revised Access Link program so that the paratransit providers on the council can be used as a resource when allowing paratransit providers to compete for regular and routine Access Link trips. Finally the coordinating councils are to serve as a resource and develop materials to assist other paratransit providers in achieving the integration objectives in the first part of phase three of the pilot program, either through the revised training module or the alternate solution developed.

The bill requires NJ Transit to issue a report to the Governor and the Legislature at the end of the pilot program with information on the

pilot program and a recommendation on whether or not to continue the pilot program, as well as an analysis of the decisions made about how to proceed with the Statewide integration required in the first part of the third phase of the pilot program. The division and NJ Transit are also required to survey users about how their user experience is impacted by the pilot program and changes to the Access Link program, and report on how each have impacted paratransit users.

COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS

The committee amended the bill to transfer the lead duties of the pilot program to NJ Transit rather than the Division of Developmental Disabilities. Most references to the division in the bill are removed and replaced with reference to the Department of Human Services. The amendments also remove the appropriations from the bill.

The amendments provide clarification that the Access Link program is not to serve as a provider of last resort but that the restructured program should use contract providers as a safety net rather than as the primary paratransit providers under the program. The amendments clarify that certain provisions apply only to corporation paratransit service, as that term is newly defined in the bill. The amendments remove reference to an “open software platform” and replace it with reference to routing, scheduling, and dispatch software requirements for NJ Transit contract providers.

As amended, the regional paratransit coordinating councils are no longer located within the Department of Human Services. Representatives from the New Jersey Council on Special Transportation, Easterseals New Jersey, and transportation providers for senior citizens or for health care services are added to the council. The amendments modify one of the county government representatives by requiring that the county representative be from the county office of aging.

The amendments shift the responsibility of issuing the reports required under the bill from the Division of Developmental Disabilities to NJ Transit.