



Public Testimony
Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 6049, 5020, 5241
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Submitted by The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty

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The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty is a coalition of diverse religious communities and advocacy partners throughout the state who have come together to fight poverty.

Today, we are writing to voice our organization's strong support of **the full restoration of the no-fare bus pass for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.**

We have previously testified before this committee to oppose cuts to RIPTA's senior/disabled no-fare program. The no-fare bus pass for seniors and people with disabilities allowed access to transportation for the essentials of daily life, such as getting to meal sites, buying groceries, accessing community centers, participating in recovery meetings, and attending religious services if they so choose. Many of these Rhode Islanders have very low-incomes or no incomes at all. The elimination of this program creates a substantive barrier to transportation for many of those in our state who are already most impoverished and at high risk for social isolation.

Substantial Negative Impacts

The Rhode Islanders who rely on the no-fare bus pass include some of the state's very poorest residents. **Many have told us that they simply cannot pay the proposed fare increase and continue their previous travel routines.** They have had to cut back on the number of trips they take each month. Those lost trips are not frivolous. Very low-income seniors and people with disabilities **depend on transportation to access meal sites, grocery stores, food banks, overnight shelters, community programs, religious services, recovery meetings, volunteer opportunities, libraries, support groups and much more.** Social supports for otherwise-isolated residents that are currently available at little or no cost to the state have become inaccessible for many of our poorest community members. These cutbacks have been widely reported, including articles in the *Providence Journal* and the *Rhode Island Catholic* that detailed the impact on meal sites and hunger for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.

Research studies have repeatedly shown that **the costs of social isolation for health are extreme.** A meta-study on social isolation found that it is the public health equivalent of other mortality risk factors like smoking and obesity.¹ Public transit access is an extremely cost-efficient, simple, effective way to increase social connectedness. We were ill-advised to add increased isolation to the mix of risk factors negatively impacted the health of poor, low-income seniors and people with disabilities.

A lifelong Rhode Island resident in her early 60's, living in Central Falls, shared that she has been a RIPTA rider since the 1960's. She now has a disability. She had relied on the no-fare bus pass to access basic transportation. In her own words, there are days, now, that she stays in and days she comes out, because she needs to save her quarters. **Still, she says, "I don't want to feel like a prisoner in my own home."**

Limiting access to transportation creates fundamental basic need access problems.

Social service providers, from both faith-based and secular organizations, have **consistently voiced real concerns** about the loss of the no-fare bus pass undercutting access to basic needs. Feeding programs, homeless service providers, mental health and recovery organizations and senior centers have been vocal proponents of preserving the no-fare bus pass, as have some municipal and local leaders from RI cities and towns.

Adding a clear moral voice to the conversation, **Bishop Thomas Tobin, Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence**, issued a statement in December 2016, saying, in part: "We ask that the RIPTA board, the governor's office and House and Senate leadership review this policy once again to avoid harming some of Rhode Island's most vulnerable citizens. Although we are not accountants or legislators, we are pastors who encounter many of those people who will suffer from this increase." **The Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island** also issued a statement calling for the restoration of the no-fare bus pass, as did the **Rhode Island State Council of Churches**, and numerous individual **faith communities**.

Misunderstandings Regarding Medical Reimbursement Dollars & Interim Support Programs

It has been repeatedly claimed by RIPTA and others that riders will be able to get vouchers for transportation through federal funds earmarked for medical transit, cycling through LogistiCare. However, that claim flies in the face of the evidence, including RIPTA's own data collection, which showed that **only 3-9% of surveyed riders were using RIPTA for a medical appointment.** This corroborates findings by other community groups who have spoken extensively with no-fare bus pass users and found that medical trips account for only a small fraction of total rides.

Further, **LogistiCare reimbursement is available only for a strictly-defined set of medical appointments.** While these reimbursements will pay for a meeting with your dietician to advise you on good nutrition, they will not cover your transportation to a meal program, food pantry or grocery store – leaving you well-informed on diet but just as hungry for food.

¹ <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

In addition, individuals must be able to plan these trips well in advance, leaving enough time to call LogistiCare, make a request for a bus ticket and be approved for that request, and wait to receive that ticket from LogistiCare, by mail, all in advance of one's appointment. Sometimes the rhythms of health and illness simply do not allow such advance planning, particularly for seniors and people with disabilities.

Additionally, beginning February 1st, a pilot program began offering 10-ride passes as a temporary amelioration measure upon the loss of the no-fare bus passes. This program is entirely inadequate to the need. First, it is available **only to seniors and veterans**. This program leaves other people with disabilities – *who comprised the majority of no-fare bus pass users* – no supports, at all. Further, many seniors and veterans require more than five round trips per month. Finally, its distribution mechanisms have been challenging and largely unsuccessful. This solution is **inadequate both in its scope and in its quality**.

An Opportunity to Again Stand Among National Leaders in Transit Equity

The importance of accessible public transportation for low-income seniors and people with disabilities is increasingly recognized. Nationally, we find that some of the country's most vibrant public transit systems are moving towards a similar or even more generous model of support than what is provided here in Rhode Island.

The **San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency** recently (Jan 2015) adopted a no-fare program for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.² San Francisco's income eligibility guidelines are substantially more generous than Rhode Island's guidelines. The pass is available for all San Francisco seniors (65+) and people with disabilities who have incomes at or below the median for the SF Bay area, with adjustments based on household size. An individual is eligible if he/she has less than \$75,400 in income, i.e. more than 600%FPL. A two-person household is eligible with income less than \$86,150; a 3-person household less than \$96,950; etc.³

The **Illinois Department of Aging** provides a Ride Free Transit Card for seniors (65+) and people with disabilities who are Illinois residents and have incomes less than \$27,610/year for an individual, \$36,635 for a 2-person household or \$45,657 for a 3-person household.⁴

Free transportation for seniors is also available via **the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority** and in several other regions, as well.⁵

Until this winter, Rhode Island stood among these national leaders. It can do so again, with the help of the General Assembly. **We encourage you to pass legislation to address this issue and permanently restore transportation access for low-income seniors and people with abilities.**

Thank you for your time and for your service to this committee.

² <http://abc7news.com/traffic/muni-launches-free-riding-program-for-seniors-disabled/483269/>

³ <https://www.sfmta.com/getting-around/transit/fares-passes/free-muni/free-muni-people-disabilities>

⁴ <https://www.illinois.gov/aging/BenefitsAccess/Pages/Eligibility%20and%20Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.septa.org/fares/discount/seniors-ride-free-info.html>