



March 10, 2017

To whom it may concern:

It is my pleasure to write in support of efforts to reinstate free RIPTA bus fares for elderly and disabled riders. Raising the cost of RIPTA fares for low-income seniors and individuals with disabilities creates significant barriers to providing services to underserved populations in this state.

Seniors and individuals with disabilities are at an increased risk for isolation and often rely on public transportation for essential activities of daily life such as buying groceries, getting to shelters and meal sites, visiting friends and family, attending religious services, and taking part in their community. Many of these individuals have very low incomes or no income at all. Regularly paying fifty cents per ride is not feasible for riders who rely on RIPTA for transportation and are already struggling to make ends meet.

Governor Raimondo has introduced a pilot program to offer 10-ride fare cards for qualifying seniors and veterans in order to mitigate effects of the fare increase. Five round trips per month does not adequately meet the transportation needs of most riders. This pilot program does not cover individuals with disabilities for whom the ability to access social supports, get to work or job interviews, attend recovery meetings, and access social services are vital to health and recovery.

The human cost of these cuts is enormous. In late February, our staff person met Dennis, a man with disabilities who was receiving services at McAuley House. He shared his story with her: Dennis can't afford the new 50 cent fare on a consistent basis. Unable to work and reliant on a paltry disability income as his sole source of support, he struggles to cover his expenses. He must choose between food and transportation. Food necessarily wins out. When he's brought his concerns to people in power, seeking a solution, he's been told: walk. With no other choices, that's what he does. He lives on Cranston Street, by the armory, but when he's run out of money and can no longer take the bus, he still does his best to get to the Providence Center, about three miles away -- *on foot*. He wakes up at 6AM to make it to the Providence Center by 9AM and often arrives winded, even with the frequent breaks he has to take along the way. Dennis wears special shoes for his diabetes, but, even still, he has significant blisters and sometimes more serious sores on his feet that require treatment by the doctor. Still, he doesn't have another option, so he does all he can do: he keeps walking.

Let's be clear: Dennis is walking because we, as a state, have begrudged him the \$1.50 he needs for a round-trip bus ride. This problem is ethical as well as economic. Our values are not where they need to be. \$1.8 million – the amount cited by RIPTA as the anticipated fare-box revenue resulting from the elimination of the no-fare bus pass – amounts to a little less than \$2 per Rhode Islander. It is a modest expenditure, relative to the size of the state budget. However, it becomes an enormous expenditure when that cost is shifted off the state and onto extremely low-income seniors and people with disabilities, in many cases individuals who were already struggling with impossible budgets.

By failing to mandate and fund the maintenance of the no-fare bus pass, the state of Rhode Island has harmed thousands of low-income seniors and people with disabilities. This already-struggling population faces increased isolation and reduced access to basic needs. In addition to this human cost, we believe that there are significant financial costs, making the elimination of the no-fare bus pass penny-wise but pound-foolish. We have outlined this in more depth in our attached testimony.

We write in full support of a no-fare bus pass program, and urge state leaders to ensure RIPTA has adequate funding to reinstate this program, which has aided thousands of Rhode Islanders in reaching independence and sustaining the healthy lifestyles we advocate for every day.

Sincerely,

Emily Jones, Interfaith Coordinator

Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty