



Testimony on the Implementation of Half-Fare MetroCards for People with Psychiatric Disabilities

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New York City Council
Standing Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation,
Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Disability Services

January 25, 2005

Good afternoon. My name is Ryan Napoli; I am a staff attorney with the Mental Health Law Project of MFY Legal Services, Inc.

As an attorney working on the implementation of the class action lawsuit against the Metropolitan Transit Authority and New York City Transit (MTA/NYCT), I am here to report on the first year of implementation of the Half-Fare MetroCard program for New York City residents with psychiatric disabilities, who receive federal disability assistance under the Supplemental Security Income Program or SSI. The Half-Fare Metrocard provides these individuals, who are poor and on a fixed income, with an invaluable benefit of more affordable transportation. The Half-Fare Metrocard also serves as the primary form of identification for a population that generally has no other form of photo identification.

On October 15, 2003, MFY and other advocates reached a settlement with the MTA/NYCT to institute a faster and less burdensome application process for mental health consumers who receive SSI. In addition to redesigning the application papers, applicants are no longer required to comply with arduous and overly intrusive administrative requirements.

For example, applicants no longer need to authorize MTA/NYCT to access all of the medical records in their Social Security files. In addition, applicants with serious mental illness no longer need to submit medical certifications. Instead, the MTA/NYCT will now conduct a computerized cross-check with the Social Security Administration, so that the applicant no longer needs to submit independent verification of their illness. If the computer check shows that the applicant receives SSI and has a serious mental illness, the half-fare card will promptly be issued. In the past, this unnecessary step was an insurmountable hurdle for many otherwise eligible individuals.

When the class-action was settled, the MTA/NYCT only would agree to continue this program

if during the first year the number of applications averaged 477 per month. Today, we proudly report that as a result of the outreach efforts of MFY Legal Services and our community partners, the average monthly application rate during the first year exceeded the MTA/NYCT's requirement by more than 10%, with an average of 559 applications each month.

To reach this goal, MFY and the Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled (CIAD) have been conducting outreach activities in the mental health community throughout the five boroughs. In 2004, MFY and CIAD together have reached over 15 Adult Homes and various other sites that serve mental health consumers throughout the City. For 2005, MFY already has mailed information packets to more than 800 organizations who serve mental health consumers, informing them that MFY is available to provide onsite training on the Half-Fare Metrocard and to assist applicants in applying for the cards. In addition, MFY's Adult Home Project continues similar outreach efforts to Adult Homes. Also, we commend the MTA staff who have been implementing this program, and hope that the MTA/NYCT continues to encourage their good work.

Now that we have overcome the initial hurdles, we now must make sure that the program is improved, so that as many qualified people receive a half-fare card as possible. To improve the program, we make the following recommendations:

- **MTA/NYCT should increase the usage of MTA vans.** The MTA vans have been a great service to this population. The MTA customer service vans travel to the consumers' communities, such that one can receive and even complete an application when a van comes to the community or simply refill or replace a damaged Metrocard. In addition, it should be noted that these vans are highly visible and as such serve as an excellent way to publicize the program. In order to assure that all boroughs are served, we recommend that the MTA/NYCT increase the usage of the vans.
- **MTA/NYCT should train their staff to become notaries.** If the applicant cannot provide the MTA with a photocopy of a valid form of photo identification, the application must be notarized. As noted earlier, many applicants do not have a valid form of identification, and as a result, the majority of the applications must be notarized. We believe, in order to continue the success of the outreach efforts, MTA representatives should become notaries.
- **Half-Fare Metrocards recipients should be allowed to use the card on Access-A-Ride vans.** Access-A-Ride users currently have to pay full fare even if they qualify for and have obtained Half-Fare Metrocards. This barrier serves to isolate low-income Access-A-Ride users, as many mental health consumers are simply choosing not to travel because the \$4 round-trip is not within their limited budget.

Finally, we have received reports from the MTA/NYCT that many applications are being returned as incomplete. (A copy of the Year 2004 Report is attached to my testimony.) Unfortunately, we as yet do not know why so many applications are returned. If there is a problem in the application process, then the MTA/NYCT immediately needs to inform us and to suggest reasonable solutions at the same time, so

that as many applications as possible are approved when they are initially submitted.

Thank you.