

RTAP Peer Roundtable Notes

ADA Compliance

04/16/2026 | 1:30-3 PM | Online

Attendees

1. Aaron Forstrom
2. Aleda Johnson
3. Gale Schulz
4. Crystal Gauthier
5. Paul Coyour
6. Ted Nelson
7. Pat LaCourse
8. Lezlie Grubich
9. Hugh Killam
10. Sandra Narh
11. Randy Jahnke
12. Tracy Borgschatz
13. Kirk Kuchera
14. Allison Karau
15. Kayla Sullivan
16. Mariah Kathan

Biggest Challenges:

1) Consistency Across Drivers and Dispatchers

- a) Ensuring all drivers and dispatchers apply ADA policies fairly and uniformly across all riders.
- b) Some drivers are overly accommodating to familiar or favorite passengers, creating inconsistencies.
- c) Passengers sometimes hear different information from dispatch versus drivers, causing confusion.
- d) Drivers struggle to understand when a situation is a one-off versus an established policy change.

2) Service Animals vs. Emotional Support Animals

- a) Difficult to distinguish legitimate service animals from emotional support or comfort animals, especially when passengers learn to answer the two permitted ADA questions correctly.
- b) People can register dogs as service animals for as little as \$80 with no real verification process.
- c) Animals on board that are disruptive, not under control, or behaving unlike trained service animals create difficult situations for drivers.

- d) Conflicting definitions across US DOT, DOJ, and FTA (e.g., FTA Circular 4710.1) make it unclear which standard to follow.
- e) One agency dealt with a rider claiming to be training service dogs, which created a gray area since the dog was not yet fully trained.

3) Reasonable Accommodations

- a) Most agencies have not received formal reasonable accommodation requests, but informal situations arise regularly.
- b) Determining what counts as a reasonable accommodation and communicating it to all drivers consistently is challenging.
- c) Ensuring every driver is physically capable of fulfilling any accommodation granted is a concern.

4) Personal Care Attendants (PCAs)

- a) Difficulty determining when a companion (friend or family member) is legitimately acting as a PCA and therefore entitled to ride free.
- b) Nursing homes sometimes expect drivers to escort patients all the way to their rooms without proper staff present.
- c) PCAs or family members occasionally interfere with driver duties (e.g., trying to assist with securement), creating safety and liability concerns.
- d) Drivers find it confusing to apply PCA rules inconsistently across different situations.

5) Mobility Device Securement

- a) Drivers who infrequently encounter wheelchair passengers lose proficiency with
- b) Q-Strait securement devices and lap/shoulder belts.
- c) Multiple versions of securement equipment (e.g., different Q-Strait models) require differentiated training.
- d) Policies on whether lap/shoulder belts are required versus optional vary by agency.

6) Rural Operations and Scheduling

- a) Rural, on-demand transit involves tight pickup and drop-off windows, making it harder to build in time for lift-assisted boardings.
- b) Larger geographic coverage areas increase scheduling complexity when accommodating passengers with mobility needs.

7) Website ADA Accessibility

- a) A new WCAG 2.1 Level AA standard is set to apply to rural transit systems (under 50,000 population) by 2027.
- b) Most rural agencies lack the technical bandwidth or dedicated staff to audit and update their websites for full accessibility compliance.

- c) The requirements are technically complex, involving screen reader compatibility, color contrast, and content display standards.

8) Keeping Up with Evolving Regulations

- a) ADA compliance spans multiple federal agencies (US DOT, DOJ, FTA) with overlapping and sometimes conflicting guidance.
- b) Rural agencies often do not have dedicated compliance staff, making it hard to stay current.
- c) AI tools can provide conflicting or inaccurate regulatory information, creating additional risk if not verified against official sources.

9) Wayfinding in Facilities

- a) Multi-modal transit facilities with multiple entrances, elevators, and skywalks create challenges ensuring ADA buttons, signage, and accessible routes are all functional and clearly marked.

Solutions:

1) Consistency

- a) Use real-world scenarios that have occurred to train drivers on why consistency matters, rather than only rule-based instruction.
- b) Provide dispatchers with two-way radio access to buses so they can step in as a calm voice of authority when difficult situations arise with passengers.

2) Reasonable Accommodations

- a) If a reasonable accommodation is granted, ensure it is one that every driver on staff is physically capable of fulfilling before communicating it as a standing policy.
- b) Document accommodations clearly and communicate them to all drivers by passenger name and specific need.

3) Service Animals

- a) Rely on the disruption and loss-of-control provisions in ADA regulations as recourse when an animal is misbehaving, since you cannot ask for proof of training.
- b) Send written notifications to riders outlining service animal policies when issues arise (e.g., a rider presenting a cat as a service animal).
- c) Verify which federal definition your agency should follow (US DOT vs. DOJ) by consulting your OTAT transit project manager.

4) Securement

- a) Conduct annual refresher training for all drivers on securement equipment to maintain proficiency, even when drivers rarely encounter wheelchair-using passengers.

- b) Require lap and shoulder belts for all passengers (not just wheelchair users) as a consistent safety standard.

5) Rural Scheduling

- a) Invest in scheduling software that automatically accounts for extra boarding time needed by passengers using lifts or with mobility challenges, making service equitable and predictable.

6) Technology and AI

- a) Use AI tools like custom-built ChatGPT instances loaded with agency-specific policies and OTAT guidelines to help managers find quick guidance on situations.
- b) Treat AI outputs as a starting point only: use AI to identify the relevant regulation or code, then verify directly on a government website before acting.

7) Website Accessibility

- a) Begin planning now for WCAG 2.1 Level AA compliance ahead of the 2027 deadline.
- b) Consider working with a website accessibility consultant or audit service to evaluate current compliance gaps.
- c) Watch for training and resources from RTAP and OTAT specifically on web accessibility requirements.

8) General Compliance

- a) Connect regularly with your OTAT compliance team and transit project manager for the most complete and Minnesota-specific ADA guidance.
- b) Use the National RTAP website for transit provider resources and updated definitions.

Ask a Peer: Questions and Answers:

Note: The formal Ask a Peer portion of this meeting did not generate new questions. The questions and answers below were raised organically during the main ADA compliance discussion.

Q: How many agencies are actually receiving formal reasonable accommodation requests?

A: Based on responses from the group, nearly all agencies reported that they have not received any formal reasonable accommodation requests. Most handle accommodation needs informally and on the fly as situations arise. One agency noted they adapt their no-show policy informally for riders whose disability contributes to missed trips.

Q: Does your agency allow passengers to bring pets on board (e.g., in a carrier)?

A: Yes, several agencies allow pets in carriers, provided the passenger can contain and hold the crate themselves without driver assistance. At least one agency requires all animals—except

service animals—to be in an approved carrier. The key standard across agencies is that the passenger must be in control of the animal at all times.

Q: How do you handle animals that claim to be service animals but behave in ways that suggest they are not (e.g., lunging, jumping on the driver)?

A: The primary recourse is the disruption and control provisions of ADA: if the animal is not under control or is causing disruption, you can address the situation on that basis. Agencies recommend documenting incidents and issuing warnings. Written letters outlining service animal policies have been used successfully to resolve some cases. Dispatchers using two-way radio communication can also help de-escalate situations on the bus.

Q: What definition of ‘service animal’ should transit agencies follow—US DOT, DOJ, or FTA?

A: There are at least three floating definitions, including from the US DOT (any animal trained to perform a specific service), the DOJ (which limits animals to dogs and miniature horses in some contexts), and FTA Circular 4710.1 (which references mostly dogs). The guidance for public transit agencies generally points to the US DOT definition. Agencies should confirm with their OTAT transit project manager which standard applies to them.

Q: Is Minnesota using AI tools for ADA compliance or regulatory research?

A: At least one agency (SMART) has built custom ChatGPT instances loaded with internal policies and OTAT/FTA guidance for use by operations and compliance managers. Others have used AI to identify specific regulatory codes and then verified those codes on official government websites. The group advised significant caution: AI can return conflicting or inaccurate information, especially given overlapping federal definitions, and should never be the sole source for compliance decisions.

Q: What is coming with website ADA accessibility rules, and when does it apply to rural agencies?

A: The WCAG 2.1 Level AA standard is the upcoming requirement. For urban/larger transit systems it applies sooner, but for rural agencies (under 50,000 population) the compliance deadline is 2027. The requirements involve technical elements like screen reader compatibility and color contrast. RTAP and OTAT are working on guidance and training to help agencies prepare. Agencies were advised to begin auditing their websites and consider working with accessibility consultants.

Q: How do you handle the PCA gray area, such as when a spouse rides free claiming to be a PCA?

A: The FTA states that a companion (friend or family member) does not count as a PCA unless they are actually performing PCA functions—but this is difficult to determine in practice. Most agencies default to allowing the companion to ride free rather than risk a compliance violation, especially when there is a plausible reason (e.g., the companion assists with hearing, counting money, navigating). The group acknowledged this is a significant gray area with no clean answer.

Next Peer Roundtable: May 21, 2026 – Driver Training & ELDT