

## **Community Connections: Proposed Hospital Shuttle and TNC Voucher Backup**

Background: Currently, the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) operates a dedicated Boston hospital shuttle for Framingham, Natick, and Wellesley (it was originally created to serve Veterans and then expanded to Boston hospitals as well). The MWRTA site notes the following:

Residents of Framingham, Natick, and Wellesley are eligible to be picked up and dropped off at their homes. Those not residing in Framingham or Natick must either be dropped off at the Blandin Hub in Framingham, or picked up at the Natick VFW Post 1274, located at 113 West Central St – there is space available at this location to park free of charge.

As part of the registration process, a fare account must be set up prior to using the service, and the rider must maintain a positive fare balance prior to booking trips. Fares will be charged through a prepay debit system, no cash will be collected on the vehicle. Value can be added to the fare account by check, money order, credit/debit card, or cash.

Trip requests must be called into the MWRTA at (508) 820-4650 at least 24 hours in advance. You will receive a confirmation call the evening prior to your ride, providing you with your ride times.

In a recently proposed option—to be the focus of a Community Connections grant application—MWRTA would provide another dedicated Boston hospital shuttle that would pick up and drop off residents at their homes in Sudbury, Wayland, and Weston. Destinations could be specified to include Newton-Wellesley Hospital as well as the Longwood area facilities and Mass General. The shuttle would operate between approx. 8 AM and 6 PM on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, unless demand warrants 5 days/week. The same MWRTA registration and request processes in use for the current shuttle would apply.

Community-Provided Backup Option: Although provided as a public service by the regional transportation authority, Sudbury, Wayland, and Weston could establish policies for residents separate from and in addition to MWRTA policies.

For example, one concern about public medical transportation in general has been the occasion of a lengthy wait by riders, most often for transportation home. This has been noted as a barrier to widespread use of “more public” (less costly, fewer SOVs, reduced congestion, etc.) transportation services. For a proposed Boston hospital shuttle that runs three cycles/day, there are potentially lengthy waits if one misses (say) the second shuttle home or to another facility and the only option is the third cycle of this shuttle.

To address the concern, we are proposing a community-provided backup option: an electronic TNC voucher program designed for *predetermined priority populations only* in each community. The voucher could be electronically activated by a prequalified rider for (1) on demand transport to another facility (for testing, a different specialist, etc.); AND/OR (2) on demand transport to a missed return shuttle (assuming it is available); AND/OR (3) on demand transportation home.

If chosen, such an option would be part of each town's policies and separate from the MWRTA public service. It should be noted that the MWRTA "offers service to residents who are unable to independently access the fixed route bus system. The [MetroWest Ride](#) is an origin-to-destination ride share service; trips are reserved through the MWRTA call center at (508) 820-4560."

Finally, each community currently offers grant-subsidized taxi programs and, in Sudbury, the program is used only for medical/healthcare appointments by four priority populations (older adults, those with a disability, the financially vulnerable, and veterans). Even with a hospital shuttle, Sudbury will likely continue to offer limited taxi service for those residents who would find it too difficult to use public transit, even with a TNC backup.

Insights Into Wait Times: On a regular basis, Sudbury requests feedback from the *GoSudbury Taxi and Uber Program* riders. The taxi program is grant subsidized and offered fare-free to the above target populations, who are qualified and registered by Senior Center staff. (Eligibility guidelines are published on the town website.)

A recent (August 2023) survey provides insights into wait times from taxi riders and with comparison to the TNC program. On the plus side, it should be emphasized that the ability to make an advance reservation (with the taxi companies or with the MWRTA hospital shuttle) is a very appreciated feature. On-demand (TNC) service is also used by residents for medical appointments in Boston. However, taxi riders note that they "don't have to be stressed trying to figure out how to get to my medical appointments." Reserving a ride provides reassurance of "reliability."

However, an advance reservation requirement also brings the challenge of selecting post-appointment pickup time. One rider said: "It would be beneficial to do round trips [to medical appointments] with Uber." Another: "It would be great if the Uber scheduling feature [i.e., on-demand] would work for GoSudbury taxi." The following verbatim comments describe the reality of predictability:

"Would like more flexibility in return time, as we are never sure if the doctors are on time or more tests will be required at that visit. But, if you build in extra time and don't need it, you don't want to be sitting around for hours."

"When going to a doctor or hospital, the time [of visit and, thus, pickup time] is unknown."

Sapienza, DBA  
10.23

“Having to estimate time to return is hard.”

“The wait time for all my return trips is always an hour.”

“Wait times for returning home from medical appointments [are long].”

The TNC voucher system is not meant to eliminate waiting time before or after an appointment. Rather, it is a backup for only those residents who are “stuck” needing supplemental transportation in and/or home from Boston.