



San Diego MTS Increases Efficiencies & Reduces Paratransit Costs

through In-Person Eligibility Assessments

Challenge

With a 40% increase in annual paratransit trip volume and 38% increase in spending over three years, MTS sought a solution to help responsibly control the unsustainable growth of its ADA paratransit service, Access.

Solution

A collaborative partnership with MTM's mobility management program for 100% in-person eligibility assessments, including a new process to accommodate trip-by-trip conditional eligibility determinations.

Results

41% decrease in total certifications, 8% increase in passengers served per hour, and 15% reduction in total paratransit trips through conditional eligibility, for a cost savings of more than \$550,000 over two years.



▲ 40%
Annual paratransit trip volume

▲ 38%
Spending over three years

Challenge

As one of the oldest transit systems in Southern California, the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) serves an annual ridership of 88 million—including nearly 500,000 annual Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) paratransit trips. Like many transit agencies, MTS struggled with an unsustainable growth pattern for its Access paratransit service. From 2013 to 2016, Access demand grew exponentially. Facing a 10% annual growth in paratransit ridership and a 40% rise in paratransit trip volume, MTS's paratransit budget increased from \$10.8 million to more than \$15 million in just three years.

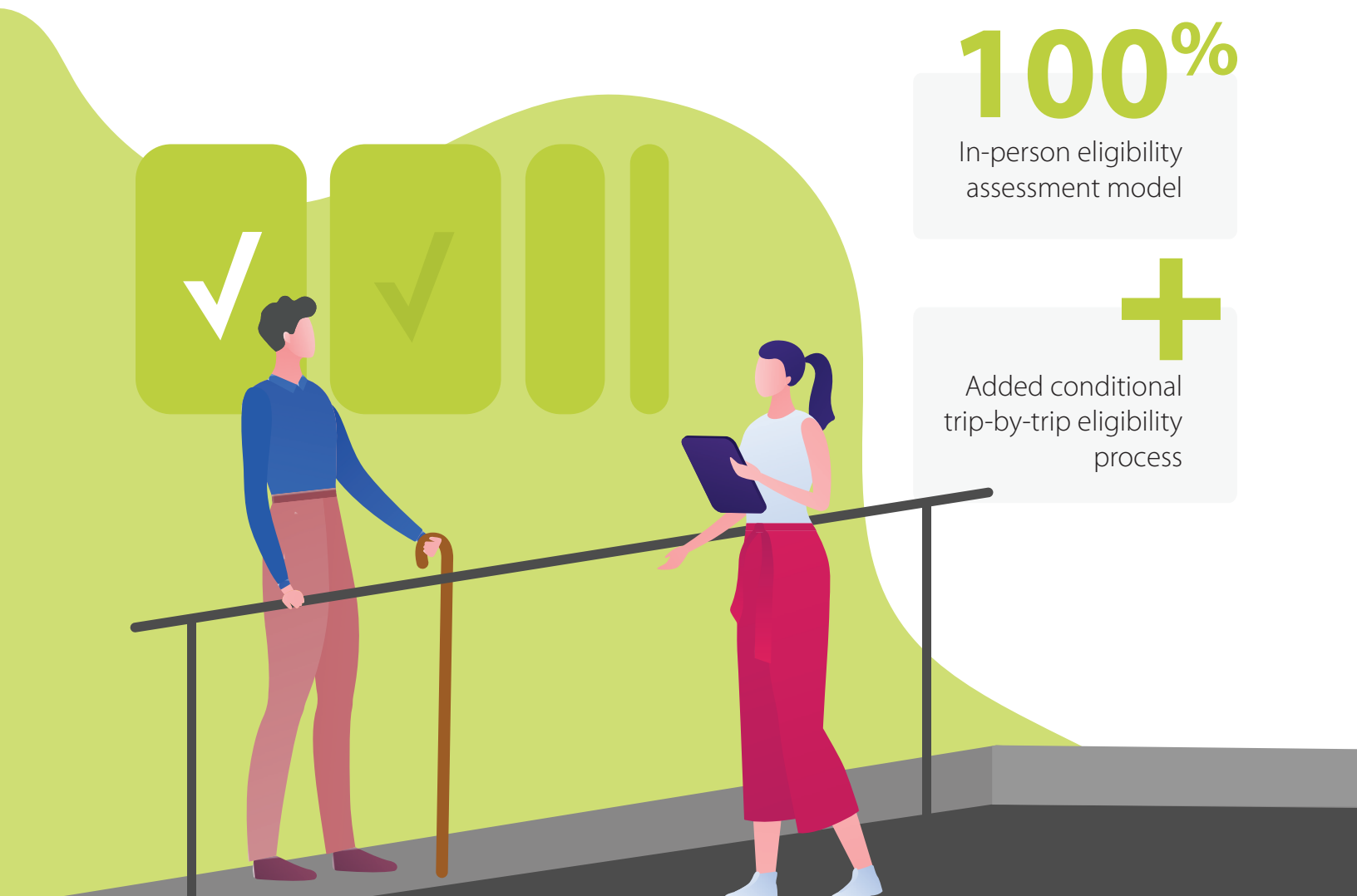
With the ultimate goal of ensuring the highest level of service for its paratransit passengers and redirecting non-eligible applicants to more appropriate transportation options, MTS sought a partner for ADA eligibility certification services to help better control paratransit growth.

Solution

Historically, MTS had deployed an ADA eligibility process that was application-based and complemented by phone interviews. Following a competitive bidding process in 2016, MTS selected MTM as its new eligibility certification partner. Together, using MTM's proven mobility management model, MTM and MTS transformed the eligibility process into a 100% in-person assessment model.

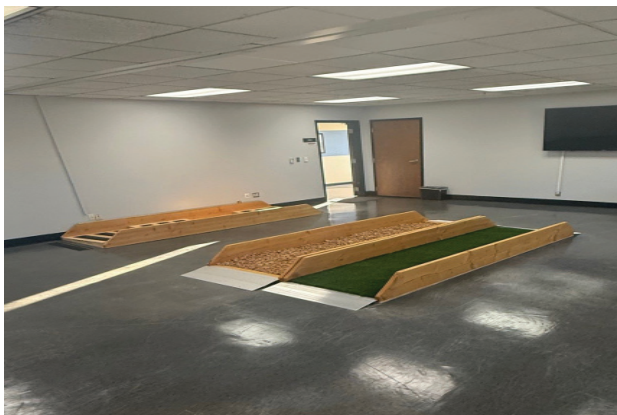
Access ADA paratransit services are a safety net for passengers in the San Diego area who are unable to utilize MTS's fixed route bus and trolley services due to a limiting disability. The new in-person assessment model helps MTS ensure that only truly eligible passengers are certified to use the program. We hold all applicants to the same baseline standards for eligibility, which safeguards that eligibility decisions are fair and unbiased.

Under the model, every applicant completes a thorough, multi-step evaluation process that allows MTM's Mobility Assessment Evaluators to gather as much relevant information as possible about their conditions and limitations. The process begins with the initial application, and then flows into an in-person meeting, where the Evaluator interviews the applicant and observes how they are able to access transit services. When necessary, the Evaluator conducts a Mini Mental Status Examination (MMSE) to determine the applicant's cognitive abilities. The Evaluator also collects supplemental information like medical professional verification, fixed route utilization history, and video footage to help inform their decision. Based on the findings, the Evaluator makes an eligibility determination. If an applicant disagrees with the decision, they have the right to an appeal. All appeals result in a more in-depth in-person functional assessment process to further examine the applicant's physical abilities.



Value-Added Services

- **BUILD-OUT OF AN INDOOR ELIGIBILITY COURSE:** To support MTS's paratransit eligibility goals and ensure precise, real-world evaluations, MTM Transit designed and built a fully functional indoor assessment course for the program in 2025. This dedicated space features simulated ramps, stairs, uneven ground, and varied surfaces—including grass, gravel, and cement—to emulate an actual transit environment. In conjunction with assessments conducted in the outdoor transit setting, this indoor course enables our Mobility Assessment Evaluators to thoroughly gauge an applicant's strength, balance, coordination, endurance, range of motion, and distance capabilities. By creating controlled, accurate simulations, it helps deliver fair, comprehensive determinations that align with ADA standards and promote sustainable program growth.
- **CONDITIONAL ELIGIBILITY:** MTM worked with MTS to establish the agency's first trip-by-trip conditional eligibility process, with a goal to empower passengers and eliminate non-qualifying paratransit trips. During the assessment, MTM's Evaluators look at potential conditions that might prevent a passenger from using fixed route, like uneven surfaces, street crossings, extreme weather conditions, air quality, and time of travel. If one of these conditions exist, results are documented in the passenger's file. When the passenger calls to book a paratransit trip, the Dispatcher references the file to determine if the trip meets one of the conditional requirements. If the trip does not meet a condition, the passenger must use fixed route service instead. This new eligibility component has required buy-in from MTS's transportation vendor to ensure conditional eligibility is enforced during scheduling. All three parties—MTS, MTM, and MTS's transportation vendor—are fully vested in the process, resulting in successful enforcement.
- **TRAVEL TRAINING:** For applicants who are deemed ineligible or conditionally eligible, MTM leverages our established travel training methods in a train-the-trainer approach. This approach teaches local social service agencies to perform travel training themselves. After completing training, agency staff are able to instruct passengers how to safely and independently use fixed route services. This helps MTS maximize travel training availability while adhering to existing staffing levels and building sustainability into the program.
- **TAXI PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY:** As part of their paratransit program, MTS assigns specific paratransit trips to taxi services. This service is reserved for single rider ambulatory trips that don't fit the Access multi-load model, and is used when it makes the most economical sense for MTS. During the assessment process, MTM's Evaluators make an eligibility determination for taxi services to ensure appropriate use of the program.
- **REDUCED FARE APPLICATION PROCESSING:** MTM's local staff also process Reduced Fare Applications on behalf of MTS, ensuring applicants who qualify for reduced fare and passes are quickly moved through the system.



Results

The partnership between MTM and MTS has achieved excellent results for Access paratransit. Highlights include:

▼41%

Total certification requests

▼53%

New certifications

▼14%

Re-certifications

▲8%

Passengers served per hour

▼15%

Paratransit trips as a result of conditional eligibility determinations, resulting in more than \$550,000 in savings from August 2017-August 2019

Keys to Success:

- Continual evaluation for success and effectiveness
- Prioritize customer service to gain passenger buy-in
- Ensure process is scalable to size
- Openness to modifications
- Client/vendor partnership



FY 2019 Access Paratransit Highlights



492,322

Total Passengers



90%

OTP



90%

OBT Compliance



19%

Taxi Ridership



2.18

Passengers/Hour



\$33.99

Cost/Trip



2,419

Assessments



1.3%

Appeal Rate

Additionally, thanks to involving the passenger community in the process and a dedication to top-notch customer service, the new process has been met with little resistance from applicants. The partnership between MTM and MTS has been a resounding success, and is an example of a true collaboration between a client and vendor. We plan to continue expanding upon the eligibility determination program in the near future, and are exploring opportunities for mini-functional assessments, video interviews to accommodate for social distancing measures, and integration between MTM and MTS's RSD platform.





Transit