

SUMMARY

Processing Safety Complaints Against Paratransit Drivers MTA/OIG Report #10-06

NYC Transit's Access-A-Ride program, which is administered and operated by its Paratransit Division (Paratransit), provides transportation services to over 130,000 customers who are unable to use the public bus and subway system to commute to their jobs, keep medical appointments, or generally travel throughout the city.

As part of its community outreach program, Paratransit's Customer Relations Unit (CRU) processes complaints about the Access-A-Ride program that have been telephoned into NYC Transit offices from riders as well as from the public at large. During the period of our review, CRU processed 1507 "Reckless Operator" complaints and 87 "Injured Customer" complaints alleging that Access-A-Ride van operators had performed unsafely in various ways.

Our findings were disturbing. For example, CRU did not refer 60 of the 87 Injured Customer complaints for investigation even though the complainants specifically alleged that their injuries had resulted from their operators' performance errors. And as to the assertion by Paratransit that its "safety net" backed up CRU, we sampled 30 of those 60 unrefereed complaints and found that 19 of them (63 percent) were never flagged or investigated by anyone.

We also found that CRU did not request that carriers investigate 102 (nearly 70 percent) of the 148 Reckless Operator complaints we sampled, even though these complainants clearly described unsafe practices by the operators, including driving dangerously, failing to adequately fasten customer seat belts and wheelchairs restraints, and failing to assist riders with limited mobility into and out of the vans. We were particularly concerned that CRU summarily closed four complaints that alleged that operators fell asleep while behind the wheel of their vehicle.

To ensure that all unsafe operators are promptly identified, investigated, and addressed, we recommended that Paratransit give priority to processing Injured Customer and Reckless Operator complaints. More particularly, we recommended that Paratransit automatically refer all Injured Customer complaints for formal investigation of the operators' role in such incidents. Regarding Reckless Operators complaints, we recommended that Paratransit institute (1) formal standards for assessing these complaints; and (2) sufficient internal controls to ensure that all appropriate complaints are referred for investigation. We also recommended that Paratransit review its contract management procedures to ensure that (1) safety investigations are being conducted as warranted and in a thorough and professional manner; and (2) drivers found to have violated the agency's safety procedures are promptly terminated, suspended, or subject to other appropriate action.

MTA Bus, which oversees Paratransit operations, accepted our audit's findings and agreed to implement our recommendations.