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By: Tom Benning

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DART contractor fined \$238,000 for falling short of goals

The company that took over DART's paratransit service last year has paid \$238,000 in fines for failing to meet basic performance standards.

Records show that in its first 11 months on the job, MV Transportation of Dallas has consistently missed the mark on telephone waiting times, punctual pick-up performance and customer complaints. The company is entering the second year of a seven-year, \$186 million contract with Dallas Area Rapid Transit.

DART officials acknowledge that they are still working through problems in the paratransit service, which provides more than 2,500 rides a day to elderly and disabled passengers.

But they say that service has steadily improved over the last year; that MV, despite its problems, is doing far better than the prior contractor; and that revamping paratransit operations has saved the agency millions of dollars.

Indeed, they said, DART is so pleased with the progress that it's considering lowering the fines or revising the performance standards by which MV is judged.

"Things have changed considerably," said Doug Douglas, DART's vice president of mobility management. "We have proven success with this model."

An overhaul of paratransit service was touted last October as a way to save DART money while improving the main transportation option for more than 10,000 of North Texas' most vulnerable transit riders.

MV, the new contractor, was given direct responsibility for some tasks that were previously handled in-house by DART. And unlike the prior contractor, Veolia Transportation, MV made use of specially trained taxi drivers to provide more flexibility in picking up passengers who schedule rides.

But the launch was a disaster.

Lengthy delays. No-show drivers. Long travel times. Jammed phone lines. Ill-suited vehicles. Untrained drivers. Inexperienced dispatchers.

DART and MV spent the first few months apologizing to customers and revamping the revamped service.

They increased phone capacity and moved dispatch operations from MV's headquarters to a DART facility. They enhanced employee incentives in an effort to keep experienced staffers around. They improved taxi training and started an effort to better pair riders and vehicles.

Some improvement

DART records show that those changes made a difference.

Last October, only 77 percent of rides were on time — defined as arriving within 20 minutes of the scheduled time. By August, the most recent month available, 91 percent were on time.

Last October, 66 percent of phone calls were answered within three minutes. By August, it was 94 percent.

In October, DART was receiving 21 complaints per 1,000 trips, compared with eight in August.

Officials said some of those numbers are better than they ever were in prior years, under the previous contractor.

“The company has learned a great deal over the course of the first year,” MV spokeswoman Jennifer Wiley said in a statement.

But issues remain, as MV struggles to meet performance standards spelled out in its contract.

Under those standards, 95 percent of rides must be on time each day. MV is fined \$500 for every day not meeting that standard. Ninety-five percent of each day's phone calls must be answered within three minutes, and 99 percent within five minutes, or there's another \$500 daily fine.

MV must average fewer than three complaints per 1,000 trips each month, or pay a \$2,500 fine.

Through the first 11 months, MV met the on-time threshold on just 24 days. That's 7 percent of the time. The contractor reached its phone-answering goals on 64 days, or 19 percent of the time. And MV has never come close to the monthly goal for customer complaints.

Those failures resulted in \$238,000 in fines.

Mixed reviews

In interviews with several people who depend on DART's paratransit service, reviews were mixed.

Most said they've noticed improvements, particularly with scheduling and dispatch. A few said they were quite satisfied with MV Transportation.

But many are displeased with the heavy reliance on taxis. Others said the new paratransit service still isn't as reliable as it was under the previous contractor. And nearly all complained about lengthy travel times and what they described as bizarre routes.

John Kilpatrick, a rider who lives in East Dallas and works in South Dallas, said it's all too common to have to travel to Pleasant Grove or some other out-of-the-way spot to complete the trip.

"It doesn't make any sense," said Kilpatrick, who's blind.

Virginia Cahill had to give up on DART's paratransit service altogether, after it consistently delivered her adult daughter late to work. Cahill, 54, said her family tried to work with DART. But she and her husband decided in May to send their daughter, who has special needs, to a closer workshop, where they could drop her off and pick her up.

"It was too frustrating, too long, too unreliable," Cahill said.

DART officials said they were aware of continuing problems, particularly with routes and travel times.

Agency records show that passengers' travel times and trip distances spiked after MV took over. The reason? While DART paid the prior contractor by the hour, it pays MV by the trip. The idea was that DART would pay for service only when service was being provided. But one effect, said Douglas, the DART vice president, is that MV has been "stuffing the vehicles as best they can," carrying as many passengers to complete as many trips as possible. As a result, some riders are forced to take the long way home.

"That was not our intent," Douglas said. "We're still working through that."

Other improvements in the works include a way for riders to go online to monitor the location of vehicles; a system that calls riders when a vehicle has arrived at the pickup spot; and online booking of trips.

But even as DART works to improve service, officials said they're considering reducing or eliminating the fines for MV's failing to meet key performance standards. That depends on the contractor's continuing to improve, Douglas said.

So does that mean the contract's goals were unrealistic from the get-go?

"It's still too early to tell," Douglas said. "We had a lot of things that we worked through this year."