

Advocates for people with disabilities speak out on Detroit transit cuts

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed members of Warriors on Wheels concerning cuts in bus service in Detroit and surrounding suburban areas. Warriors on Wheels is a Detroit-based organization that advocates for people with disabilities.

In 2004, Lawrence Dilworth and four other persons with disabilities initiated a class action lawsuit under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) against the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) over lack of wheelchair access on city buses. Since that time bus service in the Detroit area has drastically worsened for individuals with disabilities and able-bodied people alike.

Transit users in Detroit face long waits due to the lack of serviceable buses, while SMART (the suburban Detroit transit system) recently instituted drastic cuts, including the elimination of 15 weekday routes, several weekend routes, and cuts in service during “off peak” hours.

WSWS: Can you tell us about Warriors on Wheels?

Lisa Franklin: I am the founder of the organization. In 1996 I was in an auto accident caused by a drunk driver. I was ejected from the vehicle. I woke up one week after and I had a spinal cord injury. I was classified as a paraplegic. I can stand on a walker, but I use a wheelchair for mobility. After 12 years going through the community and seeing the lack of accessibility and insensitivity I encountered, I realized something had to be done.

Our organization is mostly for persons with physical challenges, but our members have various disabilities. We ensure the city is ADA compliant and, in particular, supplying people with adequate/mandated transportation services. Education is key to change in our community. We talk with the schools and first responders, and promote awareness. We have been very successful in our approach, which emphasizes communication and other solutions to prevent costly litigation.

We take pride in our independence, which is why these cuts hurt us in a grave way. Most of us don’t have the luxury of driving. We have to depend on public transportation and they are not delivering. The cuts in transportation limit our independence.

Sixteen percent of Detroiters have disabilities, and 70 percent of our homeless population. The underserved in our city continue to be the subject of constraints. It’s awful.

WSWS: What has been the impact of the cuts in bus service?

Marguerite Maddox: These cuts are really affecting my ability to get around, because I have depended on public transportation from day one. My grandmother taught me to use public transport at a very young age. By the age of 12, I was learning how to get buses so I could prepare myself to be able to work. I use SMART and DDOT to travel from city to suburbs. Since there are no major grocery stores in Detroit, I have to use the buses to get groceries in the suburbs, so having the bus stop at the city limits is a real hardship.

I used to take my dog, Jello, to Farmington. That is the only vet in this area who will treat the PAWS assistance dogs for free. The buses I took, the 305 and the 385, are cut out now.

Lisa Franklin: Employers are paying attention to this. They won’t even hire people from Detroit because you can’t make it to work. It is a bad situation. My daughter is a college student and she has problems getting to school on time. She has to leave two, two-and-a-half, three hours early to get to school on time.

What I found out recently with the SMART cutbacks is that Smart Connector has also conformed to only running on peak hours, so they are only transporting people with disabilities during peak hours if they are coming to the

city of Detroit. If you have a person sitting in a wheelchair at a bus stop, they have to wait even longer for a bus, because with the cutbacks buses are overcrowded and there is no room to board a wheelchair.

Lawrence Dilworth: It is worse than it's ever been. When Detroit catches a cold, people with disabilities catch pneumonia and wind up in intensive care.

Lisa Franklin: There have been people left waiting at the bus stop. One of our members was going down Eight Mile Road and he saw a gentleman waiting for the bus. He came back an hour and a half later, and the guy was still sitting there. So he pulled over to see what the problem was. He said, "One bus passed me by and the lift wasn't working." We've had that issue since 2004 when the lawsuit came into play. They were supposed to fix that issue. The buses aren't supposed to leave the yard if the lifts aren't working.

We feel if the transit system is better for us, it will be better for everybody.

Lawrence Dilworth: It is worse than when we initiated the lawsuit. Look at the news, you have 400 buses and only 100 are working. That has got to stop.

The main problem we had was with what we call rear loaders. The newer buses and all the SMART buses are front loaders. But the DDOT buses still have a lot of the rear loaders. I refuse to ride on those. I will let a rear loader go by and wait for a front loader because if there is a fire in the back, you just can't get out.

Once I was on one of those old buses. The bus broke down. They did not even have one of those hand cranks to get me out of there. Now suppose the hand crank is missing in the buses on fire? How do I get out of there?

WSWS: Are you a locally based organization?

Lisa Franklin: Yes, we started right here. We actually started in 2006 as Women on Wheels and we changed it to Warriors on Wheels in 2008. It started because of the lack of accessibility around the community. It was across the board wherever we went. This is the first chapter.

WSWS: What has the response been?

Lisa Franklin: Everybody talks. The ball is starting to roll. My husband used to be a truck driver and he met a couple in Tennessee with cerebral palsy, and they were interested in starting a chapter there.

Lawrence Dilworth: Lisa is an inspiration for everybody in Detroit who is physically challenged, or even seniors. I got involved because I saw what she was doing. She is the

biggest advocate for people with disabilities in the city, bar none.

WSWS: What does the Americans with Disabilities Act require?

Lisa Franklin: The ADA sets out the conditional and unconditional. If you can ride the line-haul buses, but maybe it's too cold outside, then you can use the para transit line. [Para transit buses pick up those too disabled to use regular service. They are confined to the general area served by regular buses.] Unconditional means you can't use the line-haul, you have to have para transit. But DDOT doesn't go by that rule and neither does SMART. If you can ride the line-haul, flat out you are not qualified to ride the para transit line.

Lisa Franklin: The ADA says there are two types of situations that would allow someone to use the para transit buses, conditional and unconditional. For example, heavy snowfall may affect the ability of a wheelchair to get to a bus stop. If it is too hot or too cold outside, then some people start to qualify for the para transit buses. But DDOT does not go by the rules and neither does SMART.

WSWS: So they don't transport disabled people in the winter.

Lisa Franklin: Right, so people with disabilities are stuck.

Marguerite Maddox: They don't train the drivers on the different kinds of service.

Lisa Franklin: They are supposed to include a person with disabilities when they train the drivers. And they stopped doing that about two years ago.

Lawrence Dilworth: The training is terrible.

Marguerite: Many of my friends have been denied access to the para transit buses. They denied them for the different kinds of services. Those who are blind, have epilepsy, use a wheelchair, have PTSD, or other health problems find getting certified to use the para transit service is difficult.



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