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1500 Union Ave., Suite 2000, Baltimore, MD 21211

Phone: 410-727-6352 | Fax: 410-727-6389

www.DisabilityRightsMD.org

SB 891: MobilityLink Paratransit Service Improvements Study

House Environment and Transportation Committee

April 2, 2024

Position: Support

Disability Rights Maryland submits this testimony in support of SB 891: MobilityLink Paratransit Service Improvements Study. Disability Rights Maryland is the federally designated Protection and Advocacy agency in Maryland, mandated to defend and advance the civil rights of people with disabilities. An enumerated purpose of DRM's legal work is to continue to secure improvements in the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA)'s paratransit and work with community members to improve transportation access for individuals with disabilities.

DRM supports the MobilityLink Paratransit Service Improvements Study because it mandates an independent study of MTA's MobilityLink service delivery and quality, and will provide valuable recommendations to policymakers on how to improve MobilityLink. Paratransit plays a vital role for people with disabilities in accessing meaningful participation in economic, social, and recreational activities.

DRM requests that the House maintain the Senate version of this bill. The amendment requiring the Maryland Department of Transportation to incorporate the study's findings and recommendations into the 2050 Maryland Transportation is not appropriate at this time. This amendment is premature, and incorporation into the 2050 plan should be considered once the study has concluded and findings are presented. Policymakers and agency officials should have time to review the findings before they are incorporated into the Maryland Transportation Plan.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, MobilityLink service must be comparable to the level of service and response time as MTA's fixed route lines.¹ Over the years, however, MobilityLink riders have seen inconsistent levels of service, often falling far below comparable service levels. MobilityLink rides have to arrive within a half-hour window of the appointment time to be considered "on-time." In the past seven years, MobilityLink's on-time performance has dropped below its 93.5% goal far too frequently. On-time performance fell to the lowest point at 59.2% in 2021, with late pick-ups on over 38,600 occasions.² Performance gradually increased, but suddenly dropped again in March 2022 to 73.3%.³

Poor service, such as late pick-ups and drop-offs, long trip times, missed rides, and lengthy wait times for customer service calls, have negative implications for riders. These poor service issues cause riders to be late for work, miss medical appointments, and miss entire events. Riders have been stranded all night when their MobilityLink ride has failed to show. This

¹ 42 U.S.C.A. § 12143.

² MTA MobilityLink On-Time Performance, available at <https://www.mta.maryland.gov/performance-improvement>.

³ *Id.*

is unacceptable; people with disabilities who rely on MobilityLink deserve dependability. Riders must be able to rely on getting to their appointments without concern that their ride might be late or not show up.

MobilityLink currently uses third-party contractors to provide more than 99% of its rides. The third-party contractors have had high levels of employee turnover, reaching rates of over 100% a year. There is also a substantial level of absenteeism, leaving the remaining operators to work longer shifts to cover the demand. The third-party contractors start MobilityLink operators' pay at a level that is \$5 per hour lower than their peers who work for MTA's fixed-route service. Fixed-route operators' pay increases to over \$12 per hour, the top rate for the contracted paratransit operators. Low wages, unaffordable health care plans, and limited retirement benefits deter operators who are passionate about providing safe rides to passengers with disabilities from staying in their jobs long term.

SB 891 proposes an independent study by the Maryland Transportation Institute (MTI) at the University of Maryland to identify methods to improve the paratransit service. It is critical that this study is performed by an independent third party. The legislature has required the Maryland Department of Transportation's MTA to study and report on its paratransit service in the past, yet the areas of concern identified by the legislature in these requests remain today. MTI will provide an objective report to policymakers on MobilityLink service, quality, and workforce. The report will serve as an excellent starting point for reforming MobilityLink.

The MobilityLink Paratransit Service Improvements Study will compare MobilityLink with other paratransit entities around the country to identify the best method for service delivery. It will conduct a cost-benefit analysis of paratransit service quality, reliability, and financial costs. The study will analyze and compare paratransit services nationwide, including turnover and absenteeism rates, average length of employment, preventable accidents, average wages and benefits, and career training opportunities, among other workforce metrics.

MobilityLink riders will also be consulted to provide valuable input about their experiences using the service. MTI will share its findings and recommendations with state and local officials. DRM is confident that this study will provide key information our state can use to ensure that MobilityLink service works optimally for its riders.

For these reasons, we support SB 891 and request a favorable report. For more information or questions, contact: Daria Pugh, Staff Attorney, Disability Rights Maryland, DariaP@DisabilityRightsMD.org or (443) 692-2487.

Respectfully submitted,

Daria Pugh
Disability Rights Maryland