



Partnering to Fill Gaps in the Houston Area

System: Harris County RIDES

Service Area: Harris County, TX

Website:

<https://rides.harriscountytexas.gov/Pages/default.aspx>



Background

RIDES is an option for people for whom public transportation is either unavailable or inaccessible. A 1998 study of the transportation gaps in Houston resulted in the implementation of the RIDES program in 2003. The American Red Cross was providing gap transportation; however, they could not fulfill all the needs identified in the report. The Harris County Coordinating Council consisting of the Area Agency on Aging, American Red Cross, City of Houston, METRO, Harris County and disability agencies met to create RIDES. While this group no longer meets, many of these partners continue serving on various advisory committees.

Rides provides services in Harris County which includes City of Houston and unincorporated Harris County. In 2008, RIDES became part of the newly formed County Transit Division in the Community Services Department where it remains today. RIDES operates regionally and fills transportation gaps in other counties. RIDES provides service through interlocal agreements for older adults, and people with disabilities in the following counties: Galveston County – City of Galveston (ADA service); Brazoria County – Gulf Coast Center in the cities of Friendswood, League City, and Pearland; and Montgomery County for the Montgomery County Meals on Wheels Program.

RIDES is a curb-to-curb, subsidized program that allows eligible customers and participating agencies to purchase transportation services at a significant discount. The customer or sponsoring agency pays 50% of the total trip cost. Rides can be requested as demand response or subscription service. There are no ride restrictions for purpose of travel. Riders must be over the age of 65 or have a disability in order to use the RIDES services.

There are two levels of service available through RIDES.

1. Shared ride services are non-metered rides scheduled in advance. The passengers share rides with other passengers offering the most economical option for trips over 12 miles. The cost is based on the mileage from the point of pick-up to the destination. The cost of the trip ranges from \$6.00 to \$42.00, with the customer paying only 50% of this cost. Trips must be booked a minimum of 24 hours in advance. Need for a wheelchair accessible vehicle must be noted upon reservation. Shared ride providers are private transportation companies who participate using their own vans and cars to transport RIDES clients.
2. Taxi service is available the same day and allows for 24/7 service. The cost of this same-day service is based on the rate of the meter fare box. Customers may take a one-way trip with a maximum of \$48.00. The customer pays 50% of the trip cost. Trips can be booked 90 minutes in advance.

RIDES provided its 1 millionth trip in November 2019!

RIDES Specialized Transportation for Harris County

Service Area Population	4.7 million
Service Area Size (sq. mi)	1,777
Data for Year Ending	2019
One-way Trips per Year	84,320
Annual Miles of Services	885,408
Fleet	RIDES has access to more than 500 of Yellow Cab's fleet. Shared ride providers own 15 vehicles.
Annual Operating Expenses	\$3.8 million
Operating Cost/Trip	Taxi – \$30.93, Shared Ride – \$20.66
Major Funding Sources	FTA Section 5310 and 5307 funding, match is provided by contributions from partners.
Partner Agencies	RIDES have 27 partner agencies and 3 interlocal agreements for service outside of Harris County.

Coordination

RIDES has multi-agency partnerships that reduce costs for passengers through efficient and effective coordination. Through mobility management, RIDES refers and matches customers to partner agencies who may provide the co-pay of sponsored client's trips. RIDES gathers pertinent information to refer customers to the agency whose criteria best fits their needs.

Prior to implementing the RIDES program, interviews were conducted with non-profits and human services agencies to find out what elements they wanted in the program in order to participate. A memorandum of understanding is signed annually to indicate how much these agencies will commit the program. Agencies pay 50% of the co-pay for the trips of the clients they serve. Their contributions are used as local match dollars.

Through Harris County Purchasing, RIDES issues a RFP and providers are selected through the competitive process. Standardized pricing is established by the county, so vendors are selected on their ability to provide services. The services are all turn-key contracted, and RIDES does not own vehicles. By using existing transportation resources and with donated space and in-kind services, the RIDES program was relatively inexpensive to implement.

RIDES coordinates with various agencies to fill the gap in providing community transportation services. Examples of partners who provide 50 % funding for these specific needed trips include the following:

- ETHAN-911 Emergency Service – trips provided when not an emergency
- Genesys Works Partnership – transport students with low-incomes to intern at corporate jobs
- Children's Assessment Center – transport parents who need to go to Family Court to regain custody of their children
- Senior Justice for Assessment Center – transport older adults who experienced domestic violence
- Amazing Place & Baker Ripley – transport individuals with dementia to adult day centers
- Area Agency on Aging – transportation for older adults and people with disabilities
- JoyCare Pediatric Center – transport children with disabilities to Center with a Nurse Onboard which is the first of its kind in Texas

Harris County RIDES formed the Advisory Committee and serves as the lead. Agencies involved include: the Houston Center for Independent Living, United Way of Greater Houston, Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD; Care for Elders Senior Collaborative, and Amazing Place.

Staff members hold seats on the Transportation Advisory Council (TAC) which is part of the Houston Galveston Area Council – Metropolitan Planning Organization (H-GAC). The TAC serves as the advisory council to the Transportation Policy Council which consists of elected officials.

RIDES is also involved in the Regional Stakeholder group called The Regional Transit Coordination Subcommittee (“RTCS”) of the H-GAC. The RTCS consists of regional stakeholders with a vested interest in public transportation services including, but not limited to, representatives from organizations representing health and human services, private and public transit providers, education, city and county planning, services for older adults, workforce, and state government.

An electronic fare card and data management system was implemented in 2011 which replaced paper tickets. This made regional coordination possible and increased the efficiency of program administration. GPS data is collected automatically through the use of the fare cards. Information recorded includes name, address, start and end location, miles and cost which feeds the billing reports.

Other improvements to the program include the following:

- A credit card feature was added to the website for online fare card re-loading as well as online registration to enroll in the program.
- In 2018, RIDES changed systems from ISO to Android and implemented tablets in the field for more user-friendly technology.
- Language translation on the website was added through Google translation as well as accessibility features such as a large font option.

Challenges

RIDES has had difficulty maintaining small shared ride providers. They can provide the service, but have difficulty in administration of Federal Program requirements and reporting.

When the American Red Cross stopped providing shared rides for RIDES in 2012, the Ambassador Door to Door program ceased. The high level of service in this program was difficult to sustain with the smaller shared ride providers.

The major taxi company has grown through acquisition and consolidation of competitors. This resulted in RIDES having only one contract for taxi services.

A partner agency is needed who can serve older adults and people with disabilities who is not geographically restricted.

Keys to Success

Having a respected champion, in this case, a county judge, was instrumental to the program’s success once the needs of the community were documented in the 1998 community survey.

The demonstration of the program benefits and track record of quality service delivery to partner agencies has been important for new coordination.

Outreach to the community, including face-to-face meetings with local agencies by the mobility coordinator, has increased the partnerships which increases the number of rides and sustainability for the program. All mobility coordinators on staff perform mobility management for anyone contacting RIDES, regardless if they are served by RIDES.

Communication with clients through the call center and the Public Participation Plan that is posted to the website, ensures customer feedback.

Contact Person: Vernon Chambers, Assistant Transit Director

Email: Vernon.Chambers@csd.hctx.net