

Written Testimony of Cosette Fester
Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Hearing on Improving Transportation Options in
Rural States and Tribal Areas Under MAP-21
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
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Sixteen years ago I had never heard of paratransit or even had a need to know about it. That all changed in January of 1997 when we were in a car accident which severed my spine at T5. I was in the hospital for 6 months. I have rods holding up my back so I can sit up and also rods holding up my rib cage. Everyone in the hospital tried to get me to sign up for Medicaid etc but my family said that I would be going back to work. At the time I was an insurance adjuster specializing in Workmen's Comp. My boss kept whispering in my ear that I would have a job waiting for me when I was ready to come back to work.

In October I started back part time at first. My husband was driving me back and forth but that got to be a tiresome job on both of us. My husband is years older, and has numerous health issues of his own. Am not sure how I got signed up for paratransit but my family called them and away I went!!! The first day I made my husband follow me all the way to work and back again. I cried all the way to work. My poor bus driver kept asking me if I was alright and I just kept on crying and shaking my head. On that day, I felt feelings of inadequacy and dependency. My feelings have greatly changed since that day.

Paratransit has been my salvation. They pick me up at my door and drop me off at my door. I am unable to open the doors myself as I do not have the upper strength to do so. Also my wheelchair does not allow me to get up close enough to the door to open it myself.

I think back at what people did before we had these services. I am not a person that could just stay at home – I need the interaction of people. I need to be useful and kept busy. Before I went back to work I sat home and cried and felt sorry for poor me! I felt a burden to my family and was unclear with what to do with my life. Paratransit is more than just a way for me to get to work – it is another way for me to connect. I see so much good in the people that work there as well. I once had a bus driver who wrote a poem for me. My family

and I cherish the words of this wise man, my paratransit driver. He wrote about how I am defined by me and not my chair. The way I handle this life is not what matters most, I need to make the best of it, for I will walk in the Promised Land. So, what you need to realize is that Paratransit means a whole lot more than transportation to its riders. It's key to our independence, and it enhances our self worth through its people and its services. Without this service and the special people employed by our government - I would be lost.

God has put a lot of different people on this earth. I used to consider myself average and just your average middle-class working woman. However, the tragedy that occurred that night in 1997, made me special...yes, with a disability but most importantly, I am special because unlike many others – I now see the good in so many people. I instantly recognize good will and civility in ways that most average Americans fail to recognize. I am very grateful for all of the good deeds that are provided continual by Paratransit.

The Poem:

Though my body is all crippled God has blessed me with my mind,
and the will to be productive more than most you'll find. This chair is
but a transport of the gifts God gave to me intelligence, compassion
Love of Life is what you'll see. My faith has made me whole and life
is precious everyday, a belief in all that's positive perseverance is my
way. So, if all you see is crippled then your eyes are truly closed, for
everything BUT handicapped is what my spirit shows. My mind is
free from worries all my troubles in his hands, through my faith my
life's forever and I'll stand in the Promised Land!