

# Waco Transit offering route-planning and travel training

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Job seekers and disabled residents are among the bus riders taking advantage of a free travel training program Waco Transit offers to help new passengers learn the city's bus system. The service gives residents a basic overview of the public transportation system, such as route times, fare costs and bus stop locations, as well as skills in reading route maps and planning bus trips. Waco Transit staffers also can accompany riders on a bus ride demonstration and answer questions. The services are scheduled upon request.

"We'll typically try to work with each of them on how to build a route based around where they live and what places they frequently go to, and to just get them to try to understand how to use the service and how to use the map," Waco Transit marketing director Brandon Thomas said. Thomas said he recently led a session with a group of men who were part of a faith-based transition program for people who have been incarcerated. The agency also has done training with Sanderson Farms for employees who need reliable transportation to the Bellmead plant. In addition, Thomas said Waco Transit has held training with disabled students to teach them how to get around the city safely on their own. Waco Independent School District spokesman Dale Caffey said a blind student is among those participating in training sessions. Thomas said the bus service prefers to lead group trainings, but staff members will meet individually with residents who need route planning or guided-travel training.

Julie Talbert, contract manager for child care and transportation services for the local Workforce Solutions for the Heart of Texas chapter, said the agency has enlisted Waco Transit to hold travel training sessions with clients at its Waco and Marlin offices, as well as training staff members who frequently field questions about public transportation.

"We invited staff from different departments to go ride on the bus . . . and they really felt much better about their ability to explain to the customers how do you put your money in the fare box, what does a bus pass look like, how to ring the bell to stop the bus, things like that," Talbert said. Talbert added that local unemployment rates and high fuel prices cause more residents turn to public transportation to make needed job connections. The late-night bus route that services Sanderson Farms, a service called LINK that Workforce Solutions co-sponsored, has had record-high ridership in the past four months, Talbert said.

"It's hard to have conversations about employment without being able to bring the supportive services that go with that, which are child care and transportation," Talbert said.

The travel training also allows Waco Transit to collect feedback on route planning and scheduling. Often, as staff members help training participants figure out what bus route best suits their needs, new riders ask about bus access to other destinations or adding more stops. "We always make sure we look at those suggestions from the public and see if it would work," Thomas said. "With the routes, to add something you have to take something away, so its always a balance of where's the most demand and what's going to service the most amount of people, and this helps determine that."

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