

Improving Transportation Services for Disabled Students at Virginia Commonwealth University

To whom it may concern,

We, the undersigned students, faculty, staff, and community members, respectfully petition for the improvement and expansion of transportation services for disabled students at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Currently, VCU's RamSafe shuttle operates only between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m., leaving a critical gap in service during daytime hours when many students have academic, extracurricular, medical, and personal commitments across campus.

Moreover, not all RamSafe shuttles are ADA-compliant, and students with disabilities must make an additional request for an accessible vehicle, which can create variability in reliability and lead to longer wait times. Addressing these inaccessibilities would not only reduce barriers for disabled students but also align with VCU's UNcommon values by fostering a campus environment where all students can fully participate in the academic and social opportunities the university promotes as part of its distinct identity.

Background and Rationale

VCU is known for its commitment to providing a supportive environment for all students. Still, the current transportation system does not meet the needs of disabled students, who require consistent, reliable, and accessible transportation throughout the day.

In the 2024–25 academic year, approximately 3,500 students—about 14.4% of the university's total student population—were registered with the Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity office, marking six consecutive years of growing demand for accommodations and support. Among these students, an estimated 7% (around 245 individuals) have physical disabilities or mobility-related accommodations, while another 20% (approximately 700 students) experience chronic conditions that may intermittently affect their mobility or access needs. Combined, this represents roughly 945 students—nearly 4% of the entire student body—who could directly benefit from improved accessible transportation services. These figures highlight the importance of implementing reliable, inclusive transit options to support a significant and expanding segment of the campus community.

However, university-registered data likely underestimates the true need, as many students do not formally disclose their disabilities. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that just over 20% of college students identify as having a disability.

This figure may be even higher at institutions like VCU that serve a diverse and often marginalized student population, where disability rates tend to be elevated. Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about 1 in 7 adults experience mobility impairments, while nearly 6 in 10 have chronic conditions that can impact stamina or accessibility in ways not always classified as mobility impairments. Together, these statistics reveal a substantial and potentially underestimated population of students who would benefit from accessible transportation services that promote academic success and full inclusion on campus.

Proposal for Improvement: We propose the expansion of VCU's shuttle service to include daytime hours and increased coverage across the campus, with the following modifications:

1. **Expansion of Shuttle Hours for Students:** Extend the shuttle service from early morning to late evening to cover the entire academic day so students can attend classes without fear of their inability to access transportation (approximately 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.). Ride Pingo or another application can be used to specify that these shuttles are allocated for students in need.
2. **Increased Accessibility:** Ensure shuttles are fully accessible, with priority seating signs, ramps, and space for wheelchairs, scooters, and/or other mobility aids.
3. **Campus-Wide Coverage:** Expand shuttle routes to include campus buildings for both the Monroe Park and MCV campuses available to students, such as residence halls, academic buildings, dining halls, student health services, and in-between campuses.

Embracing such transportation services would have numerous positive effects on the campus community, including:

- **Improved Integration:** Disabled students will be better able to access academic buildings, support services, extracurricular activities, and healthcare facilities that they are entitled to as students of VCU.
- **Improved Academic Performance:** Eliminating the stress and barriers of transportation for disabled and injured students ensures they are more capable of attending classes and meeting academic deadlines.
- **Alignment with VCU values:** VCU will demonstrate a deeper commitment to equity and support for *all* students.

Similarly Successful Programs

Other universities can serve as role models for this initiative, as they have successfully implemented accessible and inclusive transportation programs for students with

disabilities:

1. George Mason University

- George Mason University's network of ADA-compliant shuttle services play a vital role in ensuring equitable access to campus life and academic opportunities for students with mobility impairments. All Mason shuttles are equipped with wheelchair lifts and are free to students and employees with a valid Mason ID. These shuttles connect key locations across and beyond the Fairfax Campus, including routes to the Vienna Metro Station, Mason Square in Arlington, and the SciTech Campus via HOV lanes, offering a seamless connection between campuses and local transit systems. For example, the West Campus Shuttle provides regular service between West Campus and central hubs like Presidents Park and Patriot Circle, while the On-Demand Shuttle offers flexible, shared-ride options to and from campus destinations such as the Buchanan Parking Lot, Burke VRE Train Station, and University Mall. Another valuable resource is the Gunston Go-Bus, a local circulator route that runs frequent loops around the Fairfax Campus and surrounding areas, including stops at shopping centers. Its consistent schedule and neighborhood reach make it especially useful for students with disabilities who need reliable, ADA-compliant transportation for daily living needs.
 - The Patriot Lift at George Mason University is an ADA-accessible golf cart shuttle service that supports students and faculty with mobility impairments by providing transportation to and from classes on the Fairfax campus. Operated by the Parking and Transportation Office, the service runs Monday through Friday from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM. It is available to pre-approved students through Student Health Services or the Office of Disability Services. Once approved, students must complete an orientation, by phone or in person, before using the service. Trips are scheduled 24 hours in advance by request over the phone or email.
- ### 2. University of Richmond

- The University of Richmond offers accessible shuttle services that enhance mobility and independence for students, faculty, and staff. All shuttles depart from the Transportation Hub at Tyler Haynes Commons and are fully ADA-compliant. The Daily Connector supports off-campus errands with stops at essential locations like Village Shopping Center, Target on Broad Street, Willow Lawn Drive (with GRTC Pulse connections), and Carytown. The Campus Loop provides nightly service across campus from 8 PM to 12 AM, ensuring safe and reliable transit between academic buildings, residence halls, and wellness facilities. On weekends, the Spider Mall Crawl connects riders to shopping and entertainment at Short Pump Town Center and Regal Movie Theater.

Together, these routes reflect the university's commitment to inclusive, accessible transportation that supports students' academic, social, and daily living needs.

Seeking Funding Support

The additional funding for such services should be interpreted as an investment in the future success of disabled students. To make the most effective use of funding, costs should be prioritized based on their impact on service quality and accessibility:

1. Vehicle Modifications: Estimated one-time costs for retrofitting shuttles to meet ADA standards and ensure accessibility for all students. This could potentially include the purchasing of additional or new vehicles.
2. Shuttle Operations: annual fees to cover increased fuel, maintenance, etc.
3. Staffing Costs: for extended hours and increased routes.

By prioritizing funding in this order, the university can maximize the impact of available resources, ensuring immediate improvements in transportation access while building toward sustainable, fully accessible transit services. We propose sourcing these funds through a reallocation of the University budget, applying for state and federal grants that support accessibility and public transportation, and launching fundraising efforts involving students, alumni, and community donors.

Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT)

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) administers funding through the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5310 program, which supports improved mobility for seniors and individuals with disabilities. DRPT allocates these funds to eligible nonprofit organizations and local governments to support operating and capital expenses related to accessible transportation services.

Six-Year Improvement Program (SYIP):

All DRPT transportation grants are integrated into the agency's Six-Year Improvement Program (SYIP), which outlines anticipated funding allocations for capital and operating projects across a six-year horizon. Applications recommended for award are incorporated into the draft SYIP following the evaluation process. Inclusion in the SYIP is a prerequisite for receiving funding and reflects DRPT's long-term planning commitments.

Eligibility Requirements:

- Be a nonprofit organization or a local government entity
- Attend at least one Coordinated Human Services Mobility (CHSM) Plan meeting, typically held in mid-October.
- Maintain an active account on SAM.gov

Application materials:

- A narrative describing the requested items, the need for service, and projected ridership and trip purposes
 - The same narrative may be used for multiple grants applied for a single proposed program
- A Title VI Plan
- Proof of public notice, published at least 14 days prior to the deadline, in the newspaper with the widest circulation in the proposed service area - Notification sent to the appropriate Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) - Quarterly performance reports with projections for the grant period

Priority of grant awards:

1. The maintenance of existing DRTP programs, with a priority on capital
2. The expansion to new services for 5310 populations (senior and disabled populations) not already served by the DRPT
3. Expansion of new services to 5310 populations already serviced by DRTP

Additional Note: Applications for Fiscal Year 2026 closed on February 1, 2025. The application window for Fiscal Year 2027 is expected to open this Fall/Winter, pending federal and state budget approvals.

DRPT Grants:

There are two potential funding avenues through the DRPT grants:

1. Operating and Non-Vehicle Capital Assistance Grant

This category supports the creation of new accessible transportation services and the acquisition of supporting infrastructure. Operating assistance is available for:

- Contracted transportation services
- Transit-related staff wages (ex: Bus drivers and dispatchers)
- One-call/one-click service platforms
 - These systems serve as centralized hubs for scheduling, tracking, and coordinating rides, streamlining access for users with varying needs

- Signage, marketing materials, and car wraps
- Fuel, maintenance, and vehicle insurance

Up to 10% of the request may cover administrative expenses, such as rent, office maintenance, and salaries for administrative, clerical staff, and custodial staff. Ineligible expenses are listed in the DRPT Guidance and Procedures Manual (page 28).

Funding for this category is allocated as follows: 80% federal share, 16% from state paratransit funds, and a 4% local match

2. Capital Vehicle Assistance Grant

This category provides funding for the purchase of new accessible vehicles from DRPT's list of authorized vendors. Although DRPT retains ownership of the vehicles, recipients are responsible for their operation, routine maintenance, and insurance coverage, which the previously mentioned Operational Grant could cover.

Vehicle acquisitions are generally subsidized at 80% of the total cost, though the SYIP determines the exact percentage. Payment for awarded vehicles is typically requested in the fall after notification of grant approval.

Applicants requesting vehicle assistance grants must provide additional application materials other than the ones already mentioned, including:

- A Preventive Maintenance Plan for each requested vehicle
- A continuous vehicle inventory for the program is maintained in TransAM, DRPT's online asset management platform
- Documentation of insurance coverage for the requested vehicle(s)

Christopher and Dana Reeves Foundation—Funding for Nonprofits / Quality of Life Grants

Eligibility:

- The applicant has 501c(3) tax classification
- The proposed program would provide services and access to at least 3 paralyzed individuals

Different types of grants:

Direct Effect Grants

Tier 1 – Transportation grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$24,999

- These grants are offered twice yearly (spring and fall cycles) and support transportation-related services that directly benefit individuals with paralysis.

Priority Impact Grants

Offered once annually during the fall grant cycle, these grants address specific priority areas:

- Tier 2 – Up to \$30,000
 - Focus areas: assistive technology, disaster preparedness, and respite/caregiving programs
- Tier 3 – Up to \$40,000
 - Focus area: programs serving under-resourced and under-supported communities

Expanded Impact Grants

- Tier 5 – Up to \$100,000
 - This tier is reserved for organizations previously receiving Quality of Life grants. It supports the significant expansion of successful, evidence-based, or promising programs that demonstrate innovation or best practices in improving quality of life for individuals with paralysis, their families, and caregivers. Approximately four grants are awarded each year.

Note: Further inquiry is recommended to fully understand eligibility, funding obligations, liabilities, and qualifications for each tier, especially for academic institutions and multi-partner projects. The Tier 1 grant seems to be the most likely beneficial and applicable tier.

Impact

Improving transportation access at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) will directly benefit the hundreds, if not thousands, of students with disabilities, chronic conditions, mobility challenges, or temporary injuries who navigate campus each day. While the primary beneficiaries of this expansion would be disabled students, the impact would extend to the broader campus community—fostering a culture of empathy, shared responsibility, and inclusivity.

This proposal is rooted in the principles of universal design—the idea that environments should be designed to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without

the need for adaptation. An accessible shuttle system benefits not only wheelchair users and students who use canes or crutches, but also students recovering from surgery, those with invisible disabilities, and faculty or staff with temporary or permanent mobility limitations. Inclusive infrastructure ensures that no one is left behind.

This is not simply a matter of transportation—it is a matter of equity, dignity, and full participation in university life. By extending shuttle service hours and ensuring vehicles are fully accessible, VCU has the opportunity to take meaningful action toward its stated values of accessibility and student-centered growth. We urge VCU's administration and transportation services to prioritize this initiative and demonstrate a true commitment to universal access, where *all* students, regardless of ability, have equal opportunities to thrive academically and socially.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Vishnupriya Alavala and the Disability Advocacy and Accessibility Caucus (DAAC)

References

Background and Rationale section:

- [National Center for Education Statistics](#)
- [CDC-disabilities](#)
- [CDC-chronic conditions](#)

George Mason Transportation Services

- [Patriot Lift Rules and Procedures pdf](#)
- [Pre-existing Accessible shuttle routes](#)

University of Richmond

- [Shuttle routes](#)

Links for DRTP Grants:

- [Application portal](#)
- [General website page](#)
- [Guidance and procedures manual](#)
- [List of Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Virginia](#) -
VCU likely falls under [Plan RVA](#)
- [TransAM](#)

Links for Christopher Reeve Grant:

- [Quality of life grants page](#)
- [Link to helpful webinars](#)
- [Link to application portal](#)
- [Priority Impact - Full Grants Program Details](#)