**HOW-TO GUIDE**

# A TOTAL APPROACH TO REDUCING NO SHOWS

**TripSpark**

For a non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) provider, a no show translates directly into a waste of time and money. The following whitepaper is built around an analysis of paratransit and demand response agencies, created by the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) and sponsored by the FTA called, Practices in No-Show and Late Cancellation Policies for ADA Paratransit.

Can NEMT providers benefit from the same information that paratransit agencies are producing for addressing their issues with no shows? What these agencies are doing is quite interesting, and their analysis is sound, so perhaps the NEMT industry can take stock of their research. Both industries share a common need to reduce inefficient and wasteful trip losses. It only seems logical that both can profit from similar procedures and analysis.

There are a number of ways to encourage better practices from clients, including incentives, clearer rules, obvious penalties, and even an incident analysis system to address the key reasons for a no show. The summation of evidence supported in the TRCP document suggests that technology is a primary solution for improving paratransit-style service. The answer appears to be a combination of better information sharing between client, driver and dispatch, as well as routing and scheduling software to mitigate the effects of a late cancelation. These are the same issues that NEMT providers face every day.

First, let's examine the effect that no shows have on a NEMT operation. Next, we'll examine the root causes of a no show in order to begin the process of eliminating their effect.

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# The Overall Effect of a No Show

Have you analyzed your operation to determine the cost of each individual trip? What is the gas expense, the driver's salary, the wear on the vehicle, the vehicle's revenue per mile per day? There are dozens of expenses that are incurred when a legitimate trip is made. According to this report, some states may be required to maintain a performance level of less than .25% no-shows under penalty of $1,000 per month. If this is a condition that pertains to your operation, this should be included in the expenses to be tabulated. To create a general overview, here are the top 5 ways in which a no show can negatively affect your NEMT operation both financially as well as negatively affect your credibility.

- **Waste of time.** A driver's time is wasted traveling to a client's location who is not waiting for service. This lowers a driver's productivity. It also inconveniences the other clients, potentially aboard the vehicle.

- **Waste of money.** According to this **report** on the operating expenses of transit agencies operating in the American North-East the average cost of a paratransit trip ranged anywhere between $24-$40. A no-show would cost around half these amounts but is still a significant wasted resource.

- **Interferes with clients' schedule.** Your service offering deteriorates when a vehicle's time is wasted. This time could have been used for valid NEMT riders in your vehicles. Perhaps they could have been offered a more convenient boarding time.

- **Encourages "trip hoarding."** If clients begin to get the idea that they can "book" a trip whether they need that trip or not, this can lead to an abuse of your service. You need to have a corrective action system in place to discourage this type of wasteful behavior.

- **Can affect fare prices.** In order to recoup losses due to neglected trips, some providers may feel compelled to increase fares to offset escalating costs. This does nothing to help a provider to remain competitive in a congested marketplace. Alternatives are more favorable and these can include policy making, corrective action procedures, rewards and incentives for a good ridership record and also technology.

> How much does a no show cost you? How many of these trips does your operation encounter each month? How many per year? What is your yearly expense for wasted resources? Is this an area you'd like to improve upon?

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# Manual Ways to Prevent No Shows

In this section we look at how an operation can prevent no shows by shifting its policies. As well, we examine how technology, NEMT software for scheduling and improved client communication can also have a positive effect. Which way works for you will depend upon what you are willing to spend in terms of resources.

## Improving the Client's Relationship with Your Service

In most cases, a no show or late cancelation originates with the client in terms of their behavior or life circumstance. If they don't take seriously the service you are providing, they are less likely to respect the rules. The best way to improve overall operation is to get your clients on board. They can contribute to their experience by balancing their transportation needs with your service offering. In other words: immediate alerts of cancelations.

## Awards and Incentives

If you act in good faith with clients, they will respond in kind. If you are late for a pick-up, have you considered offering a free ride coupon? If it's in your means, perhaps you can institute a rewards program to offer free rides and passes to those clients who show an exceptional example of good trip booking and honoring those trips. Not every provider wants to be bothered with the time and expense required to enact a reward program, but the goal is to connect more deeply with clients so they understand the business model at work.

## Policies and Penalties

Do you have a no show policy in place? You need to provide clear guidelines to define the rules of what constitutes a legitimate trip. Therefore, you can demonstrate when a trip falls into a no show category and what is the clear responsibility of the client. This policy needs to be posted on your website and sent in writing to every client or client's representative. This language needs to be clear and concise so as to not produce any ambiguity. There are legitimate reasons why a

client may be forced to cancel a trip late in the schedule:

- Client is sick
- Family emergency
- Failure of a mobility aid
- Late connection from a transfer trip
- Appointment cancelled/delayed
- Acts of God

Once the rules are clear, you need to enforce them. If a no show percentage reaches around 3%, it's advised that you send both a written and a verbal warning to the client. This message should be to advise them that they are at risk of losing their door-to-door transportation privileges and of having you refuse to transport them. Transportation for essential medical service appointments cannot be denied, but the client may be required to use public transportation, instead of your service.

A policy alone can help clients to understand not only their rights to your service, but also their responsibilities when receiving your service. However, a policy alone is not a cure-all for maintaining a perfect schedule.

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# Digital Ways to Prevent No Shows

Many clients are simply forgetful when it comes to passing on information. They don't intend to abuse or misuse your NEMT service. This is why we recommend that you build a client engagement program to open a line of communication. Beyond that, there is far more that you can do to help your clients to be able save you money by having them get in touch with you. NEMT software solutions provide various advantages that can help to streamline the trip booking process and provide timely updates to give dispatch the information it needs to make informed decisions quickly. Using technologies that work through the Internet, on cellular and smartphones, in a web-browser window, on tablets and over landline telephones, you can enable clients to have more control over their transportation, while relieving your staff of unnecessary stress and work.

## The NEMT Software Solution

NEMT software helps by filling the gaps in a schedule and can calculate for an enormous number of variables. In a perfect world, routes are optimized and all the connections are met at precisely the designated moment. Real world conditions would prove to unhinge even the tidiest of schedules. Once one factors in no shows and additional hiccups, it's easy to see how having a digital scheduling system can identify problems faster, create alternative routes faster and deal with a no show faster, so as to prevent the overall effect they can produce to a daily schedule.

## NEMT Software for Scheduling

Your daily schedule may be created the day before. Each client's pickup and drop off times are locked into the system. Each trip may be for a lifesaving medical appointment and therefore cannot be missed. Every vehicle that is assigned to a client must match the client's mobility and medical needs. Errors requiring the correct vehicle type to be sent as replacement are as costly as a no show.

Traditional IVR (Interactive Voice Response) systems have been shown to be able to reduce telephone hold times, reduce driver wait times and of course, to reduce no shows. Clients have the ability to make reservations as well as cancel or confirm reservations. When interfaced with a web trip booking feature, a notifications service completely frees your operation from dealing with a client's trip booking process. At the same time, the client feels more invested in the reservation process and will have ample opportunity to inform you of changes to their trip requirements as quickly as possible. Learn more about cloud-based notifications systems that can send reminders to clients via: email, SMS text message and voice calls.

**TCRP ADVICE**

- **Acquire computer-assisted or automated scheduling and dispatching.**
- **Use MDTs, AVLs, and other technologies.**
- **Incorporate IVR and accessible on-line access to trip reservations, confirmations, and cancelations.** [Source]

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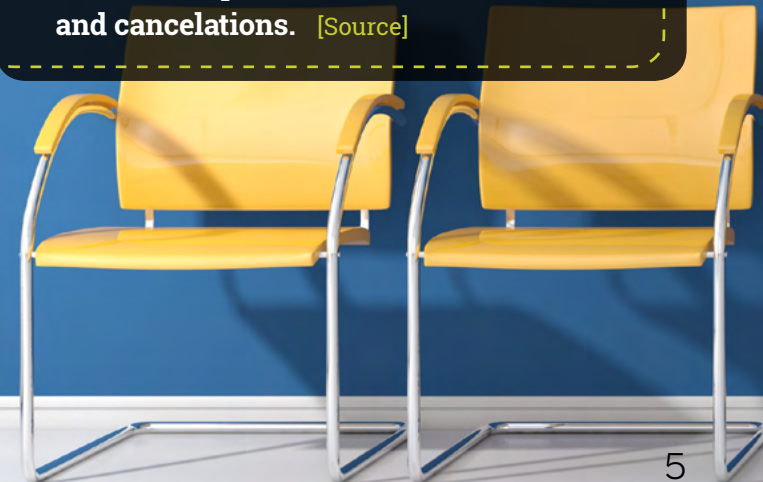
## NEMT Software for Communication

Changes to the schedule can be communicated to drivers through text messages on an in-vehicle tablet application. Data regarding the trip status: arrived, canceled-at-the-door, running late, etc. can all be input using a simple push-button interface. This data is instantly synchronized with back office computers allowing dispatchers make routing and re-routing decisions based upon immediate information, rather than having to ask driver questions via cellphone or radio.

## NEMT Software Calculates the Variables Automatically

The routes and unique schedules of each client on board the vehicle are calculated and taken into consideration. Through a combination of quick communication between drivers, clients and dispatch, as well as an automatic scheduling algorithm to adjust and heal a schedule automatically, your staff can efficiently handle a no show.

## In-vehicle Technology

Locating a vehicle is one thing. Being able to send quick updates to drivers is a benefit that is unique to NEMT software with a mobile data computer on board. Speedy updates means that there is a greater chance that "slack time" can be reassigned to a more profitable end. An additional benefit to in-vehicle technology includes being able to time stamp trip events. This is useful data when addressing a discrepancy between a driver's log and a client's dispute over a no show.

## Notifications and IVR

It can be difficult to encourage clients to contact you quickly when they no longer require a previously booked trip. However, you may not have the resources to be able to contact each client prior to a trip to confirm whether the trip is still needed. This is why having a notifications module as part of your NEMT software suite is one of the great technological advantages that helps to minimize the impact of a late trip cancelation.

*"Acquire technologies that will expedite the collection of accurate information and produce reports that facilitate analysis."*

[Source: p. 33]

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# What Else Can You Do?

Know your operation. What do brokers and clients expect of you? You need to work towards becoming error-free and in this way, you will be prepared for when unexpected, client-side issues occur. Yes, you may always find yourself dealing with a canceled-at-the-door event, but it doesn't need to destabilize your day's schedule. Be prepared. Be ready. Be automatic in your response time.
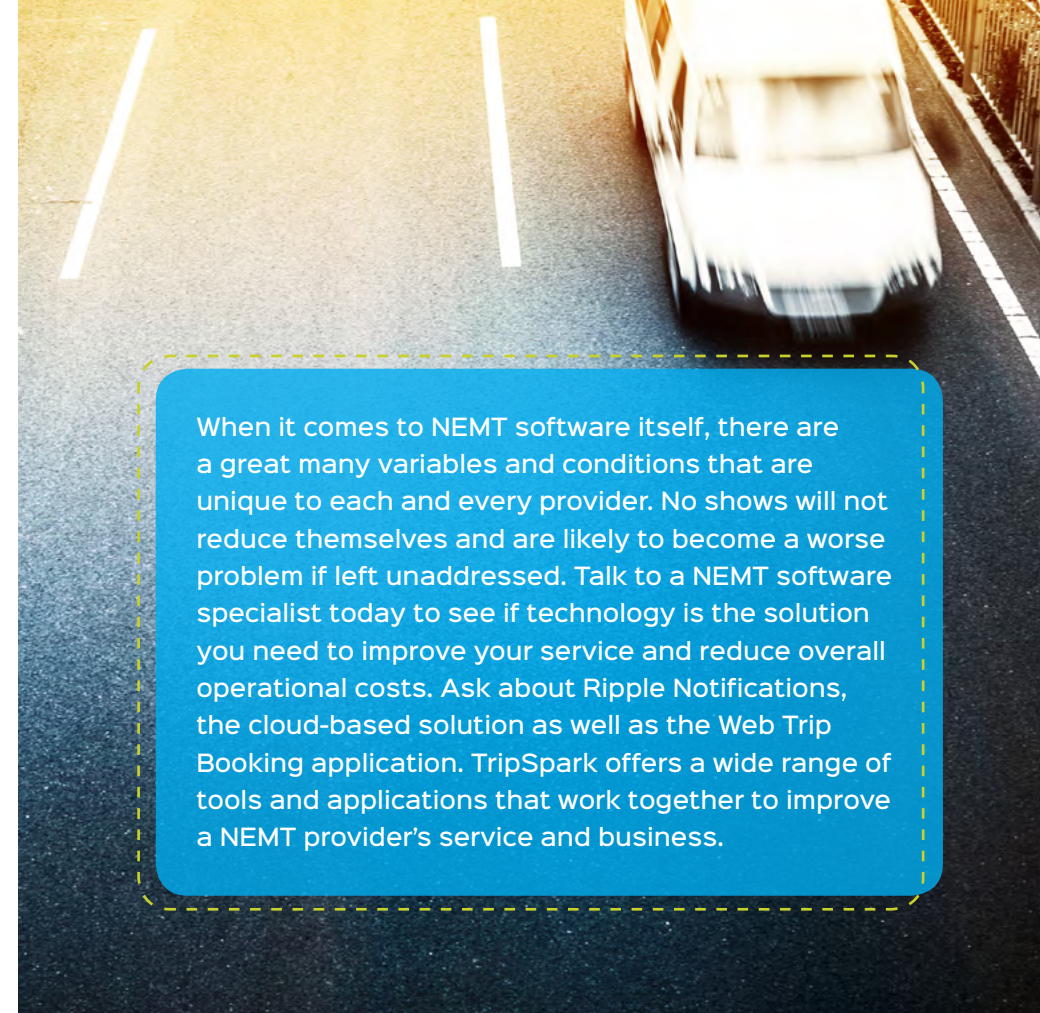
You need to analyze your current operation to learn where it is vulnerable. Has there been a drop in on-time performance due to sudden weather events or unexpected city construction? Automated scheduling may be the tool you need in order to deliver predictability to your clients while offering dependability to your schedulers and dispatchers. Having an integrated client database that accurately contains the precise information reservationists require to make a fast trip booking will also help to prevent errors on your end.

The TCRP document provides irrefutable evidence to suggest that automated scheduling, digital data collection and AVL (Automatic Vehicle Location) capabilities through in-vehicle MDT (Mobile Data Terminal) devices are all essential components to fixing the no show problem.

When it comes to NEMT software itself, there are a great many variables and conditions that are unique to each and every provider. No shows will not reduce themselves and are likely to become a worse problem if left unaddressed. Talk to a NEMT software specialist today to see if technology is the solution you need to improve your service and reduce overall operational costs. Ask about Ripple Notifications, the cloud-based solution as well as the Web Trip Booking application. TripSpark offers a wide range of tools and applications that work together to improve a NEMT provider's service and business.

# Conclusion

Before you implement a no show program, it's vital that you examine and analyze current conditions. Assemble the metrics for determining:

- The actual cost of a no show, trip refusal at the door and late cancelations
- Other events that cost as much as a no show
- The cost of managing a policy
- Current customer satisfaction (who would benefit from such a program?)

Determine whether establishing a program is cost-effective and is designed to provide returns on this initial investment. Purchasing NEMT software with an additional web trip booking and a notifications module may incur a higher initial investment but also produce higher returns for the life of the system. It's important to talk to your prospective software vendor to ensure that you are getting the full functionality that you require so you don't find yourself getting roped into a long-term purchase as you add on components over time.

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