How to Provide Predictability to Your Schedule: Managing the Call Return
Will calls, or call returns were the standard in the early days of NEMT service. This is no longer the case. Our expert panel shows why scheduling timed returns rather than call returns can remove much of the unpredictability in an NEMT operation. The result is better service, more efficient batch trip scheduling, with fewer incidents of no shows and late cancelations.

In the past, the call return was the preferred industry-wide standard. But as people started to experience long waits, this preference has changed. Clients and the medical industry have pushed for the practice of Timed Returns rather than will calls to ensure that contracted pickup window times are met. If you’re still facing call returns as an operation pitfall, keep reading. Here’s what brokers and providers are doing to solve their problems.

Cori: “in my opinion, scheduling is the hub that turns the wheel. When you have good schedules, you have good outcomes.”

Paula George
Broker
About: 120 NEMT vehicles dispatched each day. Service area of 400 square miles. 15 Providers including their own Dial-a-Ride service. Trips are assigned based on lowest cost and availability. Over 140,000 non-emergency trips per year.

Cori Walter Quotes
Broker & Provider
About: NEMT broker with 15 transportation providers. Also operates as Provider through its Saferide program. As broker contracts with two Community Care Organizations (CCOs). As provider contracts with NEMT broker.
The Operational Solution to Will Calls

Randomness is the nemesis of order and efficiency. By removing the uncertainty for when a call will arrive, you remove the power of a will call. By collecting more information about each trip, you can build a more predictable schedule.

Paula reveals that at Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority, it takes several minutes to change a return time and notify the transportation provider. If the provider is unable to perform the requested return time, they need to call immediately. The whole process can waste a great deal of time. What Paula noted was that, when given the option, many clients could accurately predict when they would need a return ride, turning a call return into a scheduled return. Cori Walter agrees, pointing out that a broker has to scramble to find a vehicle to fill the order.

C: The timed return is much easier to manage. Call returns are just a big unknown and result in a poor on-time performance.

What’s Their Solution?

P: We do not allow will calls.

C: We encourage the call return from our providers and clients. Most are agreeable.

Instead of allowing the option of a call return, Paula encourages a scheduled return at the time of booking. They then have the option to make an exception should the client require a looser pick up time.

Does this work?

P: Our call takers have a script that they follow in order in order to ensure that we have all of the consumer’s correct information.

P: On average, we only have about 15% that call in to change their return time.

C: We’ve seen great success using timed returns to share more rides.

C: Technology helps make better schedules for providers.
“Mental health appointments are almost always an hour. We can make some assumptions about when is a good time for the pick-up return. This is much more successful overall.”

Get Involved With Your Client’s Appointments

When you know more about the medical appointment, you can make more informed decisions about pick-up times. As well, you have the opportunity to schedule even more efficiently by grouping rides.

P: We have program information in terms of start times and end times. Dialysis takes approximately four hours. We group clients together. We give them their return time.

C: We look at rideshare whenever possible. We encourage our providers to also look for ways to share rides.

Medical Providers Prefer the Timed Return

In many cases, the medical field would prefer to know their patients are more likely to arrive and depart on time. This improves their own efficiency, while ensuring that patients aren’t forced to linger in crowded waiting rooms. It’s in their best interest to provide information to enable better transportation scheduling practices. Program information (type/estimated length of medical treatment) can come through on the prescription and request for transportation.

Clients Prefer the Timed Return

When a client realizes that scheduling a return ride can reduce their wait time, they are more inclined to set a specific return time. This also benefits the other clients in the system, since vehicles are less likely to go under-used and be dispatched to where they’re needed more quickly. It’s also vital that clients phone or text in as quickly as possible when they know they’re going to be running late. Paula recommends the sharing of information between all stakeholders in the system. This way, everyone understands the responsibility each has to ensure a smooth-running NEMT system.

C: They [clients] became savvy enough to say, “Let’s make it [my appointment] 45 minutes, ‘cause you never know.”

Transportation Providers Prefer the Timed Return

Timed returns allow transportation providers and brokers to know what to expect and make allowances for that. Having returns planned out in advance helps providers to meet the contract standards of their brokers.
Call Returns can Quickly Degrade into No-shows

When a member or client is forced to wait, not knowing when their ride will arrive, they are more likely to seek out an alternative form of transportation. If they elect to not wait, and then forget to call in to cancel their previously booked trip, it becomes a no-show.

P: We have to duplicate work when a no-show occurs.

C: Fewer no shows would allow us to be more efficient and providers to be more successful.

P: No shows are just a cost of doing business. How we manage no shows, is that we call them out before we dispatch a vehicle.

However, it isn't feasible for Paula to call a client as the vehicle is approaching, nor is it efficient to have clients call in to locate their vehicle on the road.

Cori’s group relies on the call center as the last point of confirmation. She exclaims, “It would be nice if the driver could let the client know when they’re going to be there.” And “The faster we know about a cancelation, the faster we can prevent no-show events.”
The Technological Solution to Will Calls

Running an efficient and dependable NEMT brokerage or transportation service depends upon the timely sharing of information. While Cori and Paula have shown operational techniques for eliminating much of the randomness of the will call, they also speak towards the benefits of technology. Their NEMT software solutions allow them to do their jobs faster and more effectively.

C: Our tools allow us to make changes faster, communicate with providers in the field in a more efficient way.

P: Our technology helps us manage non-emergency transportation in a much more efficient and cost-effective way.

C: What would be nice is if there was some technology option where the driver could let the client know via a text message or something that “I’ll be there, I’m on the way.” That’s my perfect world scenario.

TripSpark Technologies offers a complete NEMT software solution for broker and providers. Office software can automatically handle batch scheduling to coordinate shared rides and is flexible enough to deflect the effect of a no show. An automated notifications system sends clients text messages, emails and provides an IVR-like automated call center. A Client Trip Management Portal allows clients 24/7 access to their trip information so they can manage single or subscription trips. Talk to us today to see how everything fits neatly together into a perfect NEMT software solutions suite.