

For Shelly Verrinder, Access Equals Opportunity

MEMBER PROFILE



Shelly Verrinder (Executive Director of Access Services), Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Shelly Verrinder feels paratransit is treated like the Rodney Dangerfield of transit. It gets little respect. But as executive director of Access Services, one of the largest paratransit providers in the U.S., she's working to change that image.

"We're the biggest public transit system that you've never heard of! In fact, you only hear about us if you use the services or if someone you know uses the services. But we do over 11,000 trips per day and we have over 170,000 registered riders. We're growing at 13% a year and we have a budget of \$167 million. And that's from very humble beginnings in 1995, where we started with about 200 riders a day. We began service because each of LA County's 44 fixed-route operators were required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to provide paratransit. So, Access was created and I started soon after. At this point, Access is like one of my kids."

Still, there are many misconceptions about paratransit. Verrinder is on a mission to set the nation straight.

"When I tell people about Access and the little white van, people always respond, 'Oh yeah! You guys are everywhere!' And we are. But we're also more than that. For example, about 40% of our trips are done by regular taxicabs. So my job is also largely about education. There are a lot of elected officials in LA



County. Each city council, each transit agency has a board of directors, plus we have Metro as a regional funding authority for the County. I have to make sure that each and all of them are educated about what we do and what our needs are."

Verrinder understands that education and improvement goes both ways, and that passengers must experience it too.

"Access has gotten better and better. We strive for 91% on-time



performance. And we've gotten to be very reliable. You can ride with us from Malibu to Pomona. But we have to reinvent ourselves every night, based on who calls us the day before and where they want to go. So we've had to improve our service by using predictive analysis to optimize driver schedules. It is important that Access run a reliable service that our riders can depend on. Riders know what to expect and it is up to everyone at Access to deliver that service."

Verrinder may know paratransit better than most in the nation. But she also knows WTS. And she sees tremendous value in both.

"I started out as a bus driver. I needed a part-time job in college and the best paying job was driving a fixed-route bus. I graduated from UC Davis and drove a commuter route for Yolo County for about a dollar more than minimum wage. Both then and today, the great thing about working in transit and paratransit is that when you go home at the end of the day, you know that you really made a difference. And that is very similar to WTS.

"I just think it's a great organization. And while WTS-LA provides a great many things, particularly for women in nontraditional transportation roles, the greatest thing WTS-LA provides is networking. I've met more people through WTS than anywhere else. Whether its vendors or peers, the people you meet at events or learning sessions become invaluable contacts. I also enjoy the mentoring program. Now that I'm a senior person in our organization, I love talking to younger people about paratransit. It's not a typical career path, but it actually plays into everything you hear Millennials want: to make a difference, use technology, connect with people, etc. So WTS-LA is as much about the future as it is about the present."