



Submission to South Australia's Public Transport Strategy

Direct Advocacy

South Australian People's Health Voice (PHV) Submission to the Consultation on South Australia's Public Transport Strategy

June 2025

About the People's Health Voice

The People's Health (PHV) is an inclusive mechanism through which South Australians experiencing inequitable health outcomes can have their voices heard by the health system, and participate actively in guiding responsive healthcare service and policy improvements.

The PHV is a project managed by the South Australian Council of Social Service with funding from the Department of Health and Wellbeing.

The PHV is governed by a Steering Committee exclusively comprising community members and a Strategic Advisory Committee including representatives of SACOSS, other health-related peaks, and experts in community engagement alongside members of the Steering Group.

This submission is made by the PHV Steering Committee on behalf of all South Australians represented by the People's Health Voice.

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Executive Summary

Public transport is a vital enabler of health access, independence, and participation. Yet for many South Australians living with disability, frailty or chronic disease, current systems remain inaccessible, unreliable, and often unsafe. This not only undermines everyday autonomy and inclusion, but also creates serious barriers to attending medical appointments, managing chronic conditions, and seeking timely care, compounding disadvantage and leading to worsening health outcomes over time.

This submission draws on lived experience insights shared with the People's Health Voice through community engagement activities across metropolitan and rural South Australia since 2023. These perspectives highlight the challenges faced by people who rely on public transport to access healthcare and other essential supports, particularly those using mobility aids, living with chronic illness, or residing in regional areas.

Based on the evidence shared - and included here with the informed consent of the individuals involved - the PHV Steering Committee offers the following recommendations to improve public transport access and inclusion, in support of health equity and wellbeing across South Australia:

Recommendations

- 1. Upgrade boarding and alighting infrastructure** by standardising kerb heights, ramp gradients and internal layouts so people using mobility aids can board, alight and move inside vehicles safely and independently.
- 2. Guarantee full vehicle accessibility and adequate wheelchair bays** by ensuring every bus, tram and train is wheelchair-accessible, with multiple or flexible priority spaces on routes serving hospitals and other major health providers.
- 3. Provide co-designed disability-awareness training and enforce priority-space rules** by mandating respectful driver assistance, safe boarding practices and stronger enforcement to prevent misuse of accessible areas.
- 4. Improve service reliability and passenger safety** by increasing timeliness of services, delivering real-time accessibility alerts, and upgrading stops with shelter, seating, lighting, water and emergency call points.
- 5. Provide service and timetable information that attends to digital inclusion** by distributing large-print and Easy English paper timetables through health and community sites, and investing in digital-inclusion supports so that individuals with limited English language or digital literacy can plan journeys.
- 6. Standardise audio/visual announcements** by installing clear, high-contrast displays and reliable audio next-stop calls on all vehicles, and training frontline staff in inclusive communication.

7. **Align routes and stops with health destinations** by positioning stops within a short, accessible walk of medical centres, pharmacies and community services, and coordinating timetables across modes to minimise burdensome transfers.
8. **Expand community-based rural transport** by funding services delivered with local health and community organisations so regional residents can reach care without day-long journeys, and providing flexible, accessible transport that aligns with treatment schedules and recovery needs for people in isolated areas.
9. **Simplify and extend the Patient Assisted Transport Scheme (PATS)** by broadening eligibility, streamlining processes and resourcing rural transport coordinators to help residents navigate support and maintain continuity of care.

Introduction

The People's Health Voice project, launched in 2023, provides an inclusive platform through which community members experiencing health access barriers participate meaningfully in health and wellbeing policy and service reform.

The People's Health Voice understands that accessible public transport is not simply about mobility - it is a fundamental health equity concern. Without it, many South Australians are unable to attend medical appointments, to pick up prescriptions, to access food and essential services, or to participate in the community activities that support social connection. Across almost every community consultation held by the PHV, transport access has emerged as a priority, reinforcing its foundational role in preventing ill health, enabling timely treatment and supporting longer-term recovery and wellbeing.

This submission draws on PHV community engagement outcomes, providing a critical lived experience perspective on the accessibility, dignity and health implications of our current public transport system.

Physical access challenges

For many South Australians, the physical inaccessibility of public transport remains a significant barrier to ease of use. For people using wheelchairs or mobility aids, steep ramps, inconsistent platform levels and variable kerb heights continue to create difficulties in boarding and alighting. Within public transport vehicles, narrow aisles, broken tie-downs and crowded conditions can make it difficult to move safely into wheelchair seating, a circumstance made riskier when drivers fail to allow appropriate time for passengers to be safely secured.



Community Voices

"The driver just took off. I was nowhere near ready, and I was fumbling with my walker and people were pressing up next to me. It was just so unsafe"

Recommendations from the People's Health Voice

- Improve the ease of boarding/exiting public transport vehicles via standardised kerb heights, consistent ramp angles and accessible within-vehicle design

Quantity and frequency of accessible seating options

Community members note that the scarcity of accessible seating on public transport vehicles is a barrier to public transport use. People report stronger confidence in being able to find accessible seating options on trains than either buses or trams – both of which often provide only a single wheelchair bay. On routes transporting passengers to medical services (hospitals, healthcare centres, rehabilitation facilities) this is regularly insufficient to meet demand, meaning that individuals with access needs can have to wait for significant periods for a vehicle with an available space.

Community Voices

"It's ideal to get the O-Bahn to Modbury hospital, but obviously I'm not the only one who has that idea. I was stranded there for hours once. Every time a bus arrived the walker spot was taken"

Recommendations from the People's Health Voice

- Ensure that all SA Public Transport vehicles are wheelchair accessible.
- Ensure that vehicles travelling on routes servicing major health providers offer multiple or flexible accessible seating spaces.

Driver behaviour and the experience of safety

People have consistently reported to the PHV that driver behaviour can create unsafe and distressing experiences for passengers with disability, chronic illness or frailty. In some cases, drivers do not wait for passengers to be safely seated before moving off, or refuse to deploy ramps when needed - actions that significantly increase the risk of falls, anxiety and injury.

Community Voices

"Some drivers won't even put the ramp out for me. I've had that a couple of times."

We also heard reports of drivers being reluctant, or outright refusing, to allow accredited assistance animals on board. This not only breaches legal protections under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and South Australia's Equal Opportunity legislation, but also strips passengers of the independence, orientation support and the medical safeguards their animals provide. For a person who is blind, has low vision, epilepsy, or an anxiety-related condition, being

denied access with their service animal renders public transport effectively unusable and may result in missed health appointments, heightened distress, and a complete loss of confidence in the transport system.

These practices are not only disrespectful, but actively compromise passenger safety and dignity. Community members described near-falls, increased anxiety and the cumulative toll of feeling rushed, unsafe, or unwelcome when attempting to use public transport. Crowding, pram use of wheelchair bays, and unclear or unenforced signage further erode the predictability and accessibility of travel for those who rely on it most.

Recommendations from the People's Health Voice

- Driver training, co-designed with community, that includes disability awareness, respectful communication and inclusive assistance techniques
- Stronger enforcement to prevent misuse of accessible spaces and support safe, respectful use of public transport by all

Transport reliability and the risk of missed appointments

The consequences of unreliable or inaccessible public transport go beyond inconvenience. For people with disability, missing a scheduled bus or train - especially if it is the only accessible option available - can mean missing critical health appointments.

Community members report that missed appointments often result in significant delays in care, with rescheduled bookings pushed back weeks or even months. This not only affects health outcomes but can also lead to disengagement from essential services, unplanned hospital presentations, or worsening of preventable conditions.

Community Voices

"If I miss my specialist appointment because the bus didn't come, I have to wait another six weeks. That's if they don't charge me for the appointment anyway. The admin [staff] are brutal about it. But honestly what am I going to do if two buses in a row just literally do not appear?"

Long waits for public transport, especially when wheelchair bays are full or services are delayed, can also pose serious health and safety risks. For people with disability or chronic illness, being exposed to heat, cold, or unsafe environments for extended periods is not just uncomfortable, but dangerous.

Recommendations from the People's Health Voice

- Improved reliability of all Public Transport services, and real-time alerts to help avoid unnecessary waiting
- Safe, sheltered waiting areas with seating, lighting, access to water and emergency contact points or intercoms for people who become stranded

Digital inclusion and accessible information

Access to real-time, accessible information was repeatedly raised as essential to planning a safe and successful journey, especially for health-related travel where punctuality is paramount. While many community members note recent improvements in digital information about service accessibility and scheduling, others continue to find that these platforms are not user-friendly, particularly for people with limited English language or digital literacy, and those who have limited or unreliable access to a smartphone and internet coverage.

Community Voices

"I've been caught a few times when I've run out of data and can't afford to top up. Then I'm just at the stop thinking 'God knows how long I'll be here now'"

Recommendations from the People's Health Voice

- Paper-based accessible timetables available at health centres, pharmacies and community hubs
- Investment in digital inclusion supports to improve transport access for people with low digital confidence or technological access

Support for blind and d/Deaf transport users

Blind and low-vision passengers identified the importance of reliable audio announcements, consistent stop placement, and tactile paving to support safe and independent travel.

"The buses don't always announce the next stop. If no one else presses the button, I can easily miss my stop"

d/Deaf and hard of hearing users raised concerns about poor visual signage, the absence of real-time information, and the lack of awareness among drivers and ticket inspectors.

Community Voices

"Visual signage should be big and clear. And drivers should know that it's not rude to point or use their hands – that's actually what I need"

Recommendations from the People's Health Voice

- Installing large, clear digital or static displays on all public transport vehicles and ensuring consistent and reliable audio announcements
- Providing training for transport staff in inclusive communication

Route design and stop placement

Participants reported a sense that transport planning in South Australia often “*ignores where people actually need to go*” in order to stay well. Community members explained that bus stops, in particular, are often some distance from essential health services, and that pathways between stops and services often difficult to manage. Participants noted the “*fragmented*” nature of bus, train and tram routes across the Adelaide metro area, which complicates journeys for users who require ramp entrance/exit support across multiple transfers. The physical and mental toll of navigating these changes was understood to add a considerable burden for people already experiencing the impact of pain, frailty or fatigue.

Recommendations from the People’s Health Voice

- Stops placed near medical centres, pharmacies, allied health and community services, and infrastructure upgrades to improve path accessibility between stops and health providers
- Coordination across transport modes to minimise long transfers.

Rural and Regional Transport Access

Across rural and regional South Australia, the lack of accessible, reliable transport continues to compromise health access. Many towns have limited or no public transport to hospitals or specialist services, and long distances to care providers make travel prohibitively expensive. For people with chronic illness or disability, the absence of safe, timely and appropriate transport options regularly results in missed appointments, delayed treatment, and preventable deterioration in health.

Participants in PHV engagements spoke of the difficulty in getting to early morning appointments, particularly for recurring treatments such as dialysis or chemotherapy, because no suitable transport runs at the required times. While telehealth is sometimes seen as an alternative, many rural residents face poor connectivity and limited digital confidence, making it an unreliable substitute. In some areas, community health-access buses exist but require patients to spend an entire day travelling across vast distances just to attend a brief consultation, further straining health and energy. The Patient Assisted Transport Scheme (PATS), although designed to assist, is widely seen as too complex and restrictive to meet the real needs of many eligible users.

Community Voices

“I had to cancel my appointment because the only transport left at 10am and the hospital needed me there by 8. It’s not just missing one appointment, it’s weeks of delay after that.”

“I qualify for PATS but it’s too confusing to work out. I don’t even know who to ask, and no one ever calls you back.”

Recommendations from the People’s Health Voice

- Expand access to community-based transport services co-delivered with local health and community organisations.
- Introduce subsidised accessible, pre-book transport options that align with treatment schedules and recovery needs.
- Simplify and broaden eligibility for the Patient Assisted Transport Scheme, supported by rural transport coordinators to connect people with available options and ensure continuity of care.

Conclusion

The People's Health Voice supports reform of South Australia's public transport systems to centre lived experience and uphold the fundamental rights of people with disability to freedom of movement, access to care, and full participation in community life. Reliable, safe and inclusive transport is not a luxury but a health necessity. The current system too often isolates those who are unwell, mobility-impaired, or living in regional areas, compounding existing barriers to healthcare and wellbeing.

We encourage government to ensure that the implementation and evaluation of the forthcoming State Public Transport Plan continues to embed lived-experience expertise and to hold reforms accountable to those most affected by transport exclusion. The PHV looks forward to supporting disability and chronic-disease advocates as they engage with government, transport providers, and health and community services to shape a transport system that truly advances health equity for all South Australians.