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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Pilot program to test free and discounted Metro fare cards for low-income D.C. residents

By **Justin George**

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More than 1,000 low-income D.C. residents will receive free or discounted SmarTrip cards as part of a pilot program to eliminate the cost of transportation as an impediment to jobs, services and recreational opportunities, officials announced Monday.

The nearly \$1 million research pilot is being led by the Lab @ DC, Mayor Muriel E. Bowser's research and innovation division, and is being funded with local and federal money and a donation from the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab or J-Pal, a global research group focused on reducing poverty.

"Through innovative investments and initiatives, we can make our public transportation system more equitable and affordable for our residents," Bowser (D) said in a statement. "This study will guide best practices on how we can effectively use transit subsidies to give more Washingtonians a fair shot."

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The District joins several U.S. jurisdictions, including New York, Boston, Portland, Ore., and King County, Wash., that have started or are considering similar programs. Since the beginning of the year, for example, New York City residents who live below the poverty line have been able to acquire half-price Metro cards under a \$100 million program.

District Human Services Director Laura Zeilinger said the pilot will allow city agencies to “explore the impact of discounted public transit fares on the lives of our vulnerable households as they pursue connections to achieve stability and meet their families’ goals.”

In the District, only seniors qualify for discounted transportation; students can obtain free, unlimited fare cards as part of the city’s Kids Ride Free program.

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To be eligible for the pilot, residents must qualify for the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). It's unclear how participants will be selected.

Over the course of six to nine months beginning next summer, the program will track 2,500 adults to see how much transportation factors into their overall well-being.

Study participants will be broken into three groups, including people who will be given no discounts on transit, those who will receive partially discounted fares and those who will get unlimited free trips. Participants will fill out occasional surveys on their commuting patterns, and researchers will access job and other records to gauge the program's impact.

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If the transportation subsidies have a demonstrable impact on their lives and well-being, officials said, the city may seek more federal and private funding to reach even more residents.

More than 120,000 — 18 percent — of D.C. residents relied on federal food assistance in 2017, according to the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. That compares with about 13 percent of the U.S. population as a whole.

To qualify for food stamps, a single person cannot make more than \$23,500 a year or about \$48,500 for a family of four, according to D.C. eligibility requirements.

“This pilot is an important next step in our efforts to make transit in the District reliable and affordable for residents of all eight wards,” said Jeff Marootian, director of the District Department of Transportation.

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Alicia Horton, executive director of Thrive DC, a 40-year-old nonprofit that provides more than 2,000 people a year with housing and job assistance, said transportation stipends are one of the biggest needs for people searching for jobs.

“It is an impediment for people to engage in programs and services that can help people take meaningful next steps,” Horton said. “Without [transportation], they can’t even get to the job interviews. We provide assistance even for the first two weeks after people have a job until they get a check because otherwise how would they [get to work].”

Horton estimated that Thrive provides transportation help to about 1,000 people a year.

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“That’s how much we can do,” she said. “We could do much more if we had the resources. The need far outweighs the resources.”

District officials said they came up with the transit-aid program after noticing a wide discrepancy between those who use Metrobus and Metrorail, which has higher fares. Low-income residents take about 31 million Metrobus trips a year, compared with 11 million Metrorail trips, the transit agency said.

District officials said low-income riders make up 48 percent of Metrobus riders compared with just 18 percent who use rail. Lower-income residents, city officials said, are less likely to hold jobs that offer employee benefit programs that subsidize commutes or provide workers with options to use untaxed wages to purchase fare cards. Over 65 percent of Metro’s highest-income rail customers get some type of employee-transit benefit, according to Metro, while only 10 percent of the transit authority’s lowest-income customers get some type of assistance from their employers.

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About half of the pilot program's funding will go toward reimbursing Metro for the fare discounts. Metro board members will vote on the proposal Thursday.

Metro officials recently said fare evasion was projected to cost the transit agency at least \$40 million in lost revenue this year.

The District has decriminalized fare evasion. D.C. Council member Charles Allen (D-Ward 6) and others have labeled fare evasion a poverty problem, saying that transportation is a necessity and that many who jump fares simply cannot afford them.

"I'm certainly glad that they're doing [the pilot], but I'm also not sure what we need to study," Allen said. "I think we need to do more about affordability for everybody."

Allen said he supports the program but would like to see one that offers more affordable rail fares to everyone. Doing so, he said, benefits the District by shuttling more people to jobs and businesses while also driving more customers to Metro and helping keep the transit system vibrant and healthy.

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