

# A Major Win for the No-fare Bus Program

Forty years ago the Gray Panthers and the RI Handicapped Action Committee (HAC) led a long campaign that won no-fare bus passes for low-income seniors and persons living with disabilities. They won through community organizing tactics, including protests and civil disobedience. Gray Panthers “sat-in” on buses. A HAC member blocked in a RIPTA bus at a turnaround with his wheelchair.

## On the Senior Agenda



By William F. Flynn Jr.

By mobilizing public support, their final leverage was a threat to defeat a bond issue for new buses. The No-Fare Bus Pass became law and continued for decades despite RIPTA’s occasional grumblings.

Then in the final hours of the 2015 session the House of Representatives, at RIPTA’s behest, added a budget provision allowing RIPTA to eliminate no-fare passes. At hearings later that summer, RIPTA made it clear that they planned to drop the passes. The Senior Agenda Coalition learned that over fifteen thousand vulnerable persons depended on the program, and we took up the issue. Rhode

Island Organizing Project (RIOP) quickly joined in, having heard from many no-fare users that losing the passes would do them great harm. The Senior Agenda and RIOP formed a Coalition to Preserve No-Fare Bus Passes. The RI Coalition for the Homeless, Economic Progress Institute, RIPTA Riders Alliance, Mental Health Recovery Coalition of RI and the Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty joined the Coalition.

Thus began a two year struggle. Coalition members generated thousands of postcards and phone calls to the Governor and legislative leaders. They turned out hundreds of people at public rallies, RIPTA Board meetings and General Assembly hearings. They generated Op-eds and letters to the Providence Journal. Their efforts prompted the Governor to provide one year’s funding for the passes, and to persuade RIPTA to delay eliminating the passes and to lower its replacement fare from a dollar to fifty cents per one-way trip. However the 2016 General Assembly refused to restore the passes.

On February 1, 2017 RIPTA eliminated no-fare passes with immediate and

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and persistence of our coalition members. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said,

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**“House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello and Senate President Dominick Ruggerio pledged to restore no-fare passes, and they delivered.”**

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disastrous effects for no-fare riders. Food pantries, senior centers and meal sites reported huge drop-offs in numbers of persons being served weekly. RIOP heard from no-fare riders who now walked long distances for basic needs like food shopping. In April the Coalition, joined by many senior centers, filled the room with three hundred and twenty people for the Senior Agenda Coalition’s Legislative Forum. There the House Speaker Nich-

olas Mattiello and Senate President Dominick Ruggerio pledged to restore no-fare passes, and they delivered. In June the General Assembly restored the No-Fare Bus Pass Program and included a \$3.4 million annual RIPTA subsidy for the program for the next two years. It also mandated that RIPTA establish a process to craft a permanent funding solution for the program.

This was a huge victory for 13,000 vulnerable Rhode Islanders, thanks to the power of community organizing and the hard work

“Justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” This victory demonstrated that kind of power.

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