

Youth Guidelines for Using the Community Connector

The Community Connector is committed to providing safe, reliable, and accessible transportation for all riders, including youth. To ensure a positive experience for everyone, the following guidelines must be observed by youth passengers:

General Conduct

1. Respectful Behavior

- a. Youth riders are expected to maintain respectful and courteous conduct at all times to ensure a pleasant and safe environment for everyone. This includes:
 - i. **Interactions with Drivers:** Speak politely and follow any instructions provided by the driver. Drivers are there to ensure your safety and comfort, and they should be treated with kindness and respect.
 - ii. **Interactions with Other Riders:** Be considerate of fellow passengers. Avoid loud conversations, arguments, or other disruptive behaviors that might disturb others.
 - iii. **Respect for Property:** Take care of the vehicle and its amenities. Do not vandalize, damage, or leave trash behind. Any intentional damage to the vehicle will be reported, and parents/guardians may be held accountable for repair costs.
 - iv. **Appropriate Noise Levels:** Keep conversations, music, and electronic device usage at a low volume. If listening to music or using devices, use headphones to avoid disturbing others.
 - v. **Language and Behavior:** Use appropriate language at all times. Inappropriate, offensive, or threatening language, gestures, or actions will not be tolerated.

2. Compliance with Driver Instructions

- a. For the safety of all riders and the smooth operation of the service, youth riders must:
 - i. **Follow Directions Promptly:** Drivers may provide instructions related to seating, safety, or boarding/exiting procedures. Riders must listen attentively and follow these instructions without delay.
 - ii. **Respond to Safety Alerts:** In the event of an emergency or unexpected situation, riders must follow all safety protocols and directions provided by the driver.
 - iii. **Board and Exit Safely:** Wait for the vehicle to come to a complete stop before boarding or exiting. Follow the driver's guidance for safely entering and leaving the vehicle.
 - iv. **Adhere to Route Guidelines:** Stay on designated routes and do not request unscheduled stops unless it is an emergency and approved by the driver.

Consequences for Misconduct

1. **Warning System:** Riders who do not adhere to these guidelines may receive a verbal warning from the driver. Continued non-compliance may result in a report to the Transportation Coordinator.
2. **Parental Notification:** In cases of repeated or severe misconduct, the rider's parents/guardians will be contacted to address the behavior.
3. **Temporary Suspension:** If disruptive behavior persists, the rider's access to the Community Connector may be temporarily suspended, with the possibility of reinstatement after a review.

Eligibility

1. Youth Under 14

- **Adult Supervision Requirement:** Youth riders under the age of 14 must always be accompanied by an adult during their trips on the Community Connector. This ensures the safety and well-being of younger riders.
- **Accompanying Adults:** An accompanying adult can be a parent, guardian, or another authorized individual (e.g., a family member, teacher, or group leader). Authorization must be communicated to the Transportation Coordinator in advance if the adult is not the parent or guardian.
- **Group Travel:** For school or community outings involving youth under 14, the organizing group is responsible for assigning sufficient adult supervisors to monitor the riders.

2. Youth Ages 14-17

- **Independent Travel with Consent:** Youth in this age group may use the Community Connector independently with proper documentation. Written parental/guardian consent is required, which must include:
 - **Trip Details:** Specific information about the scheduled trips, such as pick-up and drop-off locations and times.
 - **Contact Information:** Up-to-date phone numbers and emergency contact details for the parent/guardian.
 - **Special Instructions:** Any necessary accommodations, medical considerations, or other relevant information the driver needs to know.
- **Submission of Consent Forms:** Consent forms must be submitted to the Transportation Coordinator in advance. Forms can be updated as needed for ongoing or one-time trips. The Transportation Coordinator will ensure the driver has access to the consent form during the trip.
- **Verification:** Drivers will verify that the youth has a signed consent form before providing transportation. If no consent form is on file, the ride may be denied.

3. Parental/Guardian Responsibility

- **Understanding the Guidelines:** Parents/guardians are responsible for familiarizing themselves and their children with the Community Connector's rules and expectations. They should discuss appropriate conduct, safety procedures, and the importance of following driver instructions.
- **Providing Accurate Information:** Ensure all contact details and trip information on the consent form are accurate and up to date. This is crucial for communication during emergencies or unexpected situations.
- **Preparation for Travel:**
 - **Safety Requirements:** If the youth requires a car seat, booster seat, or any other safety equipment, parents/guardians must provide and properly install it.
 - **Behavior Expectations:** Educate youth on the importance of respectful and courteous behavior while using the service.
- **Accountability:** Parents/guardians may be held accountable for their child's actions, including any damages caused to the vehicle or violations of the guidelines.

Safety

1. Seatbelts

- **Mandatory Use:** For the safety of all riders, wearing a seatbelt is non-negotiable. Riders must buckle their seatbelts as soon as they are seated and keep them on for the entire duration of the trip.
- **Driver Enforcement:** Drivers are responsible for ensuring compliance with this rule before the vehicle starts moving. If a rider refuses to wear a seatbelt, the driver has the authority to deny service or terminate the ride.
- **Education for Youth Riders:** Parents/guardians should emphasize the importance of seatbelt use to their children, explaining how it protects them in case of an accident or sudden stop.
- **Exceptions:** Any exceptions to this policy, such as medical conditions that prevent seatbelt use, must be documented and communicated to the Transportation Coordinator in advance.

2. Appropriate Restraints

- **Car Seats and Booster Seats:** Massachusetts law requires that children who need car seats or booster seats must use them while traveling. It is the accompanying adult's responsibility to provide and properly install these restraints for the child.
 - **Infants and Toddlers:** Must use rear-facing car seats.
 - **Older Children:** Depending on their age, height, and weight, they may require forward-facing car seats or booster seats.
 - **Youth Over 57 Inches Tall or Aged 8+:** May use the vehicle's standard seatbelt.
- **Driver Verification:** Drivers will verify that the restraint system is installed and secured correctly before departure. If a restraint system is improperly installed or missing, the ride cannot proceed.

- **Support for Installation:** For assistance with car seat installation, families are encouraged to consult a certified Child Passenger Safety Technician (CPST) available at the Winchendon Fire Station.

3. Pick-Up and Drop-Off

- **Timeliness is Key:** Youth riders must arrive at the designated pick-up location at least five minutes before the scheduled time. This ensures smooth operations and prevents delays for other riders.
- **Driver Wait Time:** Drivers will wait a maximum of 10 minutes at the designated location. After this period, the driver will proceed to the next stop. Late arrivals may result in missed rides.
- **Communication for Delays:**
 - If a youth rider anticipates being late, the parent/guardian must contact the Transportation Coordinator or driver (if the number is provided) as soon as possible to discuss alternative arrangements.
 - Riders who repeatedly fail to be on time may have their privileges reviewed or restricted.
- **Safety at Drop-Off Locations:** Drivers are responsible for ensuring youth are safely dropped off at the agreed location. For youth under 14, an adult must be present to meet the rider at the drop-off point. For independent youth riders (14–17), the Transportation Coordinator will confirm with the parent/guardian if special instructions apply, such as requiring a check-in call upon arrival.

Personal Items

1. Belongings

- **Rider Responsibility:** Each rider is responsible for keeping track of their personal belongings during the trip. Riders should ensure they have all their items with them before boarding and exiting the vehicle.
- **Size and Quantity Restrictions:**
 - Riders should avoid bringing oversized or excessive items that could obstruct walkways, take up additional seating, or inconvenience other passengers. Examples of unsuitable items include large furniture, excessively large luggage, or multiple shopping bags that cannot be stowed safely.
 - As a general guideline, personal items must fit within the rider's lap or the designated storage areas in the vehicle without disrupting the space or comfort of others.
- **Prohibited Items:** Dangerous or prohibited items, such as flammable materials, weapons, or hazardous chemicals, are strictly not allowed on board. Riders who bring such items may be denied service and reported if necessary.
- **Special Considerations:**
 - Riders with specific needs, such as mobility aids, medical equipment, or service animals, are encouraged to notify the Transportation Coordinator in advance to ensure proper accommodations are available.

- Parents or guardians traveling with children should ensure toys or other items are secure and do not cause distractions for the driver or other passengers.

2. Lost and Found

- **Procedure for Left Items:** If a rider forgets an item on the vehicle:
 - The driver will collect the item at the end of their shift and turn it in to dispatch at the Old Murdock Senior Center.
 - Riders can contact the Transportation Coordinator to inquire about missing items.
- **Retrieval of Items:** Lost items can be retrieved from dispatch during office hours. Riders should call ahead to confirm that their item has been found and to arrange a convenient time for pick-up.
- **Storage and Disposal Policy:** Lost items will be stored for up to 30 days. After this period, unclaimed items may be donated or disposed of according to the Community Connector's policy.
- **High-Value Items:** For valuable items (e.g., wallets, phones, or jewelry), drivers will notify dispatch immediately, and efforts will be made to contact the owner using any identifiable information found with the item. Owners will need to provide proof of ownership when retrieving such items.

Safety During Travel

1. Remain Seated

- **Stay in Your Seat:** Riders must remain seated at all times while the vehicle is in motion. Standing, moving around, or switching seats during the trip is not permitted, as it can compromise both the rider's safety and the driver's ability to operate the vehicle effectively.
- **Seat Assignment:** For vehicles with assigned seating, riders should take the designated seat provided by the driver. This helps ensure the smooth boarding process and accommodates riders with specific needs.
- **Minimize Distractions:**
 - Riders should avoid loud or excessive movement, which can draw the driver's attention away from the road.
 - Conversations with the driver should be kept brief and not require the driver to turn away from their primary focus of driving. Riders are encouraged to save non-urgent questions or comments for stops or the end of the ride.

2. No Food or Drinks

- **Cleanliness and Comfort:** Eating and drinking are prohibited on the vehicle to maintain a clean and sanitary environment for all passengers. Food spills and drink leaks can cause odors, stains, or potential hazards, such as slippery floors.
- **Safety Considerations:**
 - Eating while the vehicle is in motion can pose a choking hazard. In addition, uncovered drinks may spill and distract both riders and the driver.

- The policy ensures that passengers with food allergies or sensitivities are not exposed to unnecessary risks.
- **Exceptions:** Riders with medical conditions requiring food or drink (e.g., diabetic riders needing a quick snack) should notify the Transportation Coordinator ahead of time. Appropriate accommodations will be made as long as they do not interfere with the safety and comfort of others.
- **Responsibility:** Riders are responsible for removing all food and drink items from their belongings before boarding the vehicle. Parents and guardians traveling with children should ensure compliance with this rule, especially for younger riders who may be prone to carrying snacks.

Enforcement

- Drivers have the authority to remind passengers of these policies and request compliance. Persistent violations may result in a warning or, in severe cases, denial of service.
- Riders who cause cleanliness issues (e.g., spills, stains) may be held responsible for cleaning or repair costs.

Respect for Vehicles and Facilities

1. Cleanliness

- **Maintaining a Clean Environment:** Riders are responsible for ensuring they do not leave behind any trash, personal items, or messes in the vehicle. This includes wrappers, beverage containers, and other disposable items.
 - **Trash Disposal:** Riders should place all trash in designated bins located within the vehicle (if available) or dispose of it properly upon exiting.
 - **Spills and Messes:** Accidental spills should be reported to the driver immediately. Prompt action can prevent damage or stains to the vehicle.
- **Shared Responsibility:** Keeping the vehicle clean helps ensure a pleasant experience for all passengers and reduces the risk of maintenance downtime due to cleaning needs.
- **Parental Oversight:**
 - Parents or guardians traveling with children should monitor them to prevent messes or misuse of vehicle amenities.
 - Youth riders should be reminded of their responsibility to treat the vehicle with care and respect.
- **Prohibited Activities:** Activities that may lead to messes, such as eating or drinking, are prohibited (as outlined in the Safety During Travel section). Additionally, riders should not write on, scratch, or otherwise deface any part of the vehicle.

2. Damage Costs

- **Accountability for Damages:** Riders are expected to use the vehicle and its facilities appropriately and avoid causing damage to seats, windows, handles, or other equipment.
 - Examples of damage include but are not limited to graffiti, tears in upholstery, broken handles, or tampering with vehicle controls.

- **Reporting Damages:** If a rider notices any pre-existing damage or issues in the vehicle, they should report it to the driver immediately to ensure it is not attributed to their use.
- **Parental/Guardian Responsibility:**
 - For youth riders, any intentional or accidental damage caused to the vehicle may result in the parents/guardians being held financially responsible for repair or replacement costs.
 - Parents/guardians are encouraged to review these guidelines with their children before allowing them to ride independently.
- **Reimbursement Process:**
 - If damage is identified, the Transportation Coordinator will notify the rider or their parent/guardian. A detailed report, including photos and repair estimates, will be provided.
 - Payment for damages must be made promptly to avoid suspension of service for the rider.

Additional Measures

- **Inspections:** Drivers will perform routine inspections before and after each shift to ensure the vehicle is clean and free of damage. Any issues will be documented and reported to dispatch.
- **Education and Awareness:** To prevent damages, drivers may remind riders of guidelines during onboarding or as necessary during trips.

Emergencies

1. Contact Information

- **Mandatory for Independent Youth Riders:** Youth riders (ages 14–17) traveling independently must carry updated and easily accessible contact information for their parent or guardian. This ensures quick communication in case of an emergency or unexpected situation.
 - **Forms of Contact Information:** This can be in the form of a written note, card, or stored phone number. Riders should carry this information in their bag, pocket, or wallet.
 - **Details to Include:**
 - Parent/guardian name
 - Phone number(s) for immediate contact
 - Secondary emergency contact, if available
- **Parental Responsibility:** Parents/guardians are encouraged to remind their children about the importance of carrying this information and regularly updating it if contact details change.
- **Driver Awareness:** Before each trip, drivers will verify that youth riders have the necessary contact information on hand. If a youth rider does not have this information, the trip may be denied until proper arrangements are made.

2. Emergency Procedures

- **Driver Protocols:**
 - **Immediate Safety Measures:** In any emergency (e.g., vehicle breakdown, medical issue, or an unsafe situation), the driver's first priority is to ensure the safety of all passengers. This may involve pulling over, securing the vehicle, and assessing the situation.
 - **Contacting Dispatch:** Drivers are required to contact dispatch immediately to report the emergency and receive guidance on the next steps.
 - **Medical Emergencies:** If a youth rider shows signs of a medical emergency (e.g., fainting, severe injury, or illness), the driver will call 911 and stay with the rider until emergency responders arrive. Drivers are instructed not to provide medical treatment but may offer basic assistance (e.g., keeping the rider calm) while waiting for help.
 - **Emergency Evacuation:** In rare cases where the vehicle must be evacuated (e.g., fire, severe mechanical failure), drivers will guide riders to a safe location away from the vehicle and wait for emergency services.
- **Parent/Guardian Notification:** Once immediate safety concerns are addressed, dispatch will contact the parent/guardian listed on file to inform them of the situation and provide updates.
 - If parents/guardians are unreachable, the secondary emergency contact will be notified.
 - Parents/guardians may be asked to pick up their child from a designated location, depending on the nature of the emergency.
- **Support for Riders:**
 - For youth riders, drivers and dispatch will provide reassurance and clear instructions to minimize fear or confusion during emergencies.
 - If necessary, arrangements will be made to transport the youth safely to their intended destination or an alternative safe location.

Training and Preparedness

- **Driver Training:** All drivers receive regular training on emergency response protocols, including medical emergencies, evacuations, and communication procedures.
- **Youth Awareness:** Parents/guardians are encouraged to discuss basic emergency protocols with their children, such as staying calm, following the driver's instructions, and using their contact information if needed.
- **Equipment:** Each vehicle is equipped with basic emergency tools, such as first-aid kits and communication devices, to handle minor incidents while waiting for professional assistance.

Violations

1. First Offense: Verbal Warning

- **Purpose of the Warning:** The first offense is treated as a teaching moment for youth riders to understand and align their behavior with the Community Connector's guidelines. The focus is on educating the youth and encouraging responsible conduct.

- **Process:**
 - **Immediate Communication:** The driver will address the violation calmly, explaining which guideline was breached and why it is essential for the safety and smooth operation of the service.
 - **Youth-Specific Approach:** Drivers will use age-appropriate language and ensure the youth rider fully understands the guideline they violated.
 - **Documentation and Notification:**
 - The driver will document the incident and report it to the Transportation Coordinator.
 - For independent youth riders (ages 14–17), parents/guardians may be notified about the verbal warning to reinforce the importance of compliance at home.
 - **Coaching and Encouragement:** Youth riders will be encouraged to reflect on their actions and commit to improved behavior in subsequent trips.

2. Repeated Violations: Suspension of Riding Privileges

- **Escalation of Consequences:**
 - If a youth rider continues to violate the guidelines or commits a serious infraction (e.g., safety violations, disrespectful behavior, or causing disruptions), their riding privileges may be temporarily suspended.
 - The duration of the suspension will depend on the nature and frequency of the violations, with a typical suspension ranging from 1 to 4 weeks.
- **Parental/Guardian Notification:**
 - The Transportation Coordinator will notify the parent/guardian in writing or via phone, detailing:
 - The specific repeated violations or incident.
 - The length of the suspension.
 - The steps required for reinstatement (if applicable).
 - Parents/guardians are encouraged to discuss the incident with their child and emphasize the importance of following the guidelines.
- **Reinstatement:**
 - Suspended youth riders may resume using the service after a review process, which could include:
 - A meeting between the parent/guardian, the youth, and the Transportation Coordinator to discuss expectations.
 - An agreement signed by the youth rider and their parent/guardian to adhere to the guidelines.
- **Permanent Suspension:**
 - In cases of severe or persistent violations (e.g., physical aggression, endangering others, or intentional property damage), the rider may face permanent suspension.
 - The Transportation Coordinator will provide a detailed explanation of this decision to the parent/guardian, and alternative transportation options may be discussed.

Guidance for Preventing Violations

- **Clear Expectations:** Parents/guardians and youth riders will receive the Community Connector Youth Guidelines during registration, outlining behavioral and safety rules in detail.
- **Support for Youth Riders:**
 - Drivers and the Transportation Coordinator will provide supportive communication to help youth understand and comply with the rules.
 - Parents/guardians are encouraged to reach out if their child faces challenges that might affect their behavior on the service.
- **Encouraging Accountability:**
 - Youth riders will be encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and understand the impact of their behavior on others.
 - Repeat offenders may be required to participate in a review process with their parent/guardian and the Transportation Coordinator to identify underlying issues and solutions.