



Final Report

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Prepared by:

Sam Purington, Executive Director
Luanne Wilson, Program Implementation Director
Jennifer Hodge, Development Director

Guidance Provided By:



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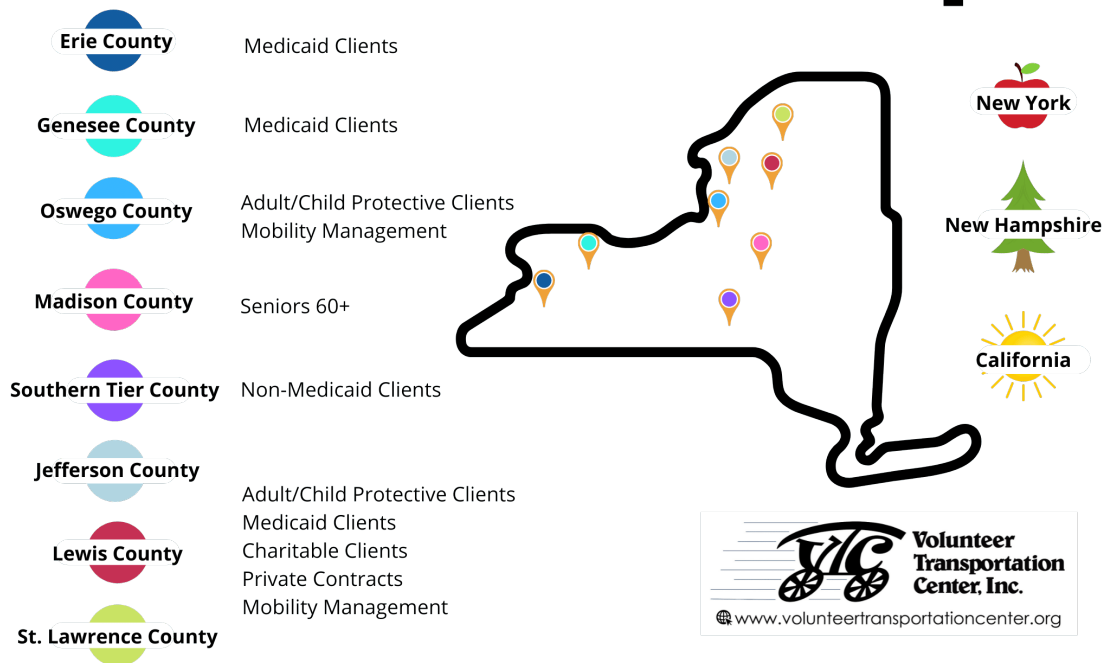
Introduction

Volunteer Transportation Center, Inc. (VTC) is 501c3 nonprofit making its home in Northern New York. Originally established as a volunteer program by the United Way of NNY, the agency now focuses on non-emergent transportation.

The volunteer driving program established nearly 30 years ago provided only 65 one-way trips to seniors in Jefferson County in year one. VTC currently has services across New York State, as well as in the State of New Hampshire and one county in California providing more than 4 million miles annually.

The service is provided using a network of more than 350 volunteers who transport clients to medical appointments and food sources. VTC is primarily funded through Medicaid trip reimbursement, but also provides over 1 million miles per year in charity trips. Charity clients can be seniors that do not qualify for Medicaid, yet need reliable transportation to medical appointments as well as other essential services. The agency contracts with other insurance programs and has partnership agreements with over 35 human service agencies in its catchment area.

VTC Service Map



BACKGROUND

The Volunteer Transportation Center and its partner Shared Mobility Inc. proposed a coordinated volunteer transportation system in Western New York State for development, deployment, and operation in Erie, Niagara and Genesee Counties. This program was to serve as an accessible and sustainable transportation option that utilizes adaptive technology to serve older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income individuals in the region, connecting them to essential services and destinations.

WHAT IS VTC IN A BOX?

VTC in a Box is a program developed by the Volunteer Transportation Center, Inc. (VTC) to assist neighboring communities with the start of a volunteer transportation organization (VTO) in their local community. Dedicated staff from the VTC work with local parties interested in providing a low-cost solution to transportation barriers. Access to affordable, convenient transportation plays a crucial role in the health of all in the community. A robust, affordable, and reliable system means better access to education and jobs, recreational and after-school activities, healthier food options and health care facilities.

The model developed by VTC includes partnering with a robust group of volunteer drivers using their own vehicles to transport folks in their own communities to medical appointments. The system works closely with the Medicaid transportation broker and local organizations to establish a reliable transportation network. All trips are tracked through a proprietary app called SNAP enabling compliance with NYS and Federal billing regulations.

WHERE DO STARTUP COST COME FROM FOR VTC IN A BOX?

VTC staff will come to the host community and start volunteer transportation center programs. During this time, volunteers will be recruited, rates will be negotiated, etc. The finances will be reviewed monthly, and once the program is in the black—the successful program will be handed over to the County for continued service. Funds for startup can come from state or federal grants or private funds. Once the program is up and running Medicaid reimbursement will assist in covering the costs of the program.

BUDGETED COSTS-

If the host community wants the project to move faster and wishes to assign staff to the work this is what the structure could look like:

1. Staffing (VTC assumes all risk)- 3 to 5 staff to get the project started
 - a. Program Coordinator: FT @ \$35-40,000 annually
 - b. Dispatcher: FT (37.5 hours per week) \$28-35,000 annually
 - c. Finance: PT (20 hours per week) @ \$15,000 annually
2. Hardware/software (VTC assumes all risk)
 - a. Purchase 3 computers with 2 monitors for staff: @ \$3000
 - b. Begin with 12-24 tablets: @ \$1500-2000
 - c. Software: \$2 per completed trip leg
3. Construction Costs – in-kind office space would be ideal; if not, renting space would be an additional cost based on local real estate costs.
4. Driver Reimbursement (VTC assumes all risk)- Initially all reimbursement would flow through VTC. Typically, we reimburse drivers the going IRS rate (currently \$0.56 per mile).
5. Advertising/Recruitment
 - a. Word of Mouth- best advertising there can be for a program of this nature for recruiting new drivers
 - b. Other free advertising: online-social media, present to senior groups (coordinate with RSVP)
 - c. Paid advertising (\$2,500-3,000 annually):
 - i. Newspapers, Radio, online: local is best
6. Training- no cost, provided by VTC staff

FUNDING SOURCES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

- a. Medicaid
- b. Private funds- grants, donations, etc.
- c. Contracts with insurances and community agencies (OFA/DSS)

COVID IMPACT ON THE PROJECT

Since COVID started in March 2020, the transportation industry nationally had to rethink how to safely transport individuals. Buses were transporting fewer people to allow social distancing. Volunteer programs and livery services could no longer combine trips (clients from the same area going to appointments at the same time could ride together) causing a strain on service capacity for this mode as well.

Telehealth appointments have become commonplace for many lessening the need for public transportation alternatives.

All of these social impacts in conjunction with the delay in funding from the FTA detrimentally affected this project. We were unable to have boots on the ground in Western NY because of health mandates, the landscape of transportation was changing and the economic impact in our proposed service area changed.

The program kicked off in Genesee followed by Erie County. The start was slow, but we were able to recruit 24 volunteer drivers in total (12 in Erie County and 12 in Genesee County). The pandemic quickly shortened that list and for good reason. When things began to open back up we were left with five drivers in total for both counties and struggling to recruit as the cost of fuel rose steadily.

POST PANDEMIC

When the world began to resume the new normal life, we began looking at the next phase of the project- Niagara County. As such, the project further evaluated the need and financial feasibility of creating a VTO in this area.

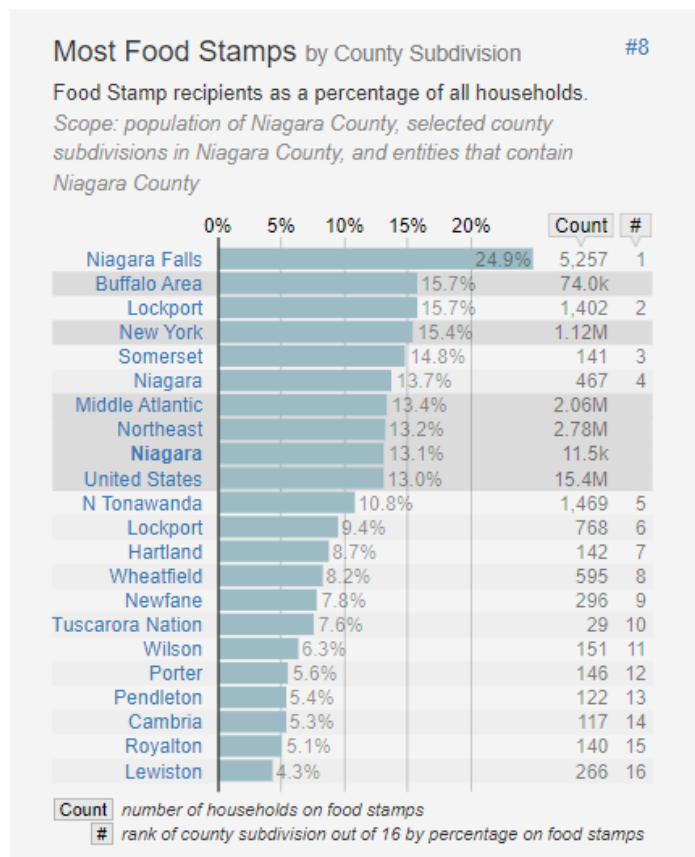
Demographics of Niagara County NY

From 2013 and 2017, the special needs population in the region increased from 59 to 60% of the total population.

This growth was driven primarily by increases in older adults. The Federal Reserve Bank of Buffalo notes that by the year 2030, 1 in 5 persons in upstate NY will be over the age of 65.

Lack of personal transportation is the main reason older adults miss medical appointments and are less likely to participate in social, family and/or religious activities which can result in overall health issues and social isolation.

In Niagara County, the percentage of individuals living below the poverty level decreased slightly from 30.95% in 2013 to 30.84% in 2017, with 48.8% of those



individuals living within the City of Niagara Falls. Within the City, 20.17% of households do not own a vehicle.

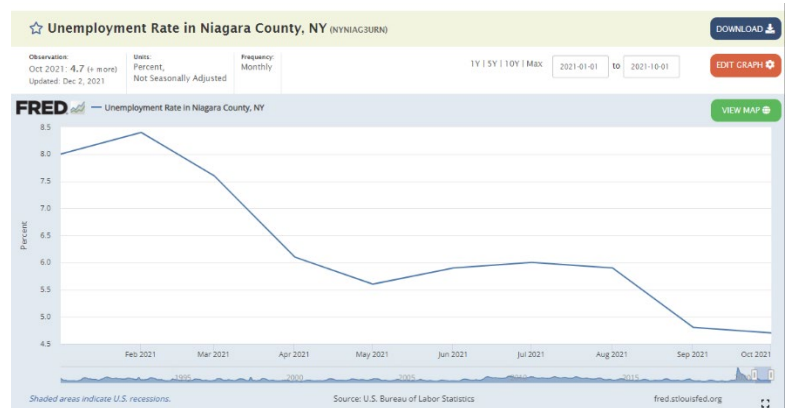
Veterans and their families in Niagara County also find transportation a challenge because of a disability or financial hardship. This group is comprised of 7.71% of the region's population.

13.1% of people in Niagara County receive food stamps. With the highest percentage in the City of Niagara Falls and the lowest percent in Lewiston.

Funding has fallen short, the need for 5310 funds has grown faster than funding is available.

The 2019 median household income for Niagara County is \$55,522, a 2.66% increase from 2018. The poverty rate for 2019 is 13.5%, down .0078% from 2018.

The unemployment rate for Niagara County for October 2021 was 4.7% down from an annual high in February of 8.4%.



RURAL VS URBAN

Rural areas of Niagara County are at a disadvantage due to the inability to take public transportation. There is little available for these individuals, Taxi and other rideshare options are expensive and not always reliable. Without an effective public transportation system to rely on, rural residents without cars often have to depend on a network of friends and family members to drive them to essential appointments. This puts rural individuals in a vulnerable position.

Urban areas in Niagara County have access to fixed bus routes, paratransit, taxi's and rideshare options which are much more affordable for shorter distances within a city and surrounding suburbs.

Rural Niagara TRANSPORTATION OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Niagara Falls Coach Lines, Inc.
(716) 285-9357

Sponsored by the State of New York
& Niagara County Legislature
Niagara County Rural Transportation
439-7797

www.niagaracounty.com/busschedule.asp

Fares:
\$2.00 on route
\$4.00 off route

Times of Service:
Monday - Friday
(except legal holidays)

Route Deviations: Niagara County's Rural Niagara Transportation system will deviate from the route not more than three-quarters of a mile to get any individual who cannot get to a scheduled stop. Call for reservations by the end of regular business hours of the day before the ride is needed (716) 285-9357.

Note: Due to Route Deviations, scheduled times may vary from 10 minutes before or 10 minutes after the designated time.

KEY

- Route IA & ID
- Route IB & IC
- Route 2A - 2D
- Route 3A - 3D
- Route 4A - 4D

T Metro Bus Transfer Point

Busess may be flagged down along routes where safely allowable.

WOULD A VTC IN A BOX PROGRAM BE FEASIBLE IN NIAGARA COUNTY?

Feasibility was examined through an implementation team meeting using a SWOT analysis format.

STRENGTH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VTC has a proven track record of successful program implementation 30 + years providing non-emergent transportation in NNY Become "go to" for many human service agencies in each area we serve. VTC has a keen sense of program development in rural, underserved pockets of the target market area Intense driver training program that covers all aspects of volunteer driving lending itself to high driver retention. VTC has a proprietary software application that meets NYS and Federal billing guidelines.
WEAKNESS

- Unable to have boots on the ground in Niagara County because of funding deficits
- It takes time to build trust and establish the business when entering a new area.
- Funding/partner agencies can be difficult to secure while many agencies have changed focus or shut down completely.

OPPORTUNITY

- Niagara County has many rural areas with populations living in devastating conditions—transportation being a leading barrier to care.
- The existing public transit systems lends itself to the implementation of a First Mile Last Mile (FMLM) program to help people in rural areas get to and from a bus stop maximizing use of the public transit.
- Current FTA funding for planning secured in 2021

THREATS

- Continued global pandemic causing high infection rates in Niagara/Erie County.
- Inability to recruit a core group of volunteers
- Building trust and networking with other agencies takes time, but is accomplished. The search to find dependable volunteers who have the time to dedicate.
- There are more than 20 taxi/livery companies and two public transit systems service Niagara County (Niagara County Rural Transit and Regional Rochester Transit)

Conclusion

Through research and discussion with local (Niagara County) contacts, initially VTC in a Box was a plausible solution. Through the delay of funding and the current pandemic, it has become unlikely that a program could be successfully implemented in Niagara County by the close of 2021.

When the pandemic lessens and VTC staff/community partners can once again actively recruit in Niagara County, there would be a focus on the northeast corner of the county where public transit does not serve the population. At the same time contracts would be established with the Office for the Aging, Department of Social Services and the Medicaid broker. Said contracts would allow for a robust, yet diversified transportation alternative for this county.

Overall, we were able to provide service in two rural areas of Western New York –Erie and Genesee Counties. However, changes overall prohibited VTC and its partners from establishing a similar service in Niagara County.

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