

# Trends Report 2020



Photo: Township of Schaumburg, Illinois





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**NADTC's Mission** is to increase accessible transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers nationwide.

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# Volunteer Driver Programs in the Age of COVID-19

## Introduction

Volunteer driver programs have long been an affordable and efficient transportation service. They tend to be more flexible and can operate any time of the day, in any geography depending on the driver's availability and preferences. Volunteer driver programs are recognized as an effective use of private resources for public good. Volunteer riders *and* drivers tend to skew older and are subsequently in the high-risk category for contracting COVID-19. With the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020, many volunteer driver programs stopped operations completely for the safety of the driver and rider. Other programs, because the volunteers know their riders and precautions were put in place, have continued to offer limited, essential rides only. More programs are ramping up, as they have drivers willing to allow others in their vehicles. Whether they continued rides or not, some programs kept volunteers engaged by asking them to deliver groceries or prescriptions or to make wellness phone calls to riders.

This report will summarize the challenges and opportunities for volunteer driver programs during the pandemic and feature some innovative ways to continue to serve those who rely on volunteer transportation programs.

## Challenges and Opportunities

While often referred to as the “best kept secret”, volunteer driver programs offer transportation in places where there are no other or limited transportation options. They have long been opportunities for community members to give back to their neighbors, families and friends by offering rides. It is a volunteer activity that is often mutually beneficial for the rider and the driver.

During the pandemic, it has become clear that volunteer driver programs, and the volunteers who drive, are essential parts of the support systems for older adults and people with disabilities. The need for these programs became especially apparent when many stopped running, leaving those who depend on this service to find other ways to get to appointments or to purchase

While rural infrastructure and budgets are often limited, culture is an innate strength, and a **neighbor helping neighbor** strategy plays to that strength. This may explain the ability of even small places to field enthusiastic volunteer driver programs, which many rural strategists see as the most sustainable and cost-effective option for filling gaps in service and helping older people maintain mobility in rural and frontier settings.

**Volunteer drivers go the extra mile**, offering much more than a ride; they provide a high-touch, supportive, social experience well beyond the reach of other forms of transportation.

*Blind Spot: Mobility and Aging in Rural America – Insights for Philanthropy, 2020*

food. Also noticeable was that not everyone can get to a drive-through COVID testing location or to the doctor should they test positive for COVID and need treatment. Out of necessity, new or augmented relationships have been formed with public health, hospitals and other community partners. Programs have been flexible and pivoted to add new services and, in some cases, recruited new volunteers willing to step up during the pandemic.

Recruiting volunteers is a consistent challenge; however, the pandemic has raised awareness of the essential role volunteers play in our social safety net programs. Many people have been looking for ways to help and have connected to programs through online searches of volunteer opportunities or the volunteer program website. Some volunteer programs have been actively recruiting new volunteers through inserts in mailings like tax bills, through town newsletters, and of course, word of mouth continues to be the most effective method. Some programs have been featuring the opportunity for occasional or one-off volunteering, which is a trend in volunteer engagement, particularly among younger volunteers.

### **Volunteer and Rider Safety**

An essential foundation for any volunteer driver program, even before the pandemic, is the assurance of rider and volunteer safety. Some programs stopped operating due to safety concerns specific to the pandemic, while others have implemented new policies and procedures and continued to operate, some with limited capacity and restricted ride purpose.

Risk management for volunteer driver programs is an established operational priority due to the nature of the volunteer task and relationships and interactions with vulnerable adults. Safety protocols, training requirements, and evaluations of volunteers are essential elements for every volunteer driver program.

With the onset of the pandemic, the need for new protective measures was essential for rider and driver safety. New safety procedures commonly implemented include:

- Masks required for drivers and riders.
- Hand sanitizer in all vehicles
- Rear passenger-side seating for riders able to sit in the back of vehicle.
- Windows open while riding
- Vehicle disinfection.
- Removable partitions between the front and back seats.
- Use of larger agency vehicles to allow more spacing for passenger.



*Jewish Family Service of Metrowest, Framingham, MA*

These measures required new training for volunteers on the proper use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and sanitation supplies. Programs have done this training through written bulletins, short videos, and in-person training following public health and CDC guidelines.

Some programs have implemented new risk statements and informed consent waivers for the drivers and riders to sign that acknowledges the safety processes in place. It also informs the driver and rider there is still a risk of contracting COVID or other diseases despite safety protocols.

Another practice adopted by some programs is to consistently assign the same volunteer driver to a specific rider. This reduces the exposure potential for those who are high risk and need multiple rides due to dialysis or cancer treatments.

Continually improving safety procedures in these programs is a priority and continues to impact operating decisions, especially as spikes in COVID occur and will be important when vaccine distribution begins.

### **Funding Support**

Even as the demand for rides has decreased during the pandemic, the need for funding volunteer program operations still exists. [Federal Enhanced Mobility of Seniors & Individuals with Disabilities – Section 5310](#) is one funding source many volunteer transportation programs use for operations. Non-traditional Section 5310 project examples listed on the FTA program website specifically include volunteer driver programs. The Federal Section 5310 funds are allocated to States and designated direct recipients, with eligible subrecipients that can include private nonprofit organizations, states or local government authorities, or operators of public transportation. While not all volunteer driver programs access this funding, many do.

Noteworthy, especially during the pandemic, is that FTA's Section 5310 program allows grantees to coordinate and assist in regularly providing meal delivery service for individuals who are homebound, if the delivery service does not conflict with providing public transportation service or reduce service to public transportation passengers. The Area Agency on



*Disability Network West Michigan, Muskegon, MI*

Aging Sonoma Access Transportation Programs which include six volunteer driver programs transitioned to meal delivery during the early days of the pandemic.

The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 (CRRSAA) and American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 each allocated \$50 million for the Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities formula program Section 5310. This funding is being used to acquire and pay for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and sanitation supplies for their drivers and riders and assist with operational expenses. The cost of operations does not directly correlate with the decrease in rides and in some cases has increased as these programs shifted to meal, prescription and other essential goods deliver. Some programs were also able to access CARES Act funding through other entities like their Area Agencies on Aging.

Another concern for volunteer driver programs is that often, their funding from year to year is dependent on the number of rides provided in the previous year. With the significant decline or stoppage of service, ride numbers in 2020 may severely reduce their 2021 allocation.

### **Operational Support**

While programs continue to upgrade their safety measures and procedures, coming together virtually to share successes, concerns, and stories has helped disseminate best practices among programs. These peer exchanges, both formal and informal have been valuable as programs navigate these difficult times.

#### *Informal Networks*

The Maine Council on Aging hosts the [Tri-state Learning Collaborative on Aging](#) (TSLCA) forums around relevant topics to the aging network in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. The Resiliency and Recovery Conversation Check-in Calls for Volunteer Transportation is one of these forums. Volunteer driver programs learn how others have adapted, discuss reopening plans, and serve as an exchange for sharing experiences, policies, and new services. For example, The Friends in Action program in Hancock, Maine noted they use the [CDC guidance - What Rideshare, Taxi, Limo and other Passenger Drivers-for-Hire Need to Know about COVID-19](#) as guidance for their program.



Participants on these video calls have shared how they moved orientation online which has helped new volunteers on-board more quickly, safely and conveniently; produced new sample waivers and policy statements; surveyed their current and past volunteers about continuing to drive now or in the future; and have acted as a support group as everyone is trying to figure out how to continue their good work while protecting volunteer drivers and riders.

## *Formal Networks*

Another resource shared by one program during the TSLCA forum is the benefit they experience as part of a national organization like the [National Volunteer Caregiving](#)



[Network](#). NVCN is a membership organization of programs that provide volunteer caregiving services across the United States. The majority of NVCN members provide volunteer driver services as one of, or the only, caregiving service they offer. Membership benefits include professional development opportunities, branding and marketing tools, support and resources, including low-cost access to an online portal to automate and track data. During the pandemic, NVCN members have access to sample templates for policies or informed consent waivers, tools to recruit volunteers, ideas to reintroduce transportation, and discussion of issues such as HIPAA compliance. Members can access an online toolbox including a resource library of policies, operational documents, waivers, bylaws, marketing campaigns, and client assessment tools.

This is one example of a membership organization that can provide support for volunteer driver programs who often operate with minimal staff or solely with volunteers.

### **Program Examples**

The following three program examples highlight other innovative ways volunteer driver programs have continued to provide transportation for their program participants when their traditional volunteer driver program was not operating or did not have enough volunteers to meet demand. In these examples, agencies were able to capitalize on programs and partnerships that began prior to the pandemic.

#### *Sound Generations – King County, Washington*

[Sound Generations](#) provides free, personalized, and safe transportation to essential healthcare appointments for older adults in King County, WA. When the pandemic started, their volunteer pool dropped by about 75%. Initially, the rides requested declined as well, but as ride requests started to increase, volunteers willing to drive did not increase to match the need. Sound Generations received a grant in 2019 to pilot the use of [UberHealth](#) to provide certain rides to their clients. Because there have been fewer volunteer drivers to meet ride request demand as the pandemic continues, Sound Generations is using this existing partnership with Uber to fill ride requests. This service is used for riders who are appropriate for this level of service, who agree to and are comfortable using it. This is a temporary solution as not all riders are capable of or willing to use Uber; these rides are more expensive; and there is a lack of funding to sustain the program long-term.

### *Transportation Improvement Program – Iowa, Statewide*

To address the need for reliable and expanded transportation solutions in Iowa, the Transportation Improvement Program began to form partnerships between the American Cancer Society, the [Iowa Cancer Consortium](#), and public transit agencies in 2019. The [American Cancer Society Road to Recovery](#) program is a network of volunteers who provide free rides for cancer patients to medical appointments and procedures.



*The Center for Volunteer Caregiving, Cary, NC*

In March of 2020, the American Cancer Society temporarily shut down their volunteer driver program to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. During this critical moment, the staff at the Iowa Cancer Consortium and American Cancer Society quickly turned to public transit because of the distancing and strict cleaning protocols they had already implemented to reduce virus spread. Public transit became the referral for some cancer patients who had no other way of getting to treatment. With emergency funding from the Iowa Cancer Consortium, the [Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority](#) and [Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency](#) have provided over 350 rides to ensure cancer patients did not skip their treatment appointments due to lack of transportation.

### *Freedom Road Transportation – Orion, Michigan*

[Freedom Road Transportation](#) program in Orion, MI offers both traditional volunteer rides, where volunteers are found and scheduled by the agency, as well as a program where the riders choose their own drivers and reimburse them directly with mileage reimbursement provided by Freedom Road Transportation. While the agency-scheduled volunteer rides ceased at the start of the pandemic, arrangements for rides made between the rider and volunteer driver continued. Those who qualify for this program must fill out an application in order to be eligible for reimbursement, which they in turn give to their driver. Volunteer drivers must fill out a form identifying themselves and their passenger. Mutually convenient travel arrangements are made between the rider and the volunteer driver. Because the rider acquires their own driver, they have control over the person with whom they ride. The rider and volunteer are usually already in the same circle. This arrangement alleviates some of the concerns of riding with a volunteer driver who the rider may not know. Due to this unique set-up, this portion of the Freedom Road Transportation Program did not see a reduction in usage,

except due to outside forces such as stay-at-home orders or cancelled routine medical appointments. This operational model is based on the TRIP Model found [here](#).

## Summary

It has become more evident than ever that volunteer drivers are essential front-line workers who provide direct access to food, medical treatment, prescriptions, and necessary appointments for people with no other transportation options. Despite initial reduction in rides requested in the beginning of the pandemic, ridership demand is increasing. Unfortunately, the number of volunteer drivers willing to drive is not increasing as quickly. Many volunteers are in the high-risk category and are choosing not to drive others or will only transport goods. With appropriate risk management procedures in place, volunteer driver programs have consistently been an efficient and effective transportation solution, particularly for difficult to serve geographies and populations. COVID-19 has been difficult on the entire transportation network and has forced new partnerships and arrangements to continue to provide an option for those with no other way to get around. It is essential that the importance of volunteer driver programs is recognized and supported because they will continue to be needed to provide mobility for older adults and people with disabilities. As more of the population becomes vaccinated, hopefully more of the volunteer drivers will once again return to the volunteer programs.

## References

Blind Spot: Mobility and Aging in Rural America, Insights for Philanthropy, Age Friendly Arizona, Elliott Sparkman Walker, Strategic Communications & Planning. August 2020

[http://www.agefriendlyaz.org/Portals/4/Blind-Spot-MAG-Rural-Mobility-report-08022020-FINAL\\_1.pdf](http://www.agefriendlyaz.org/Portals/4/Blind-Spot-MAG-Rural-Mobility-report-08022020-FINAL_1.pdf)

Federal Transit Administration (n.d.). Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities – Section 5310. Retrieved from

<https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/enhanced-mobility-seniors-individuals-disabilities-section-5310>

## Resources

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center – Operating Volunteer Driver Programs in a Pandemic: <http://www.nadtc.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteer-Driver-Suggestions-COVID.pdf>

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center – The Impact of COVID-19 on Transportation Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities: A Conversation with

Volunteer Driver Programs (webinar) <https://www.nadtc.org/event/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-transportation-services-for-older-adults-and-people-with-disabilities-a-conversation-with-volunteer-driver-programs/>

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center – Emergency Activity Tracking for Transportation Programs <http://www.nadtc.org/wp-content/uploads/Emergency-Activity-Tracking.pdf>

The Impact of COVID-19 on Transportation Access and Social Isolation (blog) <https://us5.campaign-archive.com/?u=8e5a58f0539f4d7433f4faafc&id=f878b8a7ad>

CDC Cleaning and Disinfection of Non-emergency Transport Vehicles <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/disinfecting-transport-vehicles.html>

OSHA – COVID-19 Guidance for Rideshare, Taxi, and Car Service Workers <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA4021.pdf>

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act FAQs <https://www.transit.dot.gov/frequently-asked-questions-fta-grantees-regarding-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19#CARES>

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