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Dementia Awareness in Public Transportation

What is Dementia?

Dementia affects millions of people worldwide – 7.7 million new cases are diagnosed each year (World Health Organization, 2015). Dementia itself is not a disease – rather it describes a set of symptoms that are associated with the progressive decline of an individual's cognitive function, often becoming severe enough to interfere with everyday activities. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's Disease, although it can be caused by a number of conditions, such as a stroke or traumatic brain injury (Alzheimer's Association, 2015).

Symptoms of Dementia:

While symptoms of dementia can vary greatly, individuals with dementia may experience challenges with one or more of the following:

- **Memory**
- **Communication and language**
- **Ability to focus and pay attention**
- **Reasoning and judgment**
- **Perception and processing of visual information**
- **Physical Mobility**

Dementia and Public Transportation

It is important to create networks that allow individuals with dementia to be supported in their homes and communities as they age.

Using public transportation can help an individual with dementia continue to be an active participant in society. However, individuals with moderate dementia riding public transportation alone are at risk of becoming disoriented, getting off the bus at the wrong stop, or getting lost during travel. Individuals with moderate to advanced dementia are more likely to safely travel on fixed-route public transportation with a caregiver, personal care attendant (PCA), or using assisted transportation services.

Public transportation drivers and providers who are aware of the challenges that individuals with dementia and their caregivers face are better able to recognize dementia symptoms and ensure a safe and enjoyable trip for all riders.



Older Adults' Age-Related Changes vs Dementia

It is important to know the difference between normal age-related changes and the symptoms that may indicate a developing problem. As we age, we all change – our bones may weaken and muscles generally lose strength and flexibility; we might become less coordinated or have trouble balancing; and we may become forgetful.

Cognitive Challenges
Visual Challenges
Hearing Challenges
Mobility Challenges

} General challenges individuals may experience as they age

While memory lapses can be frustrating, most of the time they aren't cause for concern. Age-related memory changes are not the same thing as dementia. **Dementia causes a decline in thinking and reasoning skills.** Older adults with dementia may have trouble quickly processing new information, or may become overwhelmed in environments with multiple distractions.

Clues that an individual is confused and may need extra assistance:

- ✓ Difficulty remembering familiar activities, such as forgetting how to pay the bus fare or signal a stop
- ✓ Becoming lost in familiar places or forgetting their final destination
- ✓ Asking the same question over and over
- ✓ Expressing frustration towards the driver or other passengers
- ✓ Finding it difficult to follow directions
- ✓ Becoming confused about time, people, and places

Observing rider behavior can tell you a lot: What you see can be important in determining the strengths and support needs of each rider. As a transportation driver, you are not expected to individually know all your passengers. However, there are likely individuals you do see every day or every week, who ride the same route with you, and over time, you may have observed patterns in their behavior. As the first line of contact for many riders, your observations are important and you may detect changes in riders' behavior that are indicative of an individual in need of extra assistance.

Tips for Drivers

How can drivers provide assistance to riders with these challenges?

1

Good Customer Service: As a driver, something as simple as a friendly face can help the individual feel at ease if they are confronting confusion on where they are going, how to pay the fare, or how to alert you of a stop.

2

Clear Directions and Communication: Individuals suffering from dementia may have difficulty dealing with unexpected or stressful situations, such as navigating a route change, recognizing a change in the bus stop location, or managing a delay in bus arrivals or departures. Provide information clearly and succinctly. You may need to repeat yourself if it is noisy.

3

Respond to Questions: If an individual is confused, they may ask what stop is next or ask for assistance to provide payment, especially on a vehicle that they are unfamiliar with. They may ask several times for clarification and direction. Drivers can be helpful by responding to the questions and helping create a comfortable atmosphere for riders.

4

Remind them of the overall bus route and let them know a few of the upcoming stops: If the confusion is related to a destination, ask if they have an address written on a piece of paper. Let them know you will alert them when you arrive at their stop and direct them to safely take a seat near the front of the bus.

5

Patience: Older adults with dementia may become frustrated because of fear, overstimulation, or difficulty in expressing their thoughts. Elevated stress levels because of confusion can be expressed as agitated behavior. If an individual appears frustrated when communicating with a driver, it is important for the driver to be patient, understanding and sensitive to the needs of the passenger. You can acknowledge what they are saying by listening and responding politely.

6

Provide reassurance that you are willing to help them, maintain eye contact and use simple language which can help mitigate the frustration. Please keep in mind that their frustration is likely not directed at you, rather at the situation.

7

Report problems to a supervisor: Most transit agencies have policies and procedures to address overall safety concerns, but perhaps not “dementia friendly” practices. The next page contains community resources that may be able to help.

Community Resources

A number of community agencies have a vested interest in supporting dementia awareness and aging in place and may be able to help. To find resources in your area, contact any of the following:

The Alzheimer's Association is a national organization devoted to enhancing care and support for all those affected by Alzheimer's and other dementias. The Alzheimer's Association has a 24/7 Helpline (800-272-3900), but also local chapters in communities across the country that run support groups, awareness events, and educational workshops on Alzheimer's Disease and dementia.

Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) provide long-term services and supports in most communities in the U.S. and promote healthy aging. To find an AAA in your community, visit www.n4a.org.

Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) serve as single points of entry into the long-term services and supports system. To find an ADRC in your community, visit <http://www.adrc-tae.acl.gov/>.

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) provide peer support, travel training and independent living skills training. To find a CIL in your community, visit <http://www.ilru.org>.

Title VI Native American Aging Programs support healthy aging and often provide educational and awareness programs for older American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. To find a Title VI program in your community, visit www.n4a.org.

Community-based Adult Day Health Care Centers or other providers of health and social services may also be good resources to consider.



For Technical Assistance or additional information about this publication:

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