Critical Issues in Human Services Transportation

This information brief is based on the "Fundamentals of Human Services Transportation" online course offered by the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center in the summer of 2020. The course was designed to address both best practices and transportation trends likely to impact human services transportation. The major topics covered in the course are included here: accessibility; inclusive practices; coordination and collaboration; federal funding; and technology.

Human services transportation, as defined by the Federal Transit Administration,

needs of transportation disadvantaged populations, including older adults, disabled persons and/or those with lower income." These critical transportation options provide rides to a wide range of community services and meet basic, day-to-day mobility needs, including providing access to medical care and food shopping. Human services transportation includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Volunteer Transportation Services
- Transportation with Assistance
- Transportation Vouchers
- Neighborhood Shuttles
- Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) funded by Medicaid or Other Sources

We know that most older adults and people with disabilities either drive themselves or depend on family and friends for transportation. Public transit and paratransit services are critical transportation resources and effectively address the transportation needs of older adults and people with disabilities in many communities, but these services are not available everywhere, particularly in rural areas. Human services transportation services typically fill gaps in the community's transportation service system, but these services may also be the only option(s) available to meet the unique travel needs of underserved populations. These services make a difference in the lives of the people they serve, but may be limited in

the scope of services they offer (e.g., only rides to medical care) or the number of people they are able to serve due to funding constraints.

This report explores a number of issues that are recognized by human services transportation programs as vital to the communities they serve. The issues include: accessibility; inclusive practices; coordination and collaboration; federal funding; and technology.

Accessibility

Human services transportation options are often defined by their availability and accessibility. Availability refers to the existence of transportation options in the community, and whether riders can utilize those options when needed. However, simply having transportation services available does not ensure the *accessibility* of these options. Federal requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) lay out specific mandates for accessible public transit vehicles and facilities. However, many transportation agencies can, and often do, go beyond the ADA requirements to recognize and remove as many barriers as possible.

Accessibility, in its broadest sense, includes the ease with which older adults and people with disabilities, as well as other riders, can find out about the transportation options available, schedule a ride, and use transportation services. Accessibility also addresses the physical infrastructure (e.g., availability of sidewalks, good lighting, well-maintained transit stations), the affordability of a ride, and whether or not inclusive practices are in place (e.g., resources, maps, and rider guides in formats and languages that riders can easily use). Such efforts enable individuals to have a fully accessible "complete" trip – from planning the trip, to booking a ride, to paying the fare, to boarding and exiting the vehicle.

Key to the complete trip is having the ability to even conceive that the trip you want to take is a real possibility. A mobility manager or travel trainer may offer hands-on instruction and guidance to apprehensive consumers to bolster their pre-trip confidence. Information provided in the consumer's primary language, picture-based travel aids, and technology apps, such as Google maps, can offer additional support for building confidence.

Transportation accessibility should be a priority for all transportation providers. It is important to engage with consumers about their concerns, but facilitating opportunities for ongoing dialogue between riders and providers will help to ensure that transportation services accurately reflect the needs and values of riders.

Inclusive Practices

Inclusion, diversity, and equity serve as "must have" pillars of any successful human services transportation system. Systems seeking ongoing input from the individuals they serve are more effective in delivering services to meet riders' specific needs and in assessing the equity and accessibility of the available options. Inclusive practices allow providers to identify what is working well, what gaps exist, and what future steps would serve the system best. This "feedback loop" enables operators to use what they learn about the rides they provide (the outputs) as "inputs" to build a better, more responsive system of services. In human services transportation, an inclusion-focused feedback loop helps identify and address consumer needs by soliciting feedback at all stages of planning and service delivery, and consistently incorporating opportunities for engagement through these practices.
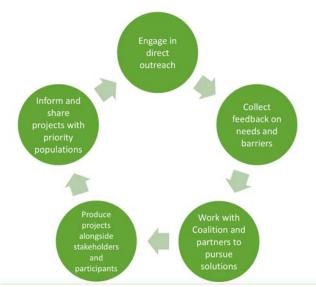

Figure 1. An example of the feedback loop used by Hopelink, Inc. in Redmond, WA to engage with consumers.

Examples of feedback loop activities can include: soliciting riders to attend meetings as well as suggest meeting agenda items; surveying riders or inviting them to speak or provide written accounts of their ride experiences; and creating a planning committee with consumer members to guide the transportation program on an ongoing basis. Offering a variety of feedback options to riders encourages them to participate in ways they find most comfortable.

Other examples of inclusive practices include rotating meeting locations to ensure geographic equity within the service area; offering transportation information materials in a variety of languages and accessible formats; hosting events at venues that are accessible and have access to public transportation; and offering virtual

participation options. Human services agencies are well-positioned to practice an inclusion and consumer-focused approach to transportation service delivery, build trust and provide opportunities for riders to participate in decision-making.

Coordination and Collaboration

Coordinating projects that bring together different, and often separate, transportation and human services agencies can be a challenge, but when it is successful it can facilitate better, more efficient transportation services with limited resources. Coordination requires careful planning and time to build trust for sharing of resources and responsibilities among providers. Engaging with organizations that do not provide transportation can offer opportunities for improving services as well. Partners who may be interested in serving the transportation needs of older adults and people with disabilities might be found in the health field, home and community based services, community and economic development, or veterans services.

Building a coalition of varying agencies and support requires significant time and effort. Initiating a collaborative process must include time to identify who needs to be at the table and an opportunity for everyone at the table (including riders) to learn from each other. These are essential steps for developing a mutual understanding of the value of the work to be undertaken. Similarly, when outlining the project purpose, it is critical at the outset to determine a realistic timeline with benchmarks for deliverables and outcomes. For some partners, the timeline of activity may be moving too quickly while others may be trying to move with a more expedited timeline. Coming to agreement among project partners will require flexibility, the identification of specific milestones, a budget, and timeline. Over time – and it will take time – project partners can begin to come together and move forward in a cohesive manner.

Outlining the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved (a "governance structure" of sorts) also proves to be beneficial in moving collaborative processes forward. Different stakeholders may be assigned to take on particular roles and responsibilities in the project (e.g., responsibility for a specific objective) to make tasks more manageable and take advantage of the skill sets of group members. Having a "convener" rather than a leader of the group can alleviate a single agency dominating the project and ensure more positive relationships in everyday communication and decision-making. As coordination activities evolve, a shared sense of "ownership" among the agencies involved can lead to shared funding opportunities, expand professional networks, and foster lasting agency relationships.

Federal Funding

Organizations that provide human services transportation, like others in the transportation field, face the challenge of balancing growing demand for robust

accessible transportation services with limited, often strained, budgets. Access to federal funds can be a lifeline for these providers, particularly the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5310 Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program. The goal of this program is to improve mobility for seniors and individuals with disabilities. Funds may be used to purchase vehicles, support existing services, increase service hours, expand options, spread awareness about eligibility and/or how to access transportation services, and create mobility management or travel training, among other uses.

Section 5310 funds are apportioned to states based on the population of older adults and people with disabilities, and then divided into large urban, small urban, and rural areas. Funds are distributed through a state-managed process (this could be a competitive application process or formula-based distribution).

Section 5310 provides a great deal of flexibility to create investments specific to the needs of a select community's population. Because of the diversity in both the types of programs and types of activities that the Section 5310 program supports, it is designed to be state and locally driven. This means that each designated state or regional recipient has the ability to determine how to manage the funds among subrecipients in a way that best reflects local and state conditions.

Every state and designated recipient has its own process in place regarding fund access and distribution. Accordingly, it is essential to understand how each state manages the requirements, tasks, and deadlines of the application process. States and other designated recipients have some discretion to interpret requirements within the guidance that FTA sets forth.

Match requirements for Section 5310 vary by project. Capital projects (e.g., funds to purchase vehicles) require a 20 percent match, while projects to fund program operations require 50 percent match. It is important to also keep in mind that the match may be derived from other federal funds (e.g., funds from the Administration for Community Living can be used as match). The recently published [Federal Fund Braiding Guide](#) is a resource to help federal grant recipients more effectively manage federal funds and coordinate human services transportation. To find out more about the Section 5310 program, visit the [FTA website.](#)

Technology

Incorporating technology into human services transportation can be challenging, especially for agencies with a limited or no budget for technology and/or without sufficient technology knowledge. Technology has tremendous capabilities for helping human services agencies become more effective providers of transportation services, but there is often a disconnect between what consumers expect and an agency's ability to deliver.

The most common challenge that human services agencies face is financial. Limited funding often leaves little room for making an investment in technology, which may be viewed as unattainable. Increasing or maintaining the volume of rides provided typically has a higher priority than making an investment in technology, even though in the long run, a well-considered technology intervention could actually lead to an improvement in services. However, given the desire of human services transportation providers to create systems that are responsive to passenger needs and wants, acquiring technology to support that effort is a must.

Integrating digital connections into human services agencies would yield significant benefits in managing human services transportation services. Consumers in many places are asking for direct access to real-time information about when their ride will arrive. Digital connections can offer riders the ability to determine what mobility options are available, to plan their trips, choose the best trip option to meet their needs, find timely and essential information (such as late pickups or if there are outages in accessibility features), and pay for a ride. With a digital connection, the agency sees separate functions on the back end, but the user experiences a single integrated system, whether it is accessed through a mobile app, computer or phone. This approach facilitates coordination across providers in a manner that manual efforts to coordinate rides and disseminate information simply cannot do.

Conclusion

Addressing the critical issues identified in this paper could make a difference in meeting the mobility needs of older adults and people with disabilities. However, the challenges facing human services transportation providers are growing rather than diminishing. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to funding constraints and service cutbacks in large urban transit systems as well as smaller community transportation programs. Challenges that are unique to the human services transportation programs include their ability to provide rides that are safe and meet the needs of the at-risk populations they serve; concerns about the social isolation of riders whose personal interactions have been severely curtailed; and the challenge of taking on new roles, such as food and pharmacy delivery. The question is: how will the changes that resulted from the pandemic impact the future of human services transportation? On the other hand, current challenges also present an opportunity to consider better, more efficient and more responsive ways to provide transportation services that connect older adults, people with disabilities and people with low incomes to the communities in which they live.

Appendix
2020 NADTC Course Agenda and Presenter Details

Module 1. A Framework for Understanding Humans Services Transportation

Speaker: Melissa Gray, Program Manager, National Aging and Disability Transportation Center

Learning Objective: Participants will be introduced to the concept of human services transportation and how these services help older adults and people with disabilities meet their wants and needs when finding and using community transportation options.

Module 2: Creating Accessible Transportation Systems

Speaker: Rik Opstelten, Program Manager with the Federal Transit Administration's Office of Mobility Innovation

Learning Objective: Participants will learn about the different elements of a community transportation system that ensure accessibility and a "complete trip".

Module 3: Funding Community Transportation Systems

Speaker: Amy Fong, Program Analyst, Federal Transit Administration

Learning Objective: Participants will learn about the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5310 Program (Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities) and strategies to fulfill application requirements. Participants will also learn how to access Section 5310 funding in their

state or urbanized area and identify eligible sources of local match under Section 5310 to develop an overall funding strategy.

Module 4: Inclusive Practices

Speakers: Cassidy Giampetro and Sara Cisco, Hopelink; Zoe Miller, Greater Portland Council of Governments

Learning Objective: Participants will learn the importance of inclusion in creating and managing equitable transportation systems.

Module 5: Coordination and Collaboration

Speaker: Alex Gordon, Transportation Planner, North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization

Learning Objective: Participants will learn about collaboration and partnerships between human services agencies and transportation agencies, and how these relationships can maximize the delivery of transportation services for older adults and people with disabilities. Participants will learn how to identify potential partnerships and collaboration strategies to advance transportation coordination in their own community.

Module 6. Technology and Transportation

Speaker: Roger Teal, President, DemandTrans Solutions

Learning Objective: Participants will learn about the intersection of technology and human services transportation and how organizations are incorporating technology in the provision of rides for older adults and people with disabilities.