

Mobility for All Final Report



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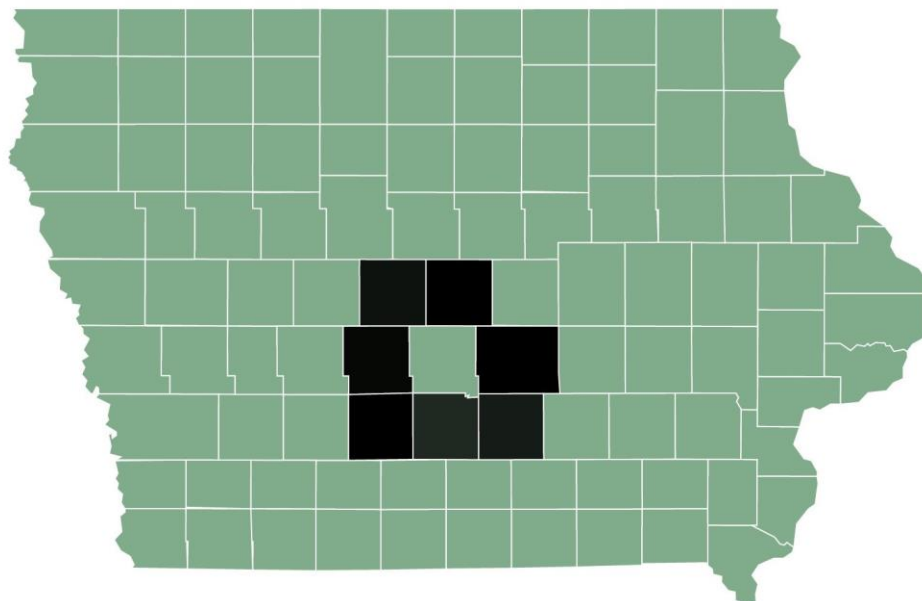
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About HIRTA

In 1981, the Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) was formed under a 28E agreement with the state of Iowa. Region 11, better known as HIRTA, was established to provide public transit services in the counties of Boone, Dallas, Jasper, Madison, Marion, Story and Warren. At the time, HIRTA was setup to contract all transit services with local non-profits and only had 2 employees. In 2011, things began to change and HIRTA started providing transit service in-house in Jasper County. Over the next several years, HIRTA began operating services directly in more counties within the region.

About Our Service

The Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency, better known as HIRTA, provides door-to-door transportation in Boone, Dallas, Jasper, Madison, Marion, Story, and Warren counties. While we do operate in Warren county, this is the first time we are operating in-town Norwalk. Door-to-door service means we pick people up directly at their door and take them right where they want to go when they want to be there. A rider can schedule a ride up to two weeks in advance, but must schedule 24 hours in advance in order to guarantee a ride. To schedule a trip, riders can call 1 (877) 686-0029, email erides@ridehirta.com or by using our smartphone application.



INTRODUCTION

Introduction

HIRTA is an on-demand public transportation agency providing service in seven counties surrounding Des Moines which include Boone, Dallas, Jasper, Madison, Marion, Story and Warren counties. Out-of-town trips into Des Moines and other areas often occur for medical appointments when there is availability.

HIRTA riders must have a reservation made 24-hours to two weeks in advance. Different options are available to pay for a ride and the fare must be paid at the time of pick up. Payment options include exact change or check, HIRTA Bucks (which works similarly as a one-time bus pass), paying via the smartphone app or website, and loading a balance onto the rider's account so that future fares are deducted automatically. The fare for a one-way trip is \$2.50 for an in-town ride or \$5.00 for a ride within the county. Out of town and same-day trip fares vary. As a promotional incentive, a free trip is automatically added to the rider's account upon creation.

This report presents an assessment of HIRTA's services over the grant period.

Background

Public transportation is as important as running water to a large number of people within our rural communities and we have to be diligent in finding new innovative ways to meet the current and changing needs so people can independently access all the services they need. A recent transportation survey in rural central Iowa communities reported the two main barriers which prohibit use of public transit are inconvenience and lack of knowledge.

The State of Iowa has 35 designated Public Transit Systems to serve every county within the State. This prevents duplication of service and ensures effective utilization of State and Federal funds. The bigger issue for HIRTA is providing the most efficient service to under-served populations, and from results of the survey mentioned above, we need a program which allows us to better educate the communities about who we are, what we do and who we serve. It is important we have a designated staff member who can devote their

time to being in our 7-county region which circles the largest urban community in Iowa, to engage, educate and market transit services, especially to those who either don't know about, don't understand or don't think they can use HIRTA.

Rural regions, like HIRTA serves, are not as densely populated, therefore we receive less funding than our urban counterpart, making it challenging to fund day to day operations. Funding for innovative programs or specific staff to focus on education, marketing and coordinating mobility is not typically available to HIRTA. This dynamic leaves HIRTA unable to efficiently meet the needs of those in our rural areas who are transit dependent or don't know how our services can assist them.

An example of the funding disparity, is the local urban transit system which sits in the middle of HIRTA's service region, receives approximately 79% of FTA operating dollars versus HIRTA, as the rural regional system, which receives 21 %. In addition, HIRTA covers 4,178 square miles inhabited, population 314,038 with a fleet of 88 revenue vehicles compared to the urban system serving 592 square miles with a population of 451,677 and fleet of 257 revenue vehicles. Even though HIRTA buses are in and out of the Urban region multiple times on a daily basis for shopping and medical service to those in our rural areas, we currently lack allies and funding for those services.

The above statistics confirm the hardships perpetuated by public transit in our rural communities, especially when it comes to outreach, marketing and staffing. We don't have the luxury of departments with multiple people, instead we have fewer people tasked with multiple department duties. The biggest need to make the most powerful impact is to have someone dedicated to be out in the communities we serve, working with the people and agencies, identifying unmet needs, looking at partnerships, funding opportunities, and training others not only about the benefits of using HIRTA, but educating them on rural transit. People need to understand the cost, the benefits and funding so they can be part of the solution to rural transit sustainability.

In summary, no matter how great a service is, how amazing a shopping center is, how delicious food is at a restaurant, or how many award winning physicians a healthcare clinic has, if someone can't there then the service doesn't exist for them. This is the reality which we want to change for those in our seven county region who feel left out and left behind.

Report Purposes

This Performance Evaluation report serves to fulfill HIRTA's commitment to evaluation and reporting as a FTA Mobility for All grant recipient. This report also serves as a self-assessment of what HIRTA has accomplished during this timeframe. FTA's Mobility for All Pilot Program seeks to improve mobility options through employing innovative coordination of transportation strategies and building partnerships to enhance mobility and access to vital community services for older adults, individuals with disabilities, and people of low income.

This report documents the performance measures and outcomes related to improving mobility options in our region, building partnerships to enhance services, and the overall breaking down of barriers.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Overview of the Project

The measurable benefits of this program reached beyond typical transit measures. This program also measured an enhanced customer experience, diversity in service, improved coordination, education and awareness, and financial sustainability.

We focused on a number of things such as:

- the assessment of individual needs for specific target markets based on research and community outreach
- translating public information and transit customer information to other languages relevant to the service area based on demographics
- distributing information and materials to communities, agencies and media outlets
- emphasizing an increase in the percent of new riders of older adults, individuals with disabilities, low-income, and limited English speakers
- creating new marketing materials available to potential riders and others markets, such as caregivers
- creating and implementing a travel training program for older adults, individuals with disabilities, and limited English speakers
- providing education presentations promoting HIRTA services

Having a dedicated Mobility Coordinator allowed HIRTA to:

- have someone work in our communities
- meet with stakeholders
- give educational presentations
- establish a travel training program
- promote the "Do You Have Transportation?" campaign to healthcare providers
- engage with riders and those who don't ride
- create educational videos
- promote new services such as HIRTA's volunteer transportation and van pool program
- reach target audiences previously not engaged with HIRTA
- post on social media consistently and host live videos

- improve employee moral through employee appreciation development
- develop and implement formal diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts

The Life of a Trip presentation allows us to show what a trip looks like from the first phone call with HIRTA to the destination and everything that happens in between. This provides support to educate on what happens when a person cancels, no-shows, and the true cost of transit. In turn, this will help many facility staff to understand and work with us to make transit more efficient.

We have developed a travel training program so vulnerable riders and their caregivers can have full confidence they and/or their loved one will be safe while riding. The better people understand how things work, the better they can advocate and support HIRTA - and become a more empowered rider!

IMPLEMENTATION

Coordination and Planning

Studies show there is a connection with public transit and health, and the more access people have to healthcare services, the more improvement there is in health outcomes. Along with reducing healthcare costs, this allows people to age in place and be active in their own community. Transportation as it relates to health impacts, is often overlooked. By working closely with our community partners, HIRTA understands we must implement and maintain modern technology so we are part of the solution in the health and wellbeing of the residents in our communities. When all impacts are considered, improving public transit can be one of the most cost effective ways to assist with improvement in overall health. Quality transit services can reduce emotional stress, as well as, get people to needed mental health services, and access to economic, social and recreational opportunities.

The planning phase for implementation for this grant began with hiring a full-time Mobility Coordinator to oversee the tasks as outlined by the grant. HIRTA's Executive Director, Business Manager, and Mobility Coordinator worked closely together to develop a plan of action to best achieve the tasks outlined by the grant.

Implementation

The implementation began with identifying major facilities in our region including medical facilities, human services agencies, etc. This provided a starting point for multiple projects as part of this grant. Once the facilities were identified, HIRTA was able to use these facilities as a target for "Do You Have Transportation?", the Life of a Trip, travel training, and coordinating with the facilities to increase the knowledge and benefits of HIRTA.

In order to familiarize themselves with HIRTA and the basics of public transportation, the Mobility Coordinator participated in extensive training sessions. The initial onboarding consisted of riding the HIRTA bus to observe how HIRTA works as well as meeting the drivers and some of the riders. As our counties differ in service provided, areas covered, and population served, these ride-alongs took place across our entire region.

Key Partnerships

For our partners in healthcare, success is shown by bridging the gaps through the development of stronger partnerships. We have worked with core groups of healthcare providers to develop a "Do You Have Transportation?" campaign allowing them to be part of the solution, and notifying us who needs transportation to their appointment, allowing us to provide rides to those who need transportation thus lowering the cancellation and no-show rates at the clinic. Promotional materials such as note pads, magnets, and infographics have been distributed so people understand the need for the campaign.

Other key partnerships include:

- Capture Management Solutions - We partner with Capture to provide event facilitation and day-of assistance for Beyond the Bus and other HIRTA projects.
- Easterseals - We worked with Easterseals to provide an unmet needs assessment to address transportation barriers. A coalition was created to assist with the project. The coalition still meets and works to break down barriers. Easterseals also provided travel training certification and helped the development of HIRTA's program.
- Iowa Department of Transportation - We identified needs in the city of Perry and were awarded a grant to address language barriers.
- Norwalk - HIRTA has recently begun to operate an in-town service for Norwalk. We have worked with the city of Norwalk, the Norwalk Public Library, the chamber, local businesses, and more to help launch and promote the service. HIRTA and the library has done a variety of events to educate and raise awareness.
- RSVP - During this grant period, HIRTA started an RSVP (Retired & Senior Volunteer Program) and have worked with the Volunteer Coordinator to ensure the program is set up for success to better expand our services.
- Transit systems - Work closely with other transit systems in Iowa to provide feedback on projects, how we can all work together, and more.

Marketing

Marketing plays a key role in almost everything HIRTA does. As outlined in the 2017 - 2027 Strategic Plan, it was a goal of HIRTA's to focus on increasing its marketing efforts to engage and attract a broader market. Through survey results done by Iowa State University CyBiz

Labs, on behalf of HIRTA, they found most customers have heard of HIRTA through family/friends or other agencies, and very few customers reported hearing about HIRTA through media advertisements (website, Facebook, newspapers, internet, TV). HIRTA needs to have a greater and consistent presence in media advertisements especially focusing on internet to attract a younger market.

HIRTA's marketing strategy includes an educational component to make the customers understand its purpose, intent, and financial resources which help in reducing the cost to passengers. HIRTA has the opportunity and content from this strategic plan to develop the right marketing message about its ridership and convenience through the use of latest technologies.

Some of the objectives in this plan are:

- Develop an internal marketing team
- Develop and implement marketing plan for individuals who do not use technology
- Dedicate a portion of our marketing strategies on obtaining new customers through greater online presence by investing in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for the HIRTA website and video messaging
- Better promote the website to encourage greater use by customers
- Use website to construct promotional messages and testimonials
- Enhance our social media presence
- Review Welcome Packet materials for improvements
- Present at and attend community meetings, social clubs, and other appropriate events
- Promote HIRTA's "Life of a Trip" presentation to facilities, such as nursing homes, meals sites, day-hab centers, etc.
- Develop and expand transit education campaigns.

Through this grant, HIRTA has been able to achieve the objectives in the plan demonstrating hiring a full-time Mobility Coordinator has been a success in all aspects.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES & OUTCOMES

Performance Measures

Each performance measure allowed us to educate and partner with the communities we serve so they understand the importance of HIRTA in keeping people mobile, and getting them where they need to go. Without education and marketing, we are limited in promoting other methods that could be used by medical facilities and other human services agencies in providing appointment information earlier for more efficient scheduling.

The performance measures for HIRTA's Mobility for All Pilot Program Grant are:

1. Create the "Do You Have Transportation?" program for local facilities
2. Attend & host 40 public events promoting HIRTA services
3. Work with 20 local facilities to implement "Do You Have Transportation?" program
4. Generate 18 social media educational posts on developing "Life of a Trip" campaign to show what happens when a trip is canceled
5. Receive 60 responses on our annual customer satisfaction survey
6. Rider engagement through 7 ride-alongs
7. Hold 5 social media events
8. Reach 50 attendees for the Beyond the Bus event
9. Increase website views by 1000 total views
10. Coordinate with 20 local facilities to increase knowledge and benefits of HIRTA
11. Implement and have 9 travel training sessions
12. Consistent posting & monitoring social media channels and reach 180 total posts

Outcomes

The overall outcome of this project was to reach 2% of new older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals living below the poverty level who will be able to access the services they need. We were able to exceed this goal by a wide margin. Ridership was down during this period because of COVID-19, but from March 1, 2020 to February 28, 2021, HIRTA had 1,937 unique riders. From March 1, 2021 to February 28, 2022, there were 838 new riders signed up for HIRTA who met the above criteria. This is a 43% increase!

PERFORMANCE MEASURE	TARGET		ACTUAL TO DATE	PERCENT OF TARGET TO DATE
Create “Do You Have Transportation?” program for local facilities.	1	PROGRAM	1	100.00%
Attend & host public events promoting HIRTA services	40	EVENTS	50	125.00%
Work with local facilities to implement “Do You Have Transportation?” program	20	FACILITIES	2	10.00%
Generate social media educational posts on developing “Life of a Trip” campaign to show what happens when a trip is canceled.	18	POSTS	10	55.56%
Annual customer satisfaction surveys responses	60	RESPONSES	111	185.00%
Ride engagement through ride alongs	7	ENGAGEMENTS	7	100.00%
Hold social media events	5	EVENTS	7	140.00%
Beyond the Bus event attendees	50	ATTENDEES	61	122.00%
Increase website views	1000	TOTAL VIEWS	1,369	136.90%
Coordinate with local facilities to increase knowledge and benefits of HIRTA	20	FACILITIES	20	100.00%
Implement travel training	9	TRAVEL TRAININGS	3	33.33%
Consistent posting & monitoring social media channels	180	TOTAL POSTS	216	120.00%

Table 1: Target and actual performance measures

MOVING FORWARD

Sustainability

HIRTA will continue to employ a full-time Mobility Coordinator to oversee future marketing and outreach projects. HIRTA aggressively pursues grants and sources of funding as part of our dedication to serve people. HIRTA's vision statement is, "To become the transit provider of choice making a positive difference by enhancing community livability through safe, innovative, sustainable regional transportation options and promoting independent lifestyles for central Iowa residents." Grants help pay the salaries for select HIRTA office staff so we can create innovative solutions.

Funding infographics have been created for stakeholder education like legislative representatives, counties, cities, community leaders, etc. detailing what we can provide now with the funding we receive compared to what we could provide with additional funding.

Next Steps

The two main focuses that came from the coalition were funding and marketing. The next step is to continue to fight for funding by preparing infographics, handouts, and presentations. These can be used as an educational tool for educating stakeholders and securing more funds to be able to expand service. HIRTA does a lot of great things in the community, but we need to convey the message that we can do even more with sustainable funding. We will also continue to build on our marketing plan. Establishing a recognizable brand is central not only to increase ridership, but so that the public and funders can quickly identify who we are and what we do.

One of the next steps to expand service is changing software so that HIRTA can provide more spontaneous travel. Switching to this software is an exciting step towards being more inclusive by allowing us to provide spur of the moment trips more often. Riders have expressed interest in taking trips without having a 24-hour notice. This will provide the opportunity for riders to access grocery stores, medical appointments, and other necessities quicker than before.

HIRTA has been awarded a new round of funding by the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) to support the development of a new equitable program to meet the needs of underserved populations. HIRTA was one of 9 grantees to receive the funding. Our goal is to make sure all underrepresented populations be more fully engaged and has a seat at the table to build on current planning efforts. A committee called IDEAS (Inclusion Diversity Equity Assessment and Solutions) was created to expand HIRTA's ongoing unmet needs assessment specifically focused on improving transportation for people with disabilities, older adults, and marginalized populations.

HIRTA's Inclusion Statement is, "HIRTA is committed to creating a safe and inclusive experience for all passengers. We will promote an environment reflective of our communities. Regardless of ability, background or personal circumstances, we will ensure all riders feel welcome and included with HIRTA. Come be yourself, ride together, and ride HIRTA." The work for this grant has begun and is a great way to work towards our overall goal of creating a safe and inclusive environment for all.

As referred to earlier in this report, a coalition was created to assist with the unmet needs assessment. That coalition has been transformed and is now called the HIRTA Connections Coalition. The group meets bi-monthly and works together to make public transit more accessible and better for everyone involved.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Impacts on HIRTA's Services

Public Transit systems, like HIRTA, were not immune to the impact of COVID-19. The impact on HIRTA included a 90% reduction in ridership due to shutdowns throughout our region. Compound that with the added (and costly) challenge of keeping transit employees and riders safe from COVID-19. This not only meant the purchase of personal protective equipment, it also included social distancing measures, which equates to fewer riders on the bus. Fewer rides mean less efficiency, which ultimately equates to a higher cost per trip.

HIRTA was already struggling in pre-pandemic times due to limited Federal and local funding, dwindling contract revenue and changes in how Medicaid funded transportation for some programs.

Public Transit plays a vital role in communities. HIRTA operates in 7 counties in central Iowa, connecting people to employment, healthcare, grocery stores, education and other essential services. People who need life sustaining care like cancer treatments or dialysis, or those who need to get to essential jobs, such as healthcare and nursing homes, do not have the option to shutdown, quarantine and remain safely in their homes. We had to be available to continue providing service and doing it safely with very limited information or guidance during the onset of the pandemic. We were forced to make decisions quickly, all the time remembering the safety of our drivers and riders. HIRTA decided early to suspend fare collection to reduce contact between riders and drivers and we installed plastic shields around the driver seat for the same reason. We also established social distancing measures, taping off seating on the buses, requesting masks while riding and even putting in extra safety measures in place to help stop the spread of the virus when a mobility device needs to be secured and driver and passenger are not able to social distance.

Impacts on the Grant

The most notable impact in completing the grant was healthcare facilities were overwhelmed and stretched thin because of COVID-19. When trying to implement the "Do You Have Transportation?" program, multiple facilities, understandably responded stating it was simply

not a good time to have the conversation of starting something new. Since then, some facilities have reached back out to reopen to conversation now COVID-19 has slowed down.

Long-term care facilities were either locked down entirely or very restrictive. In order to best coordinate with facilities to increase the knowledge and benefits of HIRTA, we had to be innovative. Some of the facilities offered to have a virtual Zoom presentation to the residents, but some residents were hard to engage virtually. However, we were able to meet the goal thanks to the facilities being able to adapt to the environment.

Travel training was another goal significantly impacted by COVID-19. After completing the 60 hours required to become travel training certified by Easterseals, HIRTA launched a travel training program in November of 2021. At that point, people were still cautious with COVID-19 and still wary about riding public transportation. We were able to provide some travel trainings, but did not reach the goal. We plan on making a strong push in advertising the program to draw in riders soon.

LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons Learned Through Projects

Throughout the creation of the “Do You Have Transportation?” program, facilities identified the lack of a transportation option is a barrier and often times leads to missed appointments. A HIRTA rider survey backed this up as 34% of responses indicated they have had to cancel an appointment due to lack of transportation. This is concerning for HIRTA, other public transit systems, and the healthcare system as a whole and will be a major focus moving forward.

Transportation plays a major role in everyday life for many people. Having reliable access to healthcare is no exception. It may be getting to doctor’s appointments, mental health visits, pharmacies, vaccinations and so much more. This event featured experts on what can be done to increase access to healthcare for all. Beyond the Bus: Healthcare on the Move focused on the benefits of having access to healthcare, the connection between transportation and health equity, and the role public transit and healthcare agencies play in making access to healthcare possible for all. This event provided great lessons to everyone who attended. All sessions are available to watch on our [website](#) and [YouTube page](#).

Rider Feedback

HIRTA has facilitated multiple focus groups and collected surveys. The main issue of one group was the language barrier when scheduling. The participants were overall pleased with HIRTA, but expressed concern about the price of the fare for some riders and the language barrier. HIRTA has made great strides in being inclusive to non-English speakers including translating vital documents to Spanish, making the website available in over 100 languages, and targeting diverse population in marketing, awarded two grants to hire a bilingual outreach coordinator and is now changing trip scheduling software to provide additional languages beyond English. With so many people relying on HIRTA to perform an essential service, it’s prudent to consider this feedback going forward to provide the best service to these communities and we will continue to work on ways we can engage people with limited English proficiency.

For the surveys, the biggest desire for our riders was expanding the operating days and times. With the exception of one city, HIRTA provides service Monday through Friday from 7am - 5pm. The people we can help during this time frame are appreciative, but life doesn't operate just during those hours. We will explore options on what we can do to help, unfortunately there are no easy solutions without securing funds to expand operations.

One of the best ways to receive feedback firsthand is to ride the bus in different communities and simply talk to the riders. We also have customer comment cards on the buses that people can mail back or give to the driver. During these ride alongs, we talk with the riders to see how HIRTA is doing, if they have any concerns or suggestions to share. We also might take some pictures or give away some promotional materials. The lessons we learn by simply listening to our community is invaluable and is the best way to learn what we can do better.