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NCST

National Center on
Senior Transportation

Taxis for Senior Transportation



Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.

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Acknowledgements

The National Center on Senior Transportation wishes to express special thanks to Hal Morgan, Executive Vice President of the Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit Association, for his many contributions to this information brief, and to Warren Secrest, Program Manager with Knoxville-Knox County (TN) Community Action Committee for his review and assistance.



Taxis for Senior Transportation

As increasing numbers of older adults stop or limit their driving and consider other options for mobility, there is likely to be increased attention focused on the use of taxicabs.

Taxis certainly offer the opportunity for independence and personalized service; however, there are at least two barriers to widespread use of taxis for transportation: the limited availability of taxis, and the cost of rides.

This paper considers these two issues and others, as well as the overall importance of including taxis in the family of senior transportation services.

Barriers to Increased Use of Taxicabs

Although visions of downtown New York City generally glow with hundreds of Yellow Cabs, the abundance of these vehicles is significantly reduced in other cities, some suburbs, small towns and, of course, in rural areas.

While some older adults do rely on the convenience of taxicabs for their transportation needs, there are a number of barriers that have an impact on widespread use, including: availability, drivers' attitudes, seniors' concerns, accessibility and affordability.

Availability

There may not be enough taxicabs to meet the needs of seniors in a community. This might be especially true in rural areas, particularly if an accessible taxicab is needed.

Taxi Drivers' Attitudes

Taxi service for older adults can be limited because of the experiences or preconceived ideas of the drivers. Drivers may not feel comfortable transporting older persons with physical limitations that require extra time and effort to assist. Some drivers may have reasonable concerns that they do not know the correct way to assist a person with a physical disability into and out of the vehicle.

A senior's access can be limited by the impression of some drivers that older adults do not tip, only require very local trips that are not money-makers and may require assistance that keeps drivers from other fares.

Seniors' Concerns

Whether based on preconceived ideas or their own experiences, many older adults are reluctant to use taxicabs. Older women especially may fear becoming a target and so are unwilling to disclose their address. Others are simply not comfortable

riding with a stranger. Some who have used taxis and have had negative experiences (such as being over-charged or driven miles out of the way) may be reluctant to try again.

Seniors living in high-rise buildings may return to their apartment to report a “no show” to the taxi dispatcher and miss their ride in the process. Further, confusion over the pick-up location and drivers who pass through too quickly are examples of real situations that can leave seniors stranded or exposed to the elements as they await transport.

Accessibility

Accessible taxicabs offer an important transportation option to seniors and persons with disabilities who are mobility challenged. Nevertheless, even vehicles that are considered accessible may present challenges in entering and exiting for some riders.

There is a limited market for accessible taxis, due at least in part to competition from publicly funded complementary paratransit services provided by transit authorities, as required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Anyone who is ADA eligible is unlikely to pay a \$26 taxicab fare when he/she can use ADA complementary paratransit and take the same trip for \$2.60.

The practical problems with wheelchair accessible paratransit taxis are primarily the costs: greater capital expense, increased fuel

and maintenance costs, and higher insurance premiums. In addition, accessible taxicabs are required to charge the same rate as regular sedan taxi fare.

In 2010, the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Foundation commissioned a report, prepared by the University of Missouri-St. Louis Center for Transportation Studies, to address in detail the cost issues and operational difficulties noted above. The report, *Assessing the Full Cost of Implementing An Accessible Taxicab Program*, is available at: <http://www.tlpa.org/costcalculator/report.pdf>

Nevertheless, there are far more accessible taxicabs in service than there were just a couple of years ago due to the impact of the FTA New Freedom program. The goals of New Freedom are to provide new public transportation services to overcome existing barriers facing Americans with disabilities of all ages, including older adults, seeking integration into the workforce and full participation into society while expanding the transportation mobility options available to persons with disabilities beyond the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. One of the most popular uses of New Freedom funds is to purchase wheelchair accessible taxicabs.

Affordability

Many seniors see the use of a taxicab as a luxury and are reluctant to treat themselves to such an extravagance. However, an examination of the real costs of owning, operating, driving and parking an automobile as compared to the cost of taxi fares may well lead to a balance that favors the taxis.

Also, for those seniors for whom paying for a taxi is really not a viable option, there is the possibility of a subsidy or sponsorship to offset the cost, such as taxi voucher programs sponsored by the local Area Agency on Aging, Medicaid office or local government in some areas.

Steps to Increase Seniors' Use of Taxis

Changing Drivers' Attitudes

One way to help change taxi drivers' potential negative assumptions about older passengers is to provide training to the drivers to address their concerns about aging and disability, help them become more sensitive to older adults, and equip them to appropriately assist older adults and persons with disabilities.

The Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association adopted standards for taxicab drivers in 2006. The standards include an extensive provision on driver training including information on government rules and regulations, map-reading, defensive

driving, and *customer service and relations, including guidelines for assisting disabled, frail and elderly passengers.*¹

Offering such training to taxi drivers is addressed below in the discussion of the Knoxville-Knox County senior transportation demonstration project, funded by the National Center on Senior Transportation (NCST). It was also the core of one of the six University Student Scholar Program projects funded by the NCST in 2009.

Training to Change Attitudes

The Student Scholar project evaluated the effectiveness of providing information about the aging process to taxi drivers. The information was presented to a group of taxi drivers in Louisville, Kentucky in order to change their attitudes toward aging. The pre-test and post-test results indicated substantial learning and the desired attitudinal effect. The overall experience was even more interesting.

Many of the drivers apparently resented time spent in training and felt that they should be compensated for the time lost "on the street." Some did not complete answers to the test questions or offered random responses. The Student Scholar concluded that such training can result in improvements in sensitivity to older adults—as evidenced by the changes between the pre-tests and post-tests—but that the training methods and

schedule have to be given serious consideration for optimal effectiveness.²

The challenge of recruiting taxi drivers for training and keeping them off the job for hours at a time is evidently not a new one. Easter Seals Project ACTION has created a *Taxicab Operator's Pocket Guide*, which provides information to demonstrate that “Serving Customers with Disabilities is Smart Business!” The guide provides a summary of practical tips for serving persons with visual, auditory and mobility impairments. It also offers the drivers encouragement to serve and assist customers with

special needs as a sound business decision: tapping into the population with disabilities numbering 54 million makes sense as a way to increase the customer base. Originally developed in 2006, the guide was revised in 2010 and is part of a new publication,

Toolkit for Taxi Operators, which adds training materials, quizzes and information to support a presentation on this topic.³

Easter Seals Project ACTION

the acronym stands for Accessible Community Transportation In Our Nation – promotes cooperation between the transit industry and the disability community to increase mobility for people with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act and beyond.

Promoting “Senior Friendly” Taxi Service

Aging service providers and senior advocates are beginning to recognize that the taxicab industry needs to be prepared for a growing aging population and increased demand for personalized service. One of the ways to prepare the taxi industry for changing customer needs is to provide “driver sensitivity training.”

Senior-Friendly Taxicab Driver Certification Program

The Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee Office on Aging worked with area taxi drivers to encourage them to voluntarily upgrade their driving skills and learn how to better serve seniors. According to promotional materials, the drivers took part in a “comprehensive screening and training program designed to ensure potential customers that they are in the hands of professional drivers who have the rider’s safety first and foremost in their minds.”

As a former taxicab driver and long-time advocate for seniors and people with disabilities, Warren Secrest, Program Manager, brought valuable industry insight into the development of the training curriculum and participant requirements. Participating taxi drivers were required to undergo background checks, alcohol and drug screening, obtain CPR and First Aid certification, and participate in



passenger assistance training. The total time commitment was significant.

The program also offered incentives for taxi drivers to get involved: program sponsorship of the screening and training fees and, more significantly, promotion through various outreach methods to increase the certified driver's customer base.

Others considering or currently working on a similar effort can benefit from what Knoxville-Knox County CAC learned along the way:

- **Incentives are the key.** In addition to covering the costs of required screening and background checks, the program paid driver licensing renewal fees. Recognizing that for drivers, time is money, they also expanded the locations and times of the required CPR and First Aid Training to allow participants more flexibility to attend training around their driving schedules.
- **A business approach is needed.** Taxi drivers with only one or a few vehicles in their fleet would benefit from developing a service niche (e.g. serving a specific geographic area) in order to be successful. Presenting an accessible or "senior friendly" taxi as a business opportunity might help more taxi companies and individual drivers to see the potential benefits and encourage their involvement.

- **Partnerships are essential** to the success of a senior-friendly project and should include local regulatory authorities, national associations (such as the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association), the aging and disability communities and citizen advocacy groups.⁴

The benefits to a community of Senior-Friendly Taxi Driver Certification:

1. promotes review and modification of existing ordinances governing the industry with regard to the transport of seniors and people with disabilities
2. encourages companies and owner-operators to provide improved customer service to the senior population (and by extension, all customers)
3. provides larger taxi companies with added value in marketing their services
4. provides individual taxi drivers with a market incentive to improve their credentials and customer skills
5. promotes a general awareness of taxicab service as a viable option for seniors in maintaining their independence
6. reduces negative stigma that is sometimes associated with the industry.⁵

“Senior Friendly” Drivers— A National Resource

The Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association has been developing a national taxicab driver training program and curriculum for the last three years. It is expected that all nine courses will be completed by the end of April 2011, and ready for the association to offer to taxicab drivers in May 2011. The nine training courses address, among other topics, Assessment of Ability to Communicate in English, Professional Service Delivery, Passenger Relations and Effective Communication, Driver Safety & Health, and Sensitivity Training to Meet the Needs of Passengers with Disabilities and the Elderly. Each course includes elements of video, digital pictures and graphics, and a list of questions to ensure a maximum of 25 interactive test questions for each course.

Improving Accessibility

Taxicabs are not always accessible for people with disabilities, especially people using wheelchairs. However, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, taxi drivers cannot deny service to an individual that they can actually accommodate—one with a collapsible, portable wheelchair, for example. Also, they cannot increase the charge to assist the passenger or to stow equipment beyond the charges applied to other customers.⁶

In some cities, ADA Paratransit offers seniors the alternative of using a subsidized taxi rather than a paratransit vehicle. This offers a real choice to many older persons who qualify for ADA paratransit but who do not necessarily need a fully equipped accessible vehicle. It also responds to the need for same-day service that may not otherwise be possible to arrange. Depending on the distance traveled, the cost of the ride may be shared between the transit provider and the passenger.

Accessible taxicabs are usually vans with lifts. Accessible taxis are not widely available, even in some major urban areas. For instance, Washington, DC just recently obtained New Freedom funding to purchase accessible taxicab vehicles. The city operates them in partnership with a local taxicab company.

Several factors hamper efforts to improve accessible taxi services. Accessible taxis are more expensive to purchase and operate when compared to sedans, and it may take additional time to serve a customer using a wheelchair. Higher vehicle costs and lower productivity may serve as a disincentive to drivers whose incomes are based on passenger fares.⁷

Some cities have passed ordinances requiring that taxicab fleets add accessible vehicles in one of three ways: by requiring a set number of accessible taxicabs, a percentage of the taxi fleet or through medallions.

- *By number:* **Chicago** requires one accessible vehicle for every fleet that has 15 taxicabs or more plus an additional accessible taxi for every additional 100. **Las Vegas** requires two accessible vehicles for each of its 14 fleets.
- *By percentage:* **Arlington and Fairfax Counties** in Virginia both require accessibility in two percent of a company's fleet. **Los Angeles**, California, requires the same – two percent of a company's fleet.
- *By medallions:* A few jurisdictions have increased the total number of medallions available. (A medallion is the metallic symbol attached to the hood of a taxicab. The medallion authorizes the operation of a taxicab and is also a license to own and operate a small business.) Most cities price the medallions for accessible vehicles below the cost for sedans as an incentive.
 - **San Francisco** increased the number of medallions available from 981 to 1,281. Fifty of the 300 new medallions are set aside for accessible taxi vehicles. In total, 75 of the 1,281 medallions in San Francisco are set aside for accessible taxicabs.

- For years, the number of taxicabs in **Boston** was set at 1,525 medallions. Then, a few years ago, the city said it would allow 40 additional medallions as long as the vehicles were accessible. When the city auctioned off 75 new medallions, two were for accessible vehicles and the price for the two accessible medallions was 1/3 less than the other 73 sedan medallions.

Most cities continue to have limited availability of accessible taxis. One might argue, however, that a growing number of individuals will need transport by accessible taxi and that increasing the accessible fleet and the services offered can be profitable and a good business decision.

Increasing Affordability – Taxi Voucher Programs

As noted earlier, the actual cost of a taxi ride is often a barrier to its use. One practical solution is the use of vouchers.

Many taxi companies participate in and benefit from transportation voucher programs. Vouchers are paper-based or electronic-based tickets, coupons, “checks,” or other media that eligible riders give to participating transportation providers in exchange for rides. The voucher is a guarantee that a rider's trip has been pre-paid or that the provider or driver will be paid later for giving a ride now.

Taxi voucher programs are typically public–private partnerships between a private taxi service and the local transit agency or government. Most taxi voucher programs use local and federal dollars for support. Local sources include private donations, advocacy groups, Chambers of Commerce, United Way, faith-based organizations, Community Action Programs and revenue from sales tax. Federal sources of support include: the U. S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration’s 5310, 5311, New Freedom (Section 5317) and Job Access and Reverse Commute (Section 5316) programs. Area Agencies on Aging can use Title III funds to provide vouchers.

In addition to the fixed-value voucher model, there are two other types of voucher programs: **mileage-based voucher systems** that reimburse for actual mileage and **i-vouchers**, which were developed as part of an online computerized system for a pilot project as part of a larger statewide program with multiple funding sources. With the system in this pilot, the customer applied for trips from the sponsoring agency and received a detailed voucher with destination, mileage, value and documentation. Additional information about the program is available via the web site⁸ and report⁹ cited in the endnotes.

Voucher programs offer transportation to older adults, people with disabilities and people who

have physical or financial situations that challenge their mobility. The vouchers enable them to get to work, doctors, shopping and other essential destinations. Voucher programs also give customers a choice of services. Many voucher programs allow customers to choose among available transportation options, often including volunteers, taxis, fixed route or paratransit. Voucher programs are more convenient for customers; they can cover a broader geographic area and be available at times when other services, like fixed route or volunteers, are not available.

Taxis are perfect partners for voucher programs. Their hours of operation and geographic service areas are often more flexible than transit programs. Taxi services are designed to provide on-demand services so clients using vouchers do not have to schedule ahead. Taxis can also be used for unexpected events. Using taxis to fill in service gaps (due to time, purpose, or destination) can save transit providers infrastructure investment and the cost of adding new or extended services while improving transportation for underserved clients.

Accessibility Through Vouchers

Communities can use vouchers to make taxis more accessible for older adults.

As part of a Livable Communities initiative supported by the local Area Agency on Aging, Alliance for Aging, Coral Gables, Florida replicated a

successful taxi-voucher program operating in Boston, Massachusetts. Area seniors were able to purchase \$20 worth of vouchers for \$10 and use them for the transportation needs important to them. The demonstration program helped seniors explore mobility options as alternatives to driving their automobiles.

The City of Olathe, Kansas sells booklets of vouchers at a 79 percent discount to eligible older adults and people with disabilities who can use the vouchers to pay for taxi services. The city has a negotiated rate with the taxis and reimburses them for the vouchers used. The program has some restrictions, including hours of operation and the amount used per month. This program has been in operation since 1977 and now also serves low income workers. Funding is provided by the local government and Job Access and Reverse Commute grants from the US Federal Transit Administration, Department of Transportation. Using taxi vouchers allows citizens of Olathe, Kansas to access rides when they need them.¹⁰

Taxi companies often benefit from voucher programs as well. They gain more riders and often have contracts with voucher-administering agencies that guarantee them a number of trips per month.

Taxi vouchers are available in many communities in the United States, but this mobility option is not always tied to a formal transportation program. In Montgomery County,

Maryland, a taxi company offered free rides to area seniors (with criteria and restrictions) to help older residents handle the recession of 2009. It proved to be very popular and was extended into the first half of 2010. Other communities have tried the approach of "ride-sponsorship." Red Top Cab in Arlington, Virginia, offers books of coupons for rides that can be purchased by families or friends as gifts for older riders. The company's website promotes this option with its slogan, "Give the Gift of Mobility."

Taxis in Rural Areas — Thinking Outside the Box

An interesting model for using taxis in rural areas comes from the United Kingdom (UK). In a small village on a main road ten miles from the nearest market town, residents were limited to service provided by a bus only on weekdays. When using the bus, riders had to limit their shopping to forty minutes or stretch it to four hours because of rigid scheduling. Sometimes there was only one passenger—sometimes there were none. The only taxis in the village were generally in use transporting school children.

The proposed solution is a TaxiPlus program, presented as a scenario. TaxiPlus is a large-scale, taxi-based operation, involving a fleet of small vehicles, which operates a bookable,

shared, demand-responsive public transport service. This service runs along the main road every hour, but only if a resident of one of the towns along the way has booked it. It is timed to connect with trains at the railway station. Residents can phone in a reservation just an hour before they want to travel. Most of the vehicles run a fixed route but short diversions are possible to help those unable to walk far. The service can pick up individuals from other towns as well as visitors who call in from the bus stop.

Service has expanded and includes a larger and more varied fleet so that the most appropriate vehicle can be used for each trip, depending upon the numbers who have booked. The service operates from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. every day, with hours extended to midnight on Friday and Saturday nights. Increased efficiency, ridership and satisfaction are predicted. At last word, a large scale demonstration in the UK was proposed, but the core of the idea could be adapted by a rural community in the US.¹¹

How Taxis Might be Used

Finally, it will be up to the taxi companies themselves to accommodate, market to and encourage use by seniors. Some, evidently convinced of the business model, are already doing so. In an effort to counter at least two of the barriers to taxi use, the Anaheim, California, Yellow Cab website shouts, “Don’t Ride With Strangers! Pride & Professionalism Travel Together.” It also reminds visitors that this is “Where 5 People Ride for the Price of One.”

Resources

- **Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association.** *Taxicab Driver Standards Recommended for Metropolitan Areas of Greater Than One Million Population by the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association.* Adopted February 10, 2006. (http://www.tlpa.org/news/taxidriverstandards_834bc.pdf)
- **National Center on Senior Transportation.** *Final Report: Aging and Disability Awareness Training for Drivers of a Metropolitan Taxi Company for the National Center on Senior Transportation Project: University Student Scholars Program,* Lori Reynolds (author). (Available upon request from the NCST, www.seniortransportation.net)
- **Easter Seals Project ACTION.** *Taxi Toolkit: The ADA and Good Business Practices for the Taxi Industry.* January 2010. Includes the “Taxicab Operator’s Pocket Guide.” (Visit the Store at <http://projectaction.easterseals.com/>)
- **Easter Seals Project ACTION.** *Moving Forward Together: A Workbook for Initiating and Increasing Taxi Services in Your Community.* October 2005. (Visit the Store at <http://projectaction.easterseals.com/>)
- **University of Missouri-St. Louis Center for Transportation Studies.** *Assessing the Full Cost of Implementing An Accessible Taxicab Program.* Commissioned by the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Foundation. 2010. (Available at: <http://www.tlpa.org/costcalculator/report.pdf>)

Endnotes

- 1 Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association. "Taxicab Driver Standards Recommended for Metropolitan Areas of Greater Than One Million Population by the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association." Adopted February 10, 2006. (http://www.tlpa.org/news/taxidriverstandards_834bc.pdf)
- 2 Reynolds, Lori. "Final Report: Aging and Disability Awareness Training for Drivers of a Metropolitan Taxi Company for the National Center on Senior Transportation Project: University Student Scholars Program." (Available upon request from the NCST, seniortransportation.net)
- 3 Easter Seals Project ACTION. "Taxicab Operator's Pocket Guide" January 2010, included in *Taxi Toolkit: The ADA and Good Business Practices for the Taxi Industry*. (Visit the Store at <http://projectaction.easterseals.com/>)
- 4 Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee. Grantee Final Report, Narrative questions. August 28, 2009. (Project summary posted at <http://www.seniortransportation.net>)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Americans with Disabilities Act. Section 37.29 Private entities providing taxi service. 1990. (<http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>)
- 7 Easter Seals Project ACTION. *Moving Forward Together: A Workbook for Initiating and Increasing Taxi Services in Your Community*. October 2005. (Visit the Store at <http://projectaction.easterseals.com/>)
- 8 Community Transportation Association of America. Types of Voucher Programs. (<http://sites.google.com/site/voucherprogram/home/types-of-voucher-programs>)
- 9 Those interested in reviewing the software can access a report on the program at: http://ndcpd.misu.nodak.edu/grit/Ibuss_Report.htm
- 10 Community Transportation Association of America. Types of Voucher Programs. http://web1.ctaa.org/webmodules/webarticles/articlefiles/Voucher_Resources_Aug_08.pdf
- 11 Commission for Integrated Transport. New Approach to Rural Public Transport, Chapter 4, 27.11.08.



**Questions about taxis and older adults?
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Based in Washington, DC, the National Center on Senior Transportation is administered by Easter Seals, Inc. in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, and with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging. The contents of this publication are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Federal Transit Administration.



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