



Expanding Transportation Programs to Evening/Weekend Hours

Reliable, accessible transportation can help older adults and people with disabilities meet a wide variety of needs—including the need to socialize with others. Because many social and recreational activities happen on evenings and weekends, transportation programs that offer extended hours can help the riders participating in these programs live happier, healthier lives.

According to the [National Institute on Aging](#), research has linked social isolation and loneliness to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental health conditions: high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer’s disease and even death. People who find themselves alone due to loss of mobility and lack of transportation are at particular risk. The importance of policies that support accessible public transportation so that people with disabilities can fully participate in recreational and other leisure activities, thus increasing their social inclusion, was highlighted in a [recent study](#) from the University of British Columbia.

The **Senior Transportation Connection (STC)** in North Olmsted, a suburb of Cleveland, OH, used its 2017 NADTC grant to expand its operating hours to evenings and weekends, enabling riders to attend recreational and social activities. STC already had a thriving program carrying older adults and people with disabilities to medical and other appointments during the week. To expand service well, STC reached out to its riders to learn more about their needs. STC also worked with local partners to develop and promote the new hours, market and launch the service. By the end of the 12-month grant period, STC was consistently providing a full schedule of transportation to older adults and people with disabilities on Saturdays. This successful program also expanded to a larger service area ahead of schedule.

Building on a Solid Base of Weekday Rides

When their project began in 2017, North Olmsted used 2014 U.S. Census figures to show that more than 10,000 residents (nearly 8,500 people aged 60 and older and more than 1,700 working-age residents living with a disability) needed accessible transportation to participate fully in community life. STC provides transportation to older adults and people with disabilities through contracts with municipalities, social service agencies and Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) Paratransit. STC also provides transportation to clients of Cuyahoga County Division of Senior & Adult Services.

STC had a solid weekday ridership base before expanding to nights and weekends. During the grant period, STC managed 50 accessible vehicles and provided 130,000 annual trips. The city assumed most of the cost of scheduled weekday trips to medical care, personal appointments and senior center functions, with passengers covering a co-pay, usually \$3 to \$5 per trip. However, there was little other transportation in the area, especially for non-medical purposes and after business hours. Few affordable evening and weekend options existed that guaranteed accessibility, especially for people using wheelchairs or other mobility devices.

Engaging Riders and Partners

Immediately prior to applying for the NADTC grant, STC surveyed its riders to gauge the need for access to after-hours social and recreation opportunities, including worship and other local activities. Survey respondents indicated they wanted evening and weekend services that they could schedule and pay for themselves. Respondents

This best practice is based on the experiences of grant programs funded by the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) from 2017 to 2019 to support innovative programs to increase the accessibility of community transportation services for people with disabilities and older adults.



Credit: The Rapid, Grand Rapids, MI

also expressed high satisfaction with STC’s scheduled daytime service, indicating trust in STC.

STC engaged three existing partners to help develop its expanded after hours and weekend program, called STC Plus. Two partners—Services for Independent Living (SIL) and the City of North Olmsted Senior Center (NOSC)—conducted outreach to promote the expansion. A third partner, Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), ensured that STC Plus aligned with the local coordinated transit—human services plan. NOACA’s Mobility Coalition convenes diverse stakeholders, including consumers, to address access, public awareness and transit needs of people with disabilities to develop the plan.

STC Plus Pricing

To use the expanded STC Plus service, passengers enroll with STC, then schedule and pay for trips. STC provides accessible vehicles, a trained driver, a call center infrastructure and staff to book trips and develop routes. Passengers must book their rides 24 hours in advance. This requirement keeps program costs down. If there are no bookings, then no driver needs to be on call.

Data collected through the survey and the low poverty rate in North Olmsted provided support for creating a self-pay program. The cost for rides provided by STC Plus was set at the market rate, priced at \$5 to board (each way) plus \$2.25 per mile.

The cost of after-hours STC Plus rides is comparable to a cab ride but has several advantages. These value-added rides come with an accessible vehicle, no-surprises pricing, a door-to-door escort and reliability. STC Plus also offers more rider choice in destinations, because the rider is paying for his or her own trip rather than supplementing a limited, city-sponsored service. These reliable rides often were used by dialysis patients with weekend appointments; these riders or their caregivers paid the cost of the ride.

Successful Outreach

The STC Plus project was STC’s first mass marketing campaign. STC quickly discovered that marketing requires plenty of education and community outreach (see best practice on outreach), and that its small staff had underestimated the scope of outreach needed to promote the new service. Undaunted, they took a slow approach to marketing, as they knew growing the project would take time. STC found that one of the most-effective outreach tools was its participation in local senior health and wellness fairs, because those events allowed it to combine outreach and marketing.

To measure the success of its efforts, STC placed coupons for a free first round-trip ride or a percentage off the first trip in a community Town Planner Calendar and tracked coupon usage. STC placed ads on TV and in the calendar but found that paid advertising was expensive and it was hard to quantify the results. Like other NADTC grantees, STC found that the best outreach was word of mouth.

Outcomes

Success is contingent on having a strong core service upon which to build expanded hours. A core service ensures reliable trained drivers who welcome the opportunity to pick up extra hours of work and the availability of sufficient vehicles. An established customer base, relationships with communities, senior living facilities and other entities are essential to market the program and attract passengers.

By the end of the 12-month grant period, STC Plus was consistently booking full shifts on Saturdays and had provided 548 trips to 138 riders. Twenty-eight were repeat riders, which was 94 percent of STC’s goal of providing 30 repeat rides.



Credit: Western Maine Transportation Services, Auburn, ME

Building on its success, STC Plus was able to expand beyond North Olmsted ahead of schedule, with little disruption to the core weekday schedule. The expansion offered the opportunity to become countywide rather than limited to the 30 communities STC was contracted to serve in its weekday program. STC’s expansion also was intended to raise interest in its Monday to Friday rides. Since the grant ended, STC has continued its weekend and evening service, providing between 80 and 100 trips per month. Passengers in the communities served are able to pay for all trips, making the model sustainable.

Learnings

The grantee interviewed for this best practice was asked to provide insights into key takeaways gathered through the implementation of the grant. Below are summaries of the most critical concepts for others seeking to provide evening and/or weekend rides.

- **Set your agency up for success.** STC chose to pilot the service in a community where it was already known and trusted. There, residents are more likely to have the means to pay for a well-priced, efficient and quality ride. North Olmsted is a robust community, with a busy calendar of social, recreational and spiritual activities, including a popular adaptive golf program. This community has much to offer outside of business hours. Activities are near each other, which helps to control costs. STC offered an introductory free round-trip ride to demonstrate value to new users.
- **Assess your capacity.** To determine if extended hours were feasible, STC first asked what financial resources and capacity the organization had (e.g., drivers, vehicles) and sought information from riders about what they were willing and able to pay for rides. They learned that it is also important to understand that members of the older adult population may, for various reasons, have poor follow-through on rides due to health or other issues.
- **Think through the process carefully.** For example, STC’s call center is only open during regular business hours, Monday through Friday, so drivers assigned to work weekends must make confirmation calls to riders and have in place emergency contingency plans, in case they are unable to provide the ride at the last minute.
- **Ask critical questions during your outreach.** While researching rider needs, fully explore these types of questions: What do you think you spend monthly on transportation? What could you really afford? Where would you go? What types of trips would you always call a friend or family member for? Can we be of value outside of our traditional weekday hours? Would you call us or another provider for those rides?

- STC drivers always have access to a supervisor on call who would either serve as backup or be able to make arrangements for another employee to come in.
 - STC requires drivers to call riders before they leave the depot to confirm trips are still required.
 - STC tries to be efficient in scheduling so that the driver has as little down time as possible, but that is not always possible. If the wait window is more than four hours, the driver clocks out, then back in when service resumes. No other agencies use the vehicles during down time.
- **Understand that it may be a long time before extended hours are sustainable.** Predicting demand is difficult, and patience and flexibility are key. The overall response from STC’s pilot community was modest, despite indications from the rider needs research. Had the project not expanded beyond its original scope, STC would not have achieved its volume targets. Build those uncertainties into your model and ask what your organization can support.
 - **Look for the backbone in your program—the consistent riders and needs—and infill other rides.** For the STC Plus program, the backbone was dialysis. A couple of patients needed to go on Saturday, so STC had a driver ready to serve social and other needs. Weekend dialysis trips were paid by the patient or caregiver. In North Olmstead there are many destinations within a 10-mile radius where riders wanted to go, so it worked. STC also found that social needs often outweigh health needs, an important learning for weekend hours.
 - **Consider downtime as you plan your service.** A dialysis treatment could require a driver to wait for three hours. Providing rides to area churches on Sundays can be easier, as you can stagger pickup times, which also allows people opportunities to socialize while they are waiting. The time of day, not the number of trips, can be more important for scheduling. Identify the number of hours when the need for rides is greatest on weekends and take mileage and the deadhead miles involved into consideration when planning your weekend program. Also find out if frequently desired destinations are close enough to justify scheduling one or two specific routes.
- **Conduct internal, as well as external, outreach and education about the program to reach staff and regular riders.** To avoid confusion, be clear about what hours rides are available. If you are booked during the weekdays with contracts, be sure that the call center and riders are aware extended hours are after 5:00 PM and on weekends.

Cost and Billing Learnings

- **Despite extensive research into local transportation rates, many seniors perceived the service as too expensive.** Those who required accessible features (wheelchair users, for example) did not. Billing customers after the free-trip promotion required timely charges to their credit card and a clear explanation. Some passengers had the perception that the service was free, or they believed it was an extension of their existing, low-cost community contract. While it has not explored in detail the option to provide rides for those who cannot afford market rate, STC thinks there may be some interest from foundations, faith-based groups and other local organizations willing to consider subsidizing the cost.

Funding

As a rider-pay model, this program is self-sustaining as an add-on to an existing service where vehicles and drivers already exist. Pricing for these trips is calculated as a pro-rated cost of the entire trip with rider fares covering a portion of the expense. With continued marketing and advertising, it earns enough income to carry the program forward.

Please note: Weekend and evening hours can also be offered by programs funded by FTA, whether Section 5307, 5311 or 5310. Dialysis rides may be paid through Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) when provided by a participating NEMT provider.



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Who We Are

Established in 2015, the NADTC is a federally funded technical assistance center administered by Easterseals and USAging based in Washington, DC.

The **National Aging and Disability Transportation Center** is funded through a cooperative agreement of Easterseals, USAging, and the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.

USAging is the 501(c)(3) national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities throughout the United States live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. USAging is dedicated to supporting the success of our members through advancing public policy, sparking innovation, strengthening the capacity of our members, raising their visibility and working to drive excellence in the fields of aging and home and community-based services. www.usaging.org

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