



best practices

Travel Training

Transportation services enable older adults and people with disabilities to access essential services such as medical appointments, grocery stores and pharmacies and help them stay connected to friends and family, social activities and the community at large. However, many are not familiar with the transportation services available in the communities where they live, and others are fearful or confused about how to use those services. For example, a 2017 study in the *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, [Public Transportation: An Investigation of Barriers for People With Disabilities](#), found that 20 percent of respondents were unable to navigate the public transportation system.

The original intent of travel training was to introduce potential riders, particularly people with disabilities, to the public transit system and help them become independent users of this vital community service. Over time, travel training has evolved to address specific travel needs in different communities, but no matter the focus, these programs can provide older adults and people with disabilities with the knowledge and tools they need to travel more independently and with greater confidence.

One NADTC planning grantee, the **Sanford Center for Aging at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine**, reported that at least 17 percent of older adults and people with disabilities in that community identified travel logistics, including lack of familiarity with transportation options and how to get a ride, as major barriers to engaging in activities outside the home. Another grantee, **Area Agency on Aging 1-B**, noted that travel training has the potential to increase socialization, expand employment opportunities and increase access to the community. Riders who learn to use fixed-route public transit are able to travel more independently, and those who previously used specialized transportation services may even save money if they are able to use the fixed-route system for some of their travel needs.

Area Agency on Aging 1-B in southeastern Michigan and



Credit: Via Mobility Services, Boulder, CO

a second NADTC grantee, **INCOG Area Agency on Aging in Tulsa, OK**, implemented travel training programs. This best practice describes their experiences.

Travel Training to Access Paratransit Services

Indian Nations Council of Governments (INCOG) Area Agency on Aging created a travel training program to support the primary goal of its NADTC grant: to provide access to healthy food for older adults and people with disabilities who live in a “food desert” of nine square miles in North Tulsa, OK (for more information about the project, see the best practice on access to healthy food).

Through a comprehensive public engagement process of surveys, focus groups and a public workshop, INCOG learned that the food desert area was also a “transportation desert.” While the city’s public transit fixed-route system included stops on the perimeter of the nine-square-mile area, available routes did not connect older adults and people with disabilities living in the area

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.

to local grocery stores. INCOG also found that although many in the target population qualified for paratransit services, they were not using those services to meet their transportation needs. Several older adults and people with disabilities in north Tulsa actually preferred to take a 14-mile-long bus ride to the Walmart Supercenter in south Tulsa rather than shop at grocery stores that were closer, primarily because they did not have to transfer buses and the bus stop was near the store. Travel training was mentioned throughout the public engagement process as a potential solution to these challenges.

The travel training offered by INCOG focused on teaching people how to use the two paratransit options available to area residents: Morton Comprehensive Health Services, which provides paratransit to INCOG clients age 60 and older to both medical appointments and grocery stores; and the Tulsa Transit Lift Program, which offers door-to-door paratransit service for people with disabilities who meet ADA paratransit eligibility criteria. Travel training also served as an introduction to using on-demand rides provided through Uber Health, which were made available to residents of the food desert later in the project.

INCOG conducted four travel training sessions, each of which included a field trip to a different grocery store near the food desert. In addition to providing round-trip transportation from their homes to an area grocery store, the field trip taught riders how to use paratransit services, including instruction on using the lift and a demonstration of how floor locks work for people who use wheelchairs and power chairs. The training also reviewed how to arrange a ride from Morton and Tulsa Transit Lift. Site visits provided through this training program were used to introduce participants to grocery stores they had not visited before, offering incentives such as gift certificates, food samples and store tours. Participants



Credit: MetroWest Regional Transit Authority, Framingham, MA

also received reusable shopping bags from Tulsa Transit with information on major bus lines and how to transfer buses to get to nearby stores. INCOG contact information and the phone numbers to call for rides were included.

While participants were a mix of those who did and did not need paratransit, travel training also served a broader educational purpose by encouraging participants to share what they learned with friends and neighbors. A total of 28 older adults and 24 people with disabilities participated in travel training. Due to funding constraints, travel training is not offered at this time, but INCOG and partners hope to build on what they learned in the next phase of C.A.N. (Creating Access to Nutrition) Ride, their food access program.

Classroom Training and One-on-One Guided Rides

Area Agency on Aging 1-B in Southfield, MI, which operates *myride2*, a One-Call, One-Click mobility management service, provides mobility management services in Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne counties in Metro Detroit, including the City of Detroit, for the Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan. The Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transit (SMART) system first identified travel training as an unmet need in its 2014 Transit-Human Services Plan.

The following year (2015), an evaluation conducted by *myride2* found that 39 percent of respondents said there was no service available where they needed to go, and 61 percent reported cost as the barrier for meeting transit needs. Although transportation options were available through the SMART bus and Dial-a-Ride service, local residents were unaware of these options. For instance, residents at one community housing complex did not even know that a fixed-route bus stop was located outside their building. Other older adults who contacted *myride2* had not previously used public transportation or had not done so for many years. This information led *myride2* staff to realize that providing training for older adults and people with disabilities to use the fixed-route service could meet many residents' needs. In the area served, fixed-route transportation offers many routes and is half the cost of the demand-response system.

Originally, *myride2* planned to develop a train-the-trainer program that would recruit community volunteers to provide travel training. However, the program

encountered challenges finding older adults and people with disabilities willing to volunteer. Travel training was a new concept in the community, so it may have been too much to expect that the riders the program attempted to recruit would feel sufficiently qualified to train others to use the public transit system. As a result, *myride2* shifted its focus to provide a staff-led program that offers both classroom training and one-on-one sessions. Two staff received certification as travel trainers through Easterseals Project Action.¹

To promote travel training, *myride2* distributes rack cards in the community at places like senior centers, senior housing complexes and community events. Area facilities and organizations then invite travel trainers to come to their sites and give a presentation. Most classes take place in the spring, summer and fall to avoid Michigan’s wintry weather.

Travel training classes are for anyone, from first-time transit users to experienced travelers and everyone in between. Instructors explain what travel training is, describe the modes of transportation available in the area, teach riders to read bus schedules, demonstrate how to cross the street safely and board the bus, and include information on how to pay the fare. Attendees are also offered an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) application should they need to apply for paratransit services. SMART Bus Ombudsmen often join the class to answer specific questions about SMART Transit.

One-on-One training is offered to riders who want to experience public transportation with a guide. The *myride2* instructors help riders plan a trip to a particular destination. With the instructor’s assistance, the rider chooses the date and maps the route. The instructor tells the rider what to watch for on the route and how to signal when it is time to get off the bus. The pair stays at the destination for about an hour, then returns. The one-on-one sessions continue as often as needed until the rider feels comfortable making the trip alone.

Outcomes

Begun in 2017 in two counties, the *myride2* travel training program now serves the counties of Macomb, Oakland and Wayne, which includes Detroit. With the expansion, *myride2* now teaches riders how to go from one county to



Credit: Greater Lynn Senior Services Lynn, MA

another and transfer between Detroit and the suburban system.

A 2017 survey of initial program participants indicated high satisfaction: 86 percent felt confident about using public transportation after receiving instruction; 76 percent reported learning something new at classes; and 61 percent said they are likely to use public transportation in the future. Through July 31, 2020, *myride2* had provided travel training to more than 300 riders through 19 classes, 21 hands-on bus demonstrations and four one-on-one trainings. Three classes took place in 2020, while two more were put on hold due to COVID-19. In response to the pandemic, *myride2* is considering online classes.

Learnings

The grantees interviewed for this best practice were asked to provide insights into key takeaways they gathered through the implementation of their grants. Below are summaries of the most critical concepts for others seeking to develop or enhance travel training in their communities.

- **Coordinating travel training with efforts to inform older adults and people with disabilities about transportation options can be beneficial.** AAA 1-B learned that many people who participated in *myride2* travel training were interested in learning about public transportation options and wanted to know how travel training could support their independence.

¹ Easterseals Project Action Travel Training Certification offers extensive knowledge and a formal, hands-on approach, as well as guidance on assessing rider readiness to be trained.

- **Travel training may be more appealing when tied to a specific activity or destination.** Consider where people in your target demographic want and need to go. INCOG found that the opportunity to do grocery shopping as part of the travel training experience was a positive incentive for older adults living in a food desert.
- **When introducing new transportation services, travel training may help increase ridership.** As the area served by *myride2* expanded and it became possible to cross jurisdictional boundaries using both city and suburban transit systems, travel training provided critical support to apprehensive travelers.
- **The first step for any program is to ensure the target population understands what travel training is.** INCOG found that the term “travel training” was confusing to prospective riders, many of whom did not understand that the training could help them use the transportation options available in the community. The promotional materials developed by *myride2* attempt to address this issue head-on by clearly explaining the purpose of travel training, identifying its potential benefits, and discussing how travel training can help both new and experienced transit users.
- **Recruiting people for travel training is best approached through partnerships with a wide array of community organizations.** Staff referrals and word-of-mouth at senior housing complexes were key factors in *myride2*'s success. Staff promoted the travel training classes through collaboration with numerous community partners, including local faith-based organizations, Centers for Independent Living, social service organizations, neighboring Area Agencies

on Aging and a strong partnership with local transit providers. INCOG benefited from the support of an area grocery store that promoted the program through a press release and offered gift cards to participants.

- **Developing expertise and learning from experts is critical when launching a new travel training program.** At *myride2*, since staff and the program had no prior experience with travel training, obtaining staff certification was deemed a necessity. Shadowing an experienced trainer can also be helpful. Through its membership in the Michigan Mobility Managers Association, the program connected with a travel trainer who offered new travel trainers practical, first-hand experience on how to work one-on-one with riders. In addition, the experienced travel trainer shared templates (e.g., forms for riders that specify their destination and the correct bus number for getting where they want to go) that were adopted by the program. The staff at *myride2* also recommends the Association of Travel Instruction as a good resource.

Funding

- The Federal Transit Administration’s Section 5310 Program provides funding through the Regional Transportation Authority of southeast Michigan to support *myride2*'s travel training program.
- INCOG’s NADTC grant provided the funding for its travel training program. Costs were minimal, including staff time and a fee paid to Morton Comprehensive Health Services for the use of a paratransit bus and staff to explain the process to riders. Due to limited funding, plans for continuing this program are on hold.

