



Volunteer Transportation

Older adults and people with disabilities who do not drive are not always able to use public transportation, especially if they live in rural communities and other areas where there are gaps in available transit. Due to economic factors, older adults and people with disabilities may need low-cost or free assisted transportation options to get to medical appointments, grocery stores and social activities to stay healthy and engaged in the community. Volunteer transportation can help fill this need.

In the Grantmakers in Aging article [Volunteer Driver Programs](#), Helen Kerschner notes that perhaps a more compelling reason for the existence of volunteer driver programs than availability and low cost is that volunteers can meet transportation needs specific to older adults—going across county lines for appointments, making multiple stops and carrying packages. People with disabilities who use volunteer transportation find this option a good fit for their needs as well. Plus, a volunteer ride not only makes possible a visit to the doctor or the grocery store, but also provides an opportunity for social interaction with drivers and empowers riders to live independently in the community.

Reasons to Consider a Volunteer Transportation Program

Comfort with Volunteer Drivers

In research conducted as part of its NADTC grant, **Shared Mobility, Inc. (SMI)** sought to understand the opportunities and challenges of shared mobility options—ridesharing (e.g., Uber, Lyft), bikesharing, carsharing, and volunteer transportation—for older adults and people with disabilities. Interview and focus group participants said they did not feel the shared mobility options currently available in their community were inclusive for them. However, participants were open to a volunteer program that could serve areas beyond those



Credit: Neighbor Ride, Columbia, MD

served by current transit routes. They felt they would be more comfortable riding with a volunteer than with a ridesharing or taxi driver and welcomed the potential for wheelchair accessibility (not available from local ridesharing companies) and the door-to-door assistance that volunteers could provide. The ability to schedule rides over the phone appealed to those without a smartphone.

SMI partnered with the Volunteer Transportation Center Western New York (VTC) to provide volunteer transportation. VTC uses volunteers and mobility management to provide transportation to health care and other critical needs destinations for anyone who has barriers to transportation. SMI provided volunteer transportation to take older adults and people with disabilities who are Medicaid beneficiaries to non-emergency medical services in rural portions of Erie County in New York state. Specifically, the project sought to fill gaps that current shared mobility options did not address.

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.

Affordable Option to Fill Transportation Gaps

Feonix—Mobility Rising, together with community leaders in the Coastal Bend region of Texas, identified volunteer transportation as the right option to fill the community’s transportation gaps for night, weekend, cross-county and on-demand rides. This need had been documented by the area’s regional Transit-Human Services Coordinated Transportation Plan. Mobility “leadership circles” convened by Feonix across the region included representation from a variety of agencies serving the community. Circle participants agreed that a new, affordable transportation option was needed to fill the region’s transportation gaps, and that a volunteer transportation program would meet the identified needs.

The volunteer transportation program sought to address the constraints of the public transit systems operating in Coastal Bend’s rural communities, which provided daytime only hours, required advance notice for rides and made long rides to go short distances, among other service limitations. Some residents’ homes in the area will not support construction of wheelchair ramps, making it difficult for them to leave the house without personal assistance. Further, a round-trip ride by a private provider to the doctor from some parts of this rural area can cost as much as \$100, a limiting factor for low-income residents.

Circle members estimated they needed approximately 114 volunteers to satisfy demand across the Coastal Bend’s 11 counties. At the time, the veterans’ group for all 11 counties had only two volunteers. The group prepared for a three to five-year effort to establish the program.

Program Design

Partnership with Medicaid and Other Human Services Agencies

Shared Mobility, Inc. partnered with Volunteer Transportation Center Western New York to test VTC’s model in the Buffalo region. VTC offers communities “VTC in a box” which includes its own volunteer transportation program model, technology to support scheduling rides and help launching the program.

The model that SMI and VTC use is diversified. The volunteer program is supported through multiple contracts and agreements with public and private



Credit: Whistlestop Carepool, San Rafael, CA

organizations to provide rides for their clients. The revenue generated through Medicaid reimbursement and from county departments of social services and local health service provider contracts covers the volunteer transportation program’s operating expenses. Volunteer transportation is a good fit for these types of rides. Medicaid uses brokers to find the lowest-cost rides, and volunteer programs cost six to ten times less than other types of rides. Even at this lower cost, the volunteer program can reimburse drivers for mileage. The VTC/SMI model is *volunteer-focused*, making volunteer satisfaction a high priority of the program.

SMI has obtained a contract to transport state Medicaid recipients to non-emergency medical services and is working to expand the program to bring it to scale; provide stable, consistent rides; and recruit more volunteers. Ultimately, SMI seeks to adapt VTC’s proven model so that it can serve clients from rural, suburban and urban areas alike. While SMI expects to expand eventually to Buffalo’s urban environment, currently, it is serving the more rural areas of Erie County that are experiencing sprawl and have an aging population that cannot reach public transportation and needs assistance to get to medical appointments in Buffalo.

To attract volunteer drivers, who are reimbursed for mileage, SMI conducts local outreach campaigns. Drivers must be willing to volunteer at least four hours per week, have a clean driving record and pass a criminal background check. To orient new drivers, a staff member meets with volunteers and reviews the program’s driver handbook. Staff may also accompany new drivers on their first ride. Often, volunteers are older adults or caregivers themselves and give rides to stay active and connect with others in the community.

The VTC handles day-to-day trip coordination—volunteer dispatch, trip management, and reimbursement processing. Trips are scheduled through the in-house driver management platform (called SNAP), developed by VTC.

SMI and VTC are very cognizant of how important community connections are to the success of this program. Volunteers have a human connection with riders and are providing a ride for someone who otherwise would not have one. The organizations realize that they must create a culture that supports the volunteers. SMI saw 25 percent growth in volunteer transportation trips in its first three months of operation and is now seeking to expand to other counties in western New York.

Building a Mobility Ecosystem

The new volunteer transportation program created by Feonix is considered part of a broader “mobility ecosystem” in the Coastal Bend community, adding a new option in an area with limited transportation choices. Volunteer drivers take riders to shop for groceries, to church, to Walmart or the post office. While shorter medical trips are typically provided by family, friends or other transportation programs, the volunteer program is a better option for long-distance trips, enabling riders to go to places that might otherwise not be possible, such as specialty medical care, visits with friends or a faraway store. Volunteers see these trips as fun expeditions and riders are able to enjoy a sense of freedom.

Feonix recruits volunteer drivers through targeted outreach and covers the cost of liability insurance for the program. Volunteers must pass a background check and complete a 90-minute online training class that covers roles, responsibilities, technology use, mileage reimbursement, safety precautions and volunteer driver procedures and policies. A central scheduling system, housed in Nebraska (Feonix’s headquarters) connects directly with volunteers to schedule rides. Volunteers are paid for mileage, including mileage for “deadhead miles” when they do not have a passenger in the car.

By the end of the grant period, January 30, 2019, the volunteer transportation program had provided 52 trips for more than 30 Coastal Plains Community Center clients. The program continues today, with a different scheduling system.

Finding the Right Scheduling Software

Special software or digital systems ease the task of scheduling volunteer drivers and are important as a program scales up to add volunteers or serve additional riders. Technology is a unique strength of VTC, which developed its own digital driver-management system, SNAP, to facilitate on-demand volunteer transportation services. The platform is not client facing but is designed for volunteer drivers and ride management. With SNAP, volunteer drivers receive their own tablet from VTC that digitally gives them directions, tracks miles driven and communicates with riders. In the SMI volunteer program, which provides rides to health care appointments, trips are booked through the VTC scheduler and assigned to drivers.

Referrals to the volunteer program in Coastal Bend may come through the established toll-free number of Coastal Plains Community Center or Coastal Bend Center for Independent Living, which operates a regional call center with a mobility manager and connections to most area transportation providers. The criteria for matching ride requests to providers includes reliability, affordability and the best match for the particular request. In a rural location like Coastal Bend, it is important to have a local mobility manager who is embedded in the community, to take care of last-minute issues that arise and build trust with riders. When people who need rides do not meet eligibility criteria for transportation through the Coastal Bend Center for Independent Living or the Coastal Plains Community Center, a referral may be made to a central phone number operated by Feonix with a backup answering service that provides 24/7 coverage.

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 and enhance their volunteer transportation programs.

- **Start by identifying the scope and scale of the volunteer program.** Critical issues include: Who will you serve and where? How many riders will the program be able to accommodate? How many volunteers will be needed to meet that goal? It is important to identify up front the population from which the program will recruit volunteer drivers. SMI

and Feonix targeted similar groups: local older adults, those interested in volunteerism, professional drivers like ridesharing drivers and bus drivers, and college students.

- **Look carefully at factors that could be barriers to a volunteer transportation program and make a plan to address them.** In Coastal Bend and in the Buffalo area, local transportation providers initially viewed a volunteer driver program as a threat to their business. Building partnerships and relationships with other transportation providers and local human services agencies at the outset is advisable. Having a smaller pool of drivers ready to go at the beginning can also be a limiting factor, so it is important not to over-promise but to slowly build ridership to match the pool of available volunteers. Sustained outreach to build the volunteer program is a necessary ingredient for success.
- **Be patient, because initiating a volunteer transportation program takes a substantial amount of time and effort.** New programs need to recruit and activate volunteers before the project starts. Building interest and trust (especially if the organization has not previously run a volunteer program) takes time and persistence. Outreach—going to food pantries, giving out flyers at the library and one-on-one efforts—is very time intensive. Outreach materials can help raise awareness but talking with people and building trust is what compels participation and can help ensure a program’s success (see the best practice on engagement and outreach for additional information). Piloting a volunteer transportation program for just a short time can be challenging, even though it may be a necessary first step. Once a program begins, it is vitally important to have in place a realistic sustainability plan so as not to lose the support and trust you have already built.
- **When planning outreach, make sure your mission is clear.** Convey exactly what you are looking for and whom you hope to serve. Feonix and SMI found success in consistent local outreach, trust building and word of mouth, plus digital and print marketing. Highly targeted Facebook ads were effective in recruiting drivers, as was partnering with other area organizations on community outreach, including sharing flyers and creating websites to promote the program.



Credit: Metrolina Association for the Blind, Charlotte, NC

- **Continue nurturing and engaging volunteers and riders.** Software is great for scheduling rides, but volunteers drive because they feel a sense of mission and trust in the people in the organization. That connection is vital and can be strengthened through efforts to create a sense of community and by showing appreciation. Consider ways to give thanks to and promote a sense of identity for the volunteers, such as t-shirts for volunteer drivers or a special luncheon.

Funding

- SMI worked with the local Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to have the Volunteer Transportation Center Western New York program and its steering committee included in the local Coordinated Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan, to solidify the program’s eligibility for future Section 5310/5311 funding that is managed by the MPO. VTC has received a Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grant through its Access and Mobility Partnerships program to expand SMI’s program to nearby counties and continue building a volunteer transportation network.
- Feonix obtained a grant from a private source to continue and expand the volunteer driver program and enhance access to care. Grant funds are currently being used for pharmacy delivery to clients of the Coastal Plains Community Center.



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