Community-Based Transportation: Conference Observations

Following the conference, Greater Twin Cities United Way called these observations from the discussions generated and information shared that day.

This conference brought into focus important issues for United Way as it considers its continued role in regional transportation and social services. Among them:

There is no one solution. The transit needs for those without are so varied—by geography, physical abilities, and income—that no one solution will work for all. We need to test and support a variety of models that will, at minimum, lower the costs of transportation for funded agencies while providing the same levels of service.

There is a need for a coordinated legislative policy. United Way needs to partner with the Metropolitan Council in crafting a regional legislative agenda. We need to dispel the common misperception that Metro Mobility meets the needs of all transit-dependent populations. We need to explain to legislative committees what specialty transit is, how it influences the delivery of social service, and what role United Way plays.

In preparation for that, a public education campaign is needed to give faces to the numbers. Who doesn’t have a car? Who uses specialty transit? Who provides specialty transit? We also need to re-survey agencies to gain a better understanding of what transit is being provided regionally. Specifically, we want to learn the number of vehicles in use, how much each agency spends on transportation, how many rides are given annually, and what transit options are used beyond what the agencies provide.

Finally, we need to target specific rules and legislation that produce unnecessary barriers to specialty transportation.

The lack of van drivers is a major barrier for social service agencies. Van drivers are the Achilles’ heel of many agencies. When van drivers are not available, programming either stops or staff is pulled to drive. Some possible solutions include developing van driving as a career path through some of our agencies or recruiting retirees as community van drivers. (Rural organizations depend heavily on volunteer drivers and have been successful in maintaining their volunteer fleets.) Agencies continue to struggle with insurance issues and misinformation. Many agencies have misconceptions regarding their car insurance. We need to more aggressively disseminate information to agency CEOs, CFOs, and others through strategies and partnerships with organizations (such as MAP and the Wilder Foundation) that provide capacity building for nonprofits. Additionally, we can create and distribute informational documents.

Agencies don’t know their full transportation costs. Nonprofit agencies range widely in their understanding of their true transportation costs. Volunteers and staff need to understand these costs when looking at an agency’s budget. Many agencies lack knowledge or expertise in bidding third parties for applicable transportation costs. Fleet planning is also often absent. Centralized tools for assessment and software to track trips, maintenance, and driver training could help many agencies understand and manage their expenses.

Collaboratives for sharing ride resources are unlikely to produce substantial results in the short term. The project tested by Volunteers of America and its collaborative partners, attempting to bring in separate organizations and build a new structure with newly created authority, is a time- and staff-intensive process. It requires system-wide commitment and a high level of risk tolerance.

Regional van-based ride providers are more efficient deliverers of specialty transit services. We need to explore the possibility of helping regional van providers more completely supply transit services to the nonprofit community.

Taxicabs are a solution in some cases. For-profit providers of transit (buses, taxicabs) provide important services to agencies. Many agencies, however, are uninformed on how to make the best use of these resources and how to make the best financial deals.

Continued dialogue with special groups is needed. Young, immigrant populations, and rural services all have specific barriers to accessing reliable transportation that meets their needs. We are beginning to understand the dynamics in some immigrant populations; we have not yet addressed the transportation needs of youth, although agencies are spending thousands of dollars annually to move youth from school to programming to home.

We need to target specific rules and legislation that produce unnecessary barriers to specialty transportation.

A summary report

The ability of clients to find transportation is often seen outside the mission of human service organizations. However, transportation is more than a commodity—it is an integral part of obtaining and maintaining self-sufficiency, providing the means to get to jobs, the grocery store, childcare, medical appointments, and other essential services. Reliable transportation has been called the “to” in “well-to-work” programs. It also can mean the difference between independent living and institutionalization for seniors and people with disabilities.

In 1999, Greater Twin Cities United Way launched the three-year Transportation Alternatives Initiative, bringing human service agencies and volunteers together to find creative ways to connect clients to jobs and services. This conference was part of the continuing effort of United Way to raise awareness of transportation barriers and their impact on self-sufficiency and to provide opportunities for sharing solutions.

Conference on Community-Based Transportation
Improving Access for the Transportation Disadvantaged

October 2, 2001 • St. Paul, Minnesota

A Community-Based Transportation Conference was held in St. Paul, Minnesota, on October 2, 2001. The conference was sponsored by Greater Twin Cities United Way and was hosted by the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota.

The conference brought together representatives from a variety of organizations, including United Way, non-profits, government agencies, and academic institutions. The goal of the conference was to improve access to transportation for the transportation disadvantaged, which includes people with disabilities, seniors, and low-income individuals.

Conference speakers included representatives from the Metropolitan Council, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Center for Transportation Studies, and various non-profit organizations. The conference featured discussions on transportation issues, including the lack of van drivers, the need for a coordinated legislative policy, and the importance of taxicabs as a solution in some cases.

One of the key takeaways from the conference was the importance of continued dialogue with special groups, such as young, immigrant populations, and rural services. These groups have specific barriers to accessing reliable transportation that meets their needs.

Another important theme discussed was the need for agencies to target specific rules and legislation that produce unnecessary barriers to specialty transportation. This includes understanding the dynamics in some immigrant populations, as well as exploring the possibility of helping regional van providers more completely supply transit services to the nonprofit community.

Conference organizers also emphasized the need for taxicabs as a solution in some cases, as they provide important services to agencies. However, many agencies are uninformed on how to make the best use of these resources and how to make the best financial deals.

The conference concluded with a call to action for continued dialogue with special groups and the need for agencies to target specific rules and legislation that produce unnecessary barriers to specialty transportation. The conference also emphasized the importance of taxicabs as a solution in some cases and the need for agencies to understand the dynamics in some immigrant populations.

Overall, the conference was a valuable opportunity for transportation professionals to come together and share best practices, as well as to identify areas for improvement in the transportation sector.
Panelists John Barrett, Jack Tamble, Sandy Froiland, and Richard Graham with moderator Sandra Vargas.

Rosenbloom said that in many major metropolitan areas, more service delivery is also a problem, Rosenbloom said, “We need to think of the disadvantaged first, she said, rather than treating them as an afterthought. “We need to recognize that their needs are not marginal, and [we] must understand their needs and not assume we know what they are when we never bother to ask.”

According to Rosenbloom, most transportation modeling done today relies on outdated data. “These old models treat disabled, older, and reverse commuters as marginal,” she said. Rosenbloom said that transportation models must be changed to account for society’s changing needs. “We have to demand that transportation modeling be done with better data and that the planning process doesn’t just tack on a few pages regarding disadvantaged travelers at the end of a report. This information has to be part of the planning from the beginning.”

Transportation planning must include all modes of transportation, including walking, Rosenbloom said. In addition, since transit is a community service, public transit agencies must be given more financial help at the same time, more must be demanded of them. Public transit operators need to offer a family of services to meet different people’s needs, Rosenbloom explained. “These operators must be more responsive to their market and be more creative in their offerings. We need to help them get the money necessary to change, then demand that they take care of the disadvantaged traveler.”

Rosenbloom said that in that too often people must go to several different places to accomplish one thing. Therefore, agencies should consider locating certain services together and ensure that hours of operation match the bus schedule. “We should also look at the method of delivery,” she said. “Why do people have to go to the services? Why can’t the services come to the people?”

Rosenbloom believes that transportation managers must now play the new role of mobility providers and managers. “Transportation isn’t a simple problem. This is complicated because people are complex; we have different needs that change day to day.”

Since the old methods aren’t working, a wide range of transportation options and solutions must be developed because more and more people will need these services, Rosenbloom said. “I believe that we can come up with solutions to these complex and difficult problems if we work together.”

Minnesota’s Current Situation: Innovations and Barriers

Moderator: Sandra Vargas, Hennepin County

According to Rosenbloom, community-based transportation should be given the same recognition as light rail, fixed rail, and public transit. He explained that more people get to where they want via community-based systems than by other transportation systems. “We need to present community-based transportation to policymakers in another way,” Graham said. “Today, there isn’t a lot of openness within policy development of transit systems. The important next step is to include more transportation into the mix as part of the plan.”

Sandy Froiland said that in early 1997, her agency formed a steering committee to find gaps in the agency’s services. The committee found a great need to improve transportation options for residents. “Because the transit issues are complex, we thought it was essential to hire an independent broker of transportation information within our agency,” Froiland said. “Our clients can now work with a transportation staff member and work on their own transportation strategies.”

Froiland noted that southern Anoka County has good fixed bus routes; further out, however, the transportation options are limited. Therefore, car ownership in many areas is problematic because they either don’t have access to bus lines or their destination isn’t located on a bus line. “The distance one lives from the center of the city also increases the problem, as does the complexity of the transportation need,” he said. “We also found that people have transportation preferences, and if they can’t take their preferred method, they may not make the trip at all.”

Several United agencies own vehicles, and face the challenges of maintaining vehicles, training drivers, and paying for insurance, Willcox said. Although none of these agencies uses their vehicles full time, there is no vehicle sharing among agencies. That presents an opportunity for United Way to help the agencies that have vehicles operate them more efficiently, Willcox said. “We want these groups to work through these issues and find a way to better share transportation resources. We also want to pursue ways to provide better access to car ownership and influence public understanding to stimulate new public-sector solutions.”

Wilcox urged workshop attendees to share ideas and support one another to positively influence transportation. “We need to make transportation more accessible not just to our United Way clients but to all people who are transportation disadvantaged.”

Panelists John Barrett, Jack Tamble, Sandy Froiland, and Richard Graham with moderator Sandra Vargas.
Lee Xiong said that when the Urban Coalition surveyed clients about their biggest challenges, childcare and transportation were named as the top two. One of the reasons, according to Xiong, is that society is caught up with consumption in terms of land use. “We continue to build roads out to companies that build in the middle of nowhere. It should be the other way around,” Xiong explained. “Employers should locate their businesses where the people are and should be responsible for the transportation needs of their employees.”

One idea Xiong has discussed with Mn/DOT is carsharing as a way to overcome some transportation barriers. “Perhaps people could buy a vehicle with a facility as do with a time-share condominium,” Xiong suggested. “I think the next step is to start a pilot program to see if carsharing will work.”

Although this is one potential solution, Xiong asked the audience to think of other solutions that don’t involve four wheels. “In Asia, the bicycle dominates the streets,” Xiong said. “How can we design that concept work here? Perhaps we need to start children early with other modes of transportation and not just the bus or freeway.”

Xiong also stressed the need for comprehensive planning—that is, looking at how transportation is tied to affordable housing. “We can build all the roads we want, but if people can’t get to where they want to go, where they live, or where they want to live, it doesn’t matter,” Xiong said. “We need to look at the whole transportation connection.”

Panelist Jay Lindgren stated that under the Ventura administration come transportation barriers would have more clout in presenting these issues to the legislature if they worked together. “We need to show all the people together who need specialized transportation, they are not a minority.”

Although partnerships will play a key role in dealing with transportation issues, Rosenbloom recognized that coordination is hard work. “We look for the best collaborations, but sometimes we make mistakes. Nonetheless, we need to keep trying. Perhaps we should talk about a family of services,” she said.

Even if transportation is not your primary service, your clients may need a variety of transportation options, and you need to find ways to provide them. “At times this isn’t easy,” Rosenbloom said, “but every time we help a family arrange a ride that they needed, it’s worth the work.”

Rosenbloom said that public transit is part of the problem, in part because providers have promised things they can’t deliver. “We need to pass legislation that requires public transportation to be available when people need it,” she said. “Look at fire engines, for example. They sit unused most of the time, but they are there when needed.”

Finally, Rosenbloom suggested that agencies trying to overcome transportation barriers would have more clout in presenting these issues to the legislature if they worked together. “We need to show legislatures work the you do and its impact people’s lives,” they need to hear your stories so these issues become something tangible to them.”
Overcoming Language and Cultural Barriers to Using Public and Community-Based Transportation

Moderator: Debra Ehret, Centro de Salud Mental de Minnesota
Speakers: Cha Lee, Southeast Asian Community Council
Ali Mohamed Ali and Oleg Voskresensky, Ramsey County

Voskresensky said that the biggest problem for new immigrants is that they have so many needs all at once. "Most of the immigrants come from an unsuccessful, unhappy situation accompanied by emotional stress," Voskresensky said. "They typically have minimal skills, speak little English—and any jobs they could do are located in areas not well served by public transportation.

Ali Mohamed Ali agreed that transportation presents huge barriers for immigrants in finding work. The jobs he finds for clients are often located at sites that lack direct bus service, making it difficult for clients to get to their jobs on time or to return home without spending a lot of time on several buses. Ali said, "When we find a job to which a client can take a bus, we must teach the client how to use our bus system. It's not easy for them to ask the bus driver for help because of the language barrier."

Cha Lee said that transportation is also a problem for the Asian community, particularly among the Hmong. "Typically, in their hometown the only transportation available was their own two feet," he said. "Because of cultural and language barriers, Asian immigrants don't use public transportation very often." Lee explained that it's often uncomfortable for immigrants else's car to get on to a big bus not knowing where, or how, to get off of it. That's one reason car ownership is a top priority for the Hmong, and family members will often pool money together to purchase a car and then share the car with many others, he added.

Logistics and Operations Support Solutions for Providing Transportation

Moderator: Carolyn Hawkins, Volunteers of America
Speakers: Andrew Krueger, DARTS; Daria Sorenson, Iron Range Transit

Andrew Krueger explained how DARTS, a senior and ADA transportation provider, is working towards sharing its resources and knowledge by providing operation and maintenance support, driver training, and computer software technology to other community-based transportation providers.

An example is DARTS’ work with the Transportation Alternatives Collaborative. Six agencies, both vehicle and non-vehicle, participated in the collaborative. The program, began in 1999 and funded by United Way, aims to improve access to services for the clients of all its partner agencies. In order to form the collaborative, each partner had to sign a confidentiality agreement to protect the interest of its clients and was required to list the insurance certificate of liability was needed for all the agencies as well. Partners provided a uniform set of standards, a memorandum of understanding, and a fare structure using a fare equity formula. The collaborative could use the computerized simulation-sharing model, which maintains autonomy but pools resources with a computerized system of trip routing known as “Tripaze.”

Another agency working on logistics and operations support is the Ramsey County Transportation Providers. The agency faces problems such as rising costs, ineffectiveness, unmet needs, administrative burdens, and a lack of expertise, the Red Cross, led by Bette Undis, stepped in to coordinate the service providers and solve problems. Undis said that the biggest problem in involving funded vehicles was the Red Cross in helping churches and hospitals, daycares, and other service projects, on behalf of the providers, thereby bringing in $150,000 in new money each year alone. The Red Cross also installed a centralized computer system, PASS, to perform dispatching, route planning, billing, performance evaluations, and scheduling.

Taxis as Community-Based Transportation Providers

Moderator: David Christianson, Metropolitan Council
Speakers: Gerri Sutton, Metropolitan Council • Braun Weissner, Airport Taxi

The Speakers: Gerri Sutton, Braun Weissner, Airport Taxi, described the Van-GO! vanpooling program and the Ramsey County’s numerous vanpooling programs that serve families that may not be eligible for traditional car loans or leasing. No-interest community development loans to purchase a vehicle. The speakers in this session described two programs that can help people overcome obstacles that limit their access to jobs, shopping, health care, and other types of services. Tina Hoschette described the Van-GO! vanpooling program that has a special benefit for individuals moving to full-time employment from welfare. Through this Access to Jobs program, participants who join a vanpool ride free for the first month, paid a reduced rate of $10 for the second month, and pay $20 for the third month. Beginning with the fourth month, participants are responsible for the full fare, but their employers may subsidize part of the cost through vouchers that can be redeemed for transit and vanpool fare. Stephen Klein noted that, "since ours is a car-reliant society, the travel needs of some families cannot always be met by public transportation.

Klein provided an overview of CEAP’s car loan, car repair, and car leasing programs that serve families that may not be eligible for traditional car loans or leasing. No-interest loans up to $3,000 for the purchase of a car, or up to $800 for repair costs, are available to qualified applicants. Applicants must be part of a one- or two-parent family with dependent children, must be either employed at the same job or in school (GED or post-high school) for at least six months, must be over 18 years of age, and have a valid Minnesota driver’s license. In addition, qualified individuals transitioning from welfare to work may be eligible for a loan after one month at a job.

Both Anoka County Transportation Alternatives and Volunteers of America used the participatory planning process to develop provisions for sharing transportation service resources. The Anoka County Transportation Alternatives Project, led by Sullivan, began with a workshop in February 2000 that produced a vision and defined an action plan for the project. Client expectations and provider coordination were identified as the most critical aspects of the project—and the ones that project participants could do the most about. A survey of transportation disadvantaged individuals and those who served them revealed several things, including: different client groups have individualized needs; transit should be immediate, individual, inexpensive, and is not equal for public and private providers; regulatory restrictions and insurance are prohibitive; and the metro area is a transit-phobic region.

The next steps in this ongoing project have been identified in the provider coordination and client expectations areas, Sullivan added. The Volunteers of America collaboration, led by Carolyn Hawkins, concentrates specifically on the Minneapolis area. Five organizations, primarily senior and developmentally disabled service providers, are working together to better their coordination and serve a larger area of people more efficiently. Providers use a computerized trip routing system—Tripaze—provided by DARTS to examine how they are routing trips. As a result, the service providers identified that extra vehicles were available to provide trips to riders who would otherwise not receive one, Hawkins said. The service structure, however, was difficult to address, since each provider had a different fare system with different fees and therefore, different regulations. In Year One, United Way funds were used to pay providers for shared rides. But in Year Two, when United Way funds ran out, the collaboration participants used a formula developed by DARTS to determine the true cost of a ride, including marginal and fixed costs.

If You Build It, Will They Come?

Development and Community-Based Transportation

Moderator: Karen Lyons, Metropolitan Council
Speakers: Jim Barton, Metropolitan Council • Tom Harmening, St. Louis Park Community Development • Robert Cunningham, TOLD Development

One of the most debated questions in urban planning is: "What does community development shape and respond to—the development of the transportation system?" Presenters from the Metropolitan Council and community development organizations offered their perspectives on implementing real-world development plans that address the needs of all transportation system users.

Senior transportation planner Jim Barton and community development planner Tom Harmening of the Metropolitan Council discussed guidelines for new development and transportation planning. The Met Council is developing a guidebook for transit-oriented development aimed at encouraging more compact development that is easily served by various modes of public transit. pronounce on taxis as community-based transit vehicles, which featured a panel of local taxi cab industry members presenting the specifics of their business operations and fielding questions from community and nonprofit representatives.

During the session, the taxi operators outlined numerous constraints inherent in their business model that must be overcome if they are to fit into their operations—chief among them the thin profit margins inherent in the taxi business, and the independent-operator status of taxi drivers. A key element of this approach, Barton said, is scaling development to pedestrians, not automobiles. Development patterns that make it difficult for people to move around without automobiles have the effect of "stacking the deck" against transit use and enforcing car-based usage patterns.

The transit-oriented development guidelines also recognize the importance of mixed-use development and regulating block size, frontages, and street setbacks. Speaking from the perspective of community development advocates interested in improving transit planning, Barton’s ideas were largely complimentary to the transit-oriented development and planning in creating transit-friendly development. Tom Harmening gave examples of the transit-oriented development process for St. Louis Park’s current “Park Commons” project. The goal, Harmening said, is to revitalize the area and create a town center while improving the link between jobs and housing areas, improving neighborhood services, and improving facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users.

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