

Research on Volunteer Driver Programs



SWRPC

Southwest Region
Planning Commission

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INTRODUCTION

While Volunteer Driver Programs (VDP) in the Monadnock Region have played an important role and made steady progress over the last decade to address the transportation challenges of older adults and people with disabilities, challenges faced by other transit-dependent populations including youth and low-income persons remain unresolved. As a result, these populations have limited access to social inclusion opportunities, employment, medical care, food outlets, and essential services. A study conducted in rural Ontario, Canada indicated that different demographic groups experience different limitations when lacking access to transportation services.¹ For example, youth experience limited access to social inclusion opportunities such as sports, social gatherings, participating in clubs and employment. Some youth, for various reasons, live independently outside their family homes, often moving to rural isolated areas outside town where rent is more affordable. These individuals may find it even more difficult to meet basic needs such as access to food and health care. Similar to youth who live independently, low-income households experience limited access to social inclusion opportunities, supplies (particularly affordable groceries and food banks), and lack of reliable and affordable access to workplaces.

Another shortcoming of VDPs is that unlike fixed route services or shuttle programs, rides are not guaranteed to those that request them. For those that need rides—particularly medical, school, work, food access or social service related rides—but are unable to find them, there is a demand for strategies that address unmet need such as introducing a taxi voucher program, stopgap service provision through microtransit, or other measures. In the Monadnock Region during the year ending June 30, 2021, 17% of trip requests to VDPs were denied for various reasons. The vast majority of denied trips (71.5%) were due to unavailable drivers. An additional 23.5% of trips were denied because riders failed to provide enough notice, or trip requests were outside of trip purpose or operating area. The remainder of denied trips were for other reasons.

Access to transportation, to economic and social opportunity, and to resources for healthy living are inextricably linked and are critically important to the health and well-being of all transit-dependent populations in the largely rural Monadnock Region. It is important that efforts to improve access to community transportation programs and services are tailored to meet the specific needs of each demographic group. Given VDP's prominent role in providing transportation in the Monadnock Region, and its potential as a low-cost, grassroots approach to delivering rides, this study examines VDPs more closely to see how they can improve transportation access in the region.

The purpose of this technical memo is to present preliminary research findings to help the Monadnock Region Coordinating Council (MRCC) gain an initial understanding of issues related to the following overarching questions, which are identified as strategic priorities in the 2018 Coordinated Community Transportation Plan for the Monadnock Region:

1. What is the feasibility of VDPs serving a broader cross-section of the population including area youth, low-income persons and other transit dependent groups identified by MRCC?

2. What programming innovations could address Section 5310 providers' current unmet need ride requests?

This research is being conducted as part of a larger study with the overall purpose to explore two research topics for which the MRCC believes could lead to a more innovative, coordinated and resilient transportation system for everyone. These include inquiries into the feasibility of both microtransit and enhanced VDP services in the Monadnock Region. The latter is the subject of this technical memo.

This memo provides the results of the project's Phase I research activities and a foundation for conducting additional research as well as meetings and follow up activities with VDPs and other transportation providers to assess their readiness to expand services as well as address unmet need ride requests.

RESEARCH

SWRPC's efforts to conduct preliminary research and information gathering include three components: 1) conducting a literature scan of VDPs and community transportation programs in the New England region and other parts of the country that serve rural populations; 2) conducting an interview with the Executive Director of the Community Volunteer Transportation Company (CVTC), the largest VDP provider in the Monadnock Region; and, 3) reviewing case studies from community transportation improvement projects implemented in other rural areas. Additionally, VDPs serving other regions of New Hampshire are identified as potential candidates to participate in meetings and/or key informant interviews during Phase II of the feasibility study.

Literature Scan

The literature scan involved an extensive review of reports that are available from professional community transportation organizations. They include the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Transportation Research Board (TRB), National Center for Mobility Management, and National Aging and Disabilities Transportation Center (NADTC). The scan reveals that, while a significant body of information exists on the development, implementation and evaluation of community transportation and mobility management programs for older adults and people with disabilities, there is a dearth of information on programs targeted to meet the needs of other transit-dependent populations including youth and low-income persons in general, and in rural areas in particular. This is likely because the predominant funding sources, such as the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5310 funding program, provide support for community transportation programs targeted to seniors and people with disabilities.

Furthermore, most information that is available, even for VDPs that serve older adults and people with disabilities, is anecdotal in nature. The TRB has determined that more rigorous research is needed and outlined a process for doing so in a 2021 Research Needs Statement, *Planning, developing, and sustaining Volunteer Driver Programs (VDPs) as an effective mode for rural transportation*.ⁱⁱ The research would attempt to analyze the potential for VDPs to be an effective

means to accommodate the unmet mobility needs of older adults and other transportation-disadvantaged people in rural communities where transit, paratransit and taxi services are limited or cost prohibitive. The assumption is that there is considerable potential for these programs to be implemented or expanded on a coordinated basis to provide low-cost and accessible transportation in underserved or unserved rural communities. This would be a national research effort with objectives to support the elaboration of a seminal publication that would review, summarize, and build on, as directly stated in the document, the following dimensions:

- Identify existing VDPs in North America, particularly in rural areas, and available resources on these programs, including tools for planning services or monitoring and dispatching volunteers.
- Identify the types of metrics and methods for monitoring performance that would be valuable for transportation planning and aligned with the VDPs capacity to provide service and improve equity of available mobility options.
- Create an organizational complexity model (also known as maturity model) tool that quantify success factors and best practices of VDPs in rural areas.
- Identify criteria/factors for program success based on population and geography size to identify ideal places for VDPs and appropriate sizing of programs based on local suitability.
- Create a tool based on organizational complexity and operational metrics that transportation agencies and existing or prospective VDPs can use to help them assess or self-assess potential areas for improvement.
- Identify sustainable funding sources and mechanisms for VDPs in rural areas based on agency size and trip types.
- Quantify the potential for VDPs into a viable transportation resource in rural areas (which may include areas of less density, long distances, or otherwise difficult and expensive to serve) to provide additional transportation options for seniors, persons with disabilities, and other travelers as well as improve the equity of available mobility options.

A number of key benefits as well as challenges and recommendations for overcoming those challenges emerged from the literature scan for the MRCC to consider as it examines the feasibility of expanding VDP services in the Monadnock Region. Much of the literature emphasizes that use of VDPs within rural mobility management networks can be an effective means to complement existing transportation services or provide an option when no other service exists. This is particularly relevant in the Monadnock Region where fixed route services are very limited for the general public operating in Keene and portions of Swanzey, Hinsdale, and Walpole. The limited quantity of fixed route transit is exacerbated by the services' hours of operation, which are limited to weekdays mostly during regular business hours. Benefits of VDPs in comparison to fixed route services are their relatively low cost of operation, their ability to offer personalized assistance and build positive relationships between drivers and passengers, and their scalability meaning that they can be expanded or reduced based upon demand or population density without heavy capital investment.

MassMobility, an initiative of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services with support from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, has identified recruiting enough drivers to meet demand, locating funding to cover operational costs, and navigating volunteer insurance and liability concerns as significant challenges to establishing and sustaining VDPs. These challenges are consistently identified in other studies and reports reviewed for this study. Both MassMobility and NADTC have identified strategies for overcoming the challenges which include:

- **Recruiting and Retaining Drivers** – In Massachusetts, some VDPs operating under a city or town provide qualified older adult homeowners with a write-off on their property tax bill for volunteering with a municipal agency as an incentive for recruiting drivers. The tax work-off abatement law allows a city or town to establish a program giving property owners 60 or older the opportunity to provide volunteer services to the city or town in exchange for a reduction in property tax of up to \$1,000. Many towns participate in this program through their Councils on Aging. Newbury, for example, lists on its website the volunteer positions, Medical Transportation Drivers and Meals on Wheels Drivers, and has job descriptions for each. NADTC recommends using a variety of outreach tactics such as Facebook marketing, Craigslist, Zip Recruiter, radio, print, movie theater, church, friends, or relatives to attract drivers. Both MassMobility and NADTC recommend as retention tactics hosting yearly volunteer appreciation events and making monthly phone calls from organizers to express gratitude to volunteers for hours spent driving. The latter tactic can be reinforced through collecting feedback from passengers, partners, or staff members as an operations strategy to provide testimonials, further affirming and showing appreciation for drivers' time and energy.
- **Outreach to Prospective Riders** – Both MassMobility and NADTC recommend that in addition to using traditional marketing tactics such as paid advertising, collaborating with community partners with complimentary missions to conduct outreach to expand awareness of VDPs as a transportation option for the public. This can include promoting their services to employers, hospitals and local medical facilities, human service organizations, and advertising to referral agencies.
- **Insurance and Liability** – While addressing concerns around insurance and liability can be challenging, MassMobility underscores that the actual risks associated with operating a VDP are minimal compared to the perception of risk. To address the concerns, some VDPs purchase umbrella policies covering above and beyond the driver's commercial policy. Both MassMobility and NADTC recommend having drivers and riders sign indemnification forms waiving their right to sue. NADTC recommends establishing good relationships with insurance agents and consulting them to ensure state guidelines are being followed.
- **Collecting and Sharing Data** – NADTC highlights the importance of collecting and gathering data around not only reporting rides but also quality metrics and operational metrics that enable the program to be viewed from multiple dimensions. Effective data collection will help to answer questions such as: What is increasing, decreasing, or maintaining? What factors or variables dictate a shift? The ultimate goals are to turn the

data into information to manage the program and to share what is relevant and meaningful on a regular ongoing basis with drivers, staff, management, partners, the media, and community. In addition to quantitative and qualitative data, capturing the stories of passengers, drivers, and program managers is essential to communicating the impact of the program to the community.

Delivering coordinated transportation services through adopting and implementing best practices for mobility management is identified throughout the literature as critical to addressing community transportation challenges in rural areas. TRB's *Expanding Access to Our Communities: A Guide to Successful Mobility Management Practices in Small Urban and Rural Areas* includes a mobility management implementation checklist that delves deeper into the strategies identified by MassMobility and NADTC and also includes additional strategies for needs assessment and program design, and fund development.ⁱⁱⁱ The MRCC is likely to have an excellent opportunity to expand its use of mobility management services through leveraging new funding and technical assistance anticipated in 2022-2023.

Additional strategies and innovative practices including technology solutions are highlighted in the Rural Case Studies section of this technical memo.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW: COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER TRANSPORTATION COMPANY

An interview was conducted with Ellen Avery who serves as the Executive Director of CVTC for the purpose of gaining an initial understanding of the challenges and benefits of expanding volunteer driver services to a broader cross-section of the population. The interview also included a discussion of challenges and potential opportunities for addressing current unmet need ride requests. As the largest VDP in the region, serving all 34 of the region's municipalities, CVTC provided 60.3% of the total 14,677 trips provided by all Section 5310 providers in the region during the two-year period July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020.

In addition to serving as CVTC Executive Director, Ms. Avery serves as the current MRCC Chair as well as mobility manager for the Section 5310 program. Serving in these combined roles provides the Executive Director with a comprehensive understanding of the region's overall community transportation system. Information gleaned from the interview will be utilized to inform the approach to conducting listening sessions and interviews with additional transportation providers during Phase II of the feasibility study.

CVTC serves four categories of riders: 1) people without disabilities under 60 years of age; 2) people without disabilities 60 years of age and older; 3) people with disabilities under 60 years of age; and, 4) people with disabilities 60 years of age and older. CVTC's Executive Director noted that the organization does not see a lot of demand from younger adults, youth or disabled. However, it is worth noting that CVTC has not specifically targeted younger adults and youth in its marketing materials and efforts. In fact, the marketing materials do not reference any specific populations that are served.

The typical profile of CVTC volunteer drivers is between 64 and 74 years of age, 80% college educated, and most are not employed.

A synopsis of interview content is presented in the following two sections.

Volunteer Driver Programs and Factors for Limiting/Expanding Categories

Although CVTC serves older adults, people with disabilities, youth, and veterans, 98% of rides are provided to older adults and people with disabilities. Because CVTC does not track ridership data by age or income level, it is not possible to identify transportation trends, such as trip purpose for youth and low income riders. However, the CVTC Board is committed to expanding transportation services to these other transit-dependent groups as a part of its vision to provide transportation for everyone.

When asked what are the greatest challenges to providing volunteer driver services for a broad cross-section of the population, Ms. Avery identified lack of volunteer driver capacity as the top challenge. While it is difficult to recruit a sufficient volunteer driver force, CVTC does not have issues with driver retention. This is due primarily to the high level of personal satisfaction drivers experience while volunteering. Drivers report that they consistently receive positive feedback from riders about how important the services provided are to their health and quality of life. To maximize its limited capacity of volunteer drivers, CVTC has an established policy that drivers meet a minimum threshold of providing four rides per month.

Ms. Avery indicated lack of funding as another top challenge to expanding services to other populations. The mileage reimbursement rate of 56 cents per mile CVTC provides drivers limits the ability to expand services to other populations. The Section 5310 program, which supports transportation for older adults and people with disabilities, is CVTC's primary source of funding. While additional funding is provided by the NH Charitable Foundation, Cheshire Medical Center, Monadnock Community Hospital, and Roy A. Hunt Foundation, it is not sufficient to support large scale expansion of services to other populations. Another challenge includes the liability risks involved in providing rides to children. In CVTC's experience, drivers typically prefer not to provide rides to children without another adult in the car.

Ms. Avery recommends the NH Alliance for Healthy Aging (NHAHA) as a resource for identifying potential funding sources for community transportation. The University of New Hampshire Center on Aging and Community Living conducted a funding scan in 2020 and created a searchable database on behalf of NHAHA that provides information on numerous funding opportunities that could support efforts to create age-friendly communities. Funder interest areas are categorized by five strategic framework areas including increasing transportation options.

Ms. Avery identified a number of benefits to providing volunteer driver services to a broad cross-section of the population including providing access to specialty medical services (i.e., dental, vision, and hearing appointments), grocery stores, and opportunities for social engagement for those who are socially isolated. A benefit to drivers includes the increased commitment they make to serving the community as a result of their volunteer service. Drivers are also keenly aware of

the health and well-being of their riders and help to ensure that they get the essential health care and other services they need.

When asked if it is advisable for VDP programs to promote shared rides among different population groups, Ms. Avery responded that CVTC will bundle rides when they can. CVTC's internal policy is that permission is required from both the riders and driver to do so. When asked about additional incentives (other than mileage reimbursement) needed to recruit volunteer drivers to transport youth or low income persons, Ms. Avery reported that CVTC has adopted a simple approach and purposefully does not provide additional incentives. This includes not having a driver of the year award. CVTC has discerned that the satisfaction drivers gain from volunteering keeps them motivated to continue serving.

At the time of this writing, CVTC is analyzing the results of a rider/volunteer driver survey it conducted during the fall of 2021. The results will be made available to SWRPC and utilized to inform this feasibility study. One finding that Ms. Avery highlighted is that 25% of riders who responded to the survey reported they rely solely on CVTC only for transportation services. This raised several questions on the part of the Executive Director:

- How do the remaining 75% of riders meet their transportation needs?
- What other services do they use?
- Do they rely on family members, friends, and neighbors to help meet their transportation needs?

Innovative Practices for Addressing Unmet Ride Requests

CVTC initially augmented unmet ride requests with a taxi service, but stopped the practice for philosophical reasons. The organization felt the practice ran contrary to the volunteer driver concept, namely, paying the high cost of taxi rides when volunteer drivers are receiving mileage reimbursement, but not being paid for their services. Riders are informed up front when they register that CVTC does not dispatch trips and that there infrequently may be times when a ride request cannot be met. There are people who want guaranteed rides (i.e., for methadone treatments), however, CVTC is not always able to meet the demand.

There are factors that contribute to the gaps in the services that CVTC provides. The most significant is the lack of capacity in the region's volunteer driver force. Another factor is their operational model which involves providing services for anyone who requests rides. Other organizations in the region that provide transportation, such as human services agencies and health care institutions have lists of drivers to cover last minute trips, but they are available for their members only. While the American Red Cross is no longer providing transportation services, they were a reliable agency for CVTC to call on, which helped to minimize the number of unmet ride requests. CVTC has a list of other transportation services to call within the regional provider network, but they typically are not readily available to meet the requests.

Ms. Avery is not aware of successful innovative practices for addressing unmet ride requests, but suggests that more involvement from municipalities could help especially for specific purposes such as trips to food outlets and hospitals. In particular, CVTC is interested in gaining access to

unused municipal recreation department vehicles for these types of trips. Working with the faith-based community to explore opportunities to make use of underutilized church vehicles might also be a strategy worth pursuing. Ms. Avery has spoken to a gathering of churches in Peterborough about the possibility. Exploring relationships with other organizations with unused vehicles would also be worth pursuing.

CVTC anticipates that, as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the number of unmet ride requests may double.

RURAL CASE STUDIES

The following case studies are presented as examples from around the country of VDPs and regional transportation coalitions serving rural areas for the MRCC to review as it considers next steps in assessing the feasibility of expanding VDPs to additional transit-dependent populations as well as strategies for addressing unmet ride requests for populations currently being served. The literature scan and CVTC key informant interview reveals specific challenges and opportunities related to achieving these two objectives.

Door-Tran: A Community Network Approach to Improving Transportation Options

Door-Tran is featured as a model community transportation program in the 2016 report, *Coordinated Mobility Management Feasibility Study for Waupaca and Surrounding Counties*.^{iv} The report includes the results of a transportation needs assessment in multiple rural Wisconsin counties.

Door-Tran is a non-profit organization and community consortium that partners with rural Door County to connect transportation services that are affordable, available, and accessible within and out of the county. Door County is 490 square miles with a total population of 27,785. In addition to community transportation services, Door-Tran provides vehicle loans, gas vouchers and other services.

The Door-Tran story began when the United Way of Door County identified expanding transportation services as the highest need for county residents in their 1998 and 2005 needs assessments, and also in a 2006 focus group. In 2007, the Door County Community Foundation released a request for applications for its Community Impact Grant. The Foundation was looking for creative cross-disciplinary projects that would have significant and positive impacts. The United Way was awarded a grant to form a transportation steering committee comprised of nonprofits, for-profits, and government agencies. The steering committee found that, while there were plenty of vehicles and drivers in the county, they were not adequately communicating with each other.

Under the direction of the steering committee, the Door County Transportation Consortium was formed in 2007 and continues today with over 40 current members. The Consortium's initial task was to establish a communication and coordination center. The center serves as a one-call-center to help Door County residents schedule rides on existing services. The center staff also tracks unmet needs by recording ride requests that are not filled and coordinating with UW-Green Bay

students to conduct a resident transportation needs survey. Door-Tran was formed to make transportation more affordable, available, and accessible based on the research results.

Since their research began in 2007, the Consortium has been able to make strides towards their mission to make transportation more affordable, available, and accessible through a number of creative and innovative strategies of which a VDP is a component. These include:

- Implementation and maintenance of a travel voucher program to cut travel costs in half for Door County residents who use a private taxi or other transit options.
- The creation of Door-Tran, Inc. D.B.A. Door-Tran became a 501(c)3 in November of 2009 with the assistance of the Door County Community Foundation.
- Collaboration with the County of Door to begin a public shared ride taxi, Door 2 Door Rides, which is averaging more than 3,400 rides per month.
- Implementation and maintenance of a VDP to assist veterans in getting to their medical appointments at out of county Veterans Health Administration medical facilities.
- Implementation and maintenance of a county-wide VDP that serves individuals who have no other options to get where they need to go.
- The creation of a Vehicle Purchase/Repair Loan Program in 2014 to serve hard working, low income families with 0% interest vehicle loans to get to and from work.
- In 2015, Door-Tran implemented and maintains a half-price gas voucher program to assist with fuel costs for employment or job search trips.

The driving force behind Door-Tran's success are the partnerships and the people involved. Important partners include the County and local municipalities, providers (for profit and not for profit), community members, and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. Buy-in from the County and local municipalities provide access to additional funding sources. The Consortium participates in conferences, trainings, webinars and teleconferences to get new ideas and connect with new partners.

Volunteer Transportation as an Affordable Option to Fill Transportation Gaps

The following is excerpted from a September 2021 NADTC Best Practices Compendium, a compilation of the lessons learned by 16 grant programs funded by NADTC from 2017 through 2019.^v These were demonstration grants with the overall purpose to establish one or more innovations with the potential to serve as models that may be replicated by other communities.

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. 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.

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.

In addition to the Feonix VDP example, there are other VDPs featured in the NADTC Compendium. Interviews conducted with grantees resulted in the identification of a number of findings. Below are summaries excerpted from the Compendium 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 be served 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. 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, 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 overpromise 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.

- **When planning outreach, make sure the mission is clear.** Convey exactly what you are looking for and whom you hope to serve. Feonix 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.
- **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.

Rightsizing Transportation Technology for Rural America

The following is a reprint of an article posted to an American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) blog on May 21, 2021 by Jana Lynott, AICP, MP, who is a senior strategic policy advisor at the AARP Public Policy Institute.^{vi}

When it comes to technology, many rural transportation providers face a mismatch between their needs and what's on the market today, particularly in terms of ride-scheduling software solutions. Software developers make assumptions about the agencies that will use their products, the services they provide, the availability of IT staff to monitor and maintain systems, and more. If an agency happens to fit in those boxes, off-the-shelf products could work quite well. However, for a small transit agency or transportation service in a rural area, operations may not align with any of these assumptions.

That was certainly the case for two nonprofit transportation providers—Inner Court Family Center (ICFC) and Lake County Senior Center Association (LCSCA) in highly rural Lake County, Oregon. The two nonprofits wanted to streamline ride-scheduling tasks and communication with drivers, make billing more transparent, and gain insights into cost drivers such as road conditions and trip distances. But they found off-the-shelf software solutions too complex and expensive for their needs.

In 2020, AARP provided funding to Full Path Transit Technology to work with ICFC and LCSCA to develop software suited to the needs of small providers with no more than a dozen vehicles. The project was also intended to be a proof-of-concept of a new data standard that allows two or more providers to coordinate their services to function as a single transportation provider. The resulting open-source software is RideSheet.

How It Works

Small nonprofit transportation providers are often the only game in town. In many parts of the United States there is no public transportation, no taxi, Uber or Lyft. Nondrivers, many of whom are older or have a disability, depend on human service agencies and volunteer driver programs for rides to the doctor, grocery store, and visits with friends. As our nation's population ages there is increasing demand for the transportation services offered by organizations such as ICFC and LCSCA.

That's where the new software comes in. The software was designed with the rural client in mind. For instance, RideSheet overcomes a problem common to rural areas: inaccurate Google Maps location results. It accomplishes this by using the Google Maps geocoding service to validate and format accurate street addresses that are easy to find by drivers. The software also builds upon general knowledge of spreadsheets, word processing, and calendar apps by integrating and migrating these functions to the cloud. Trip data is tracked in Google Sheets and can be exported to Google Calendar for easy visualization of drivers' schedules and to Google Docs for generating driver manifest reports. RideSheet will replace ICFC's and LCSCA's use of its makeshift and inefficient system built around local desktop spreadsheets, white boards, and pen and paper.

With RideSheet, agencies can track their services and exchange trip data with each other in a streamlined, secure manner using two customized, independent Google Sheets and without the need for rural providers' tools of the trade such as email, fax, or phone calls between providers, or for manual rekeying of trip information. RideSheet allows ICFC and LCSCA to share all their scheduled runs with one another in enough detail so that each agency can assess whether there is an opportunity to add a passenger of their own to the other agency's run or to fulfill a trip request from the other agency. The Application Programming Interface (API) that enables this interoperability adheres to the new transactional data standard (TDS).

Right-sized Technology Supports the Crucial Mission of Nonprofits in Rural America

By automating trip scheduling in a system rightsized for the real-life strengths and constraints of rural nonprofits, RideSheet frees up staff time, allowing them to focus on their core mission. In the words of Andrea Wishart, Executive Director, Lake County Senior Center Association, "We're worthy of having some good tools to use." RideSheet offers small providers like LCSCA an affordable technology solution to better serve riders who have few if any options to get where they need to go.

The above blog illustrates how incorporating technology can increase the capacity of VDPs to better address unmet transportation needs. A June 2019 MassMobility practice brief concludes that "... technology can be as complex as custom-built software or as simple as using free services such as Google Docs. When thinking about how technology can best serve your volunteer driver program, it is important to consider which option or options will best suit the needs of your service population, volunteer drivers, and staff. No matter the type of technology implemented, proper training of the individuals utilizing it is critical to success."^{vii}

FINDINGS AND NEXT STEPS

Summarized below are key findings and recommendations from the literature scan, key informant interview, and review of case studies.

Limited Research on Youth and Low Income Populations

The literature scan and review of case studies indicates that scant research has been conducted specific to efforts to improve access to community transportation services for transit-dependent youth and low-income populations in rural areas. A larger body of information is available on community transportation improvement efforts for older adults and people with disabilities and, to a lesser degree, military veterans, however, it is largely anecdotal in nature. Recognizing the lack of research that has been conducted, the TRB has determined that more rigorous studies are needed and has outlined a research framework.

Due to the lack of information that is currently available, it is recommended that the following avenues of research be the primary focus during Phase II of this feasibility study:

1. Conduct an ongoing literature and case study review for additional information on community transportation programs for youth and low-income populations not uncovered during the Phase I effort.
2. Further mine the resources gathered during Phase I on programs and services targeted to older adults and people with disabilities to glean additional insights strategies and innovative practices that may be applicable to other transit-dependent populations.
3. Maintain a keen focus on improving transportation services for youth and low-income populations when conducting key informant interviews during Phase II with representatives of VDPs serving other regions of New Hampshire and human service agencies in the Monadnock Region that provide transportation services to their clients.
4. Review findings from the microtransit component of SWRPC's feasibility study for the potential to use microtransit as a complement to VDPs and other transit services.

Findings Related to VDPs Serving a Broader Cross-section of the Population and Addressing Unmet Need

Recruiting and retaining enough drivers to meet demand, identifying and securing funding to maintain operations, and navigating volunteer insurance and liability concerns are consistently cited as significant challenges to establishing and sustaining VDPs in rural areas. Strategies for overcoming these challenges include:

Driver Recruitment and Retention

- Deploy a variety of social media, print media and networking outreach tactics to attract drivers.
- Work with municipalities to provide property tax incentives to older adult homeowners who serve as volunteer drivers.
- Host volunteer appreciation events.
- Make periodic phone calls to acknowledge volunteers for their service.

- Collect feedback from passengers, partners and staff and share testimonials with drivers.

Outreach to Riders

- Use both non-traditional and traditional marketing tactics such as paid advertising and social media.
- Collaborate with community partners with complementary missions to conduct outreach and expand awareness of VDPs as a transportation option for the public.
- Recruit the above community partners to serve as members on Coordinating Councils and transportation collaboratives as a way to accelerate outreach efforts.

Insurance and Liability

- Purchase umbrella policies covering above and beyond drivers' commercial policies.
- Ask both drivers and riders to sign indemnification forms waiving their right to sue.
- Establish strong relationships with insurance agents and consult them to ensure state guidelines are being followed.

Collect and Share Data

- Collect ridership, quality assurance and operational data for the purpose of answering the questions: What is increasing, decreasing, or maintaining? What factors or variables dictate a shift?
- Share relevant and meaningful data on a regular ongoing basis with drivers, staff, management, community partners, the media, and community.
- Capture stories of passengers, drivers, and program managers to communicate the impact of the program to the community.

Other Strategies and Innovative Practices

- Build partnerships and relationships with other transportation providers and local human services agencies.
- Build ridership at a pace that matches the pool of available volunteer drivers.
- Right size technology to match the scope of operations of a rural transportation provider.
- Partner with other providers to coordinate services and streamline ride-scheduling tasks and communication with drivers.
- Consider developing half-price (or partially subsidized) travel voucher programs for private taxi and other transit options.
- Consider developing a zero-percent interest vehicle purchase and repair loan program for low-income working families.
- Consider developing a half-price gas voucher program to assist with fuel costs for employment or job search trips.

Next Steps

Phase II of the feasibility study will focus on gathering input from key VDP stakeholders, conducting additional research as necessary, and assessing readiness to expand transportation services in the region and address unmet need. Findings from the Phase I research will be used to frame discussions with stakeholders. The MRCC will be engaged and kept informed as the process progresses. Specific Phase II activities include the following:

1. Prepare, meet with and follow-up with VDPs regarding expansion with objective to develop SWOT Analysis or other evaluation tool that assesses readiness for expansion.
2. Prepare, meet with and follow-up with VDPs regarding addressing unmet need requests with objective to develop SWOT Analysis or other evaluation tool that assesses readiness.
3. Conduct additional research as necessary relating to expansion and unmet need, based on meetings.
4. Meet with VDP staff or boards as necessary to discuss readiness.
5. Develop a technical memo relating to assessment on readiness for expansion.
6. Develop a technical memo relating to assessment on readiness for addressing unmet need.
7. Update MRCC regarding VDP improvement activities during Phase II.

In addition to the above activities, there will be an opportunity to monitor and harvest outcomes and lessons learned from community transportation improvement projects that will be identified and implemented while this study is being conducted. The NH Department of Transportation, NH Department of Health and Human Services and NH State Coordinating Council have partnered to provide funding and technical assistance to expand mobility management services and implement community transportation improvement projects in the Monadnock Region. There will likely be project proposals aimed at expanding transportation services to youth and low-income populations as well as older adults and people with disabilities. Relevant results from such projects and expanded mobility management services can be integrated into this study.

Pending the results of Phase II activities, SWRPC will meet with and follow-up with VDPs and the MRCC regarding the development of an implementation plan for expanding services to a broader cross-section of stakeholders and/or the development of an implementation plan for addressing unmet ride requests.

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