

A Strategy for Getting People with Disabilities to Work: Supporting New Jersey County Transportation

New Jersey's 21 county community transportation providers – like many of their peers nationwide – are facing economic difficulties in maintaining and enhancing the vital services they provide to transportation disadvantaged persons, including people with disabilities seeking to access employment. This two-year study documents these difficulties and investigates best practices that could assist county community transportation providers in New Jersey and beyond cope, allowing them to better serve those most in need of transportation support.

Background

Since the 1980s New Jersey's county transportation providers have served an increasingly significant role in providing community-based transportation in the state, serving people with disabilities, the elderly, those with low incomes, and veterans, as well as the general public. Currently, these community transit providers are facing severe economic constraints due to the nationwide recession and a significant reduction in a main state funding source for the majority of county providers – the Casino Revenue Fund's Senior Citizen and Disabled Resident Transportation Assistance Program (SCDRTAP).

New Jersey's county community transportation agencies are committed to identifying other viable, diversified funding sources and seeking new strategies and innovative solutions that will allow them to continue and expand community transportation services to populations dependent upon that service.



Research Objectives & Approach

This research effort sought to 1) document the economic difficulties NJ's county providers are coping with and 2) identify strategies that could be pursued to address these difficulties so that services can be maintained and enhanced. Additionally, the researchers investigated how county providers could best serve the employment trip needs of persons with disabilities because these persons are so dramatically underrepresented in the labor market.

To achieve the research objectives, the investigators undertook both primary and secondary research that included a series of key informant interviews with New Jersey community transportation stakeholders; a national online survey of community transportation providers; focus groups with NJ consumers with disabilities seeking employment; and data inquiry and analysis that examined the universe of federal, state, local, and nonprofit/NGO funding opportunities available for community transportation providers.

Findings

All New Jersey county community transportation providers expressed dedication and commitment to offering employment trips to persons with disability and serving other transportation disadvantaged populations. County providers uniformly agreed that no single strategy will completely alleviate the economic duress they are experiencing and acknowledged that a variety of strategies must be pursued. Moving forward, the research team determined six core recommendation categories:

- *Pursue program evaluation* – Each of NJ’s 21 county transportation providers should undertake an effort to initiate and/or strengthen their program evaluation efforts to determine the economic costs, benefits, and social impacts of their services. Documenting and sharing those findings will serve to better inform stakeholders at the grassroots and political levels of the critical role county community transit services provide in the state. Program evaluation will also aid efforts to pursue policies/legislation supportive of county transportation services and would be valuable in pursuing grant opportunities.
- *Pursue a variety of grant funding opportunities* – All NJ county providers utilize a mix of federal, state, and local funding, but there is great variety in the number and extent of programs utilized. Some counties have not yet availed themselves of multiple funding sources, including funding from nonprofits/NGOs.
- *Pursue a variety of non-grant funding opportunities* – Funding other than by grants should be considered and/or expanded, including bus advertising, donation and fare programs, use of volunteer drivers, private sector support, and service contracts. Most providers are not maximizing non-grant funding opportunities, such as fare programs.
- *Pursue legislative & regulatory opportunities* – A variety of legislative and regulatory opportunities should be explored that could help to alleviate the economic difficulties experienced by county community transportation providers, including clarification on federal anti-kickback legislation, discussion with FTA on funding match issues, and identification of a new state dedicated funding source for county community transportation.
- *Pursue operational efficiencies* – Optimization of existing resources can yield much needed cost savings. Examples include implementing coordination strategies; utilizing efficiency promoting technologies such as route scheduling software; and offering a diverse array of service options, such as feeder service and deviated fixed routes, which can reduce reliance on costly single occupant trips.

Finally, to facilitate employment trips for persons with disabilities county providers need to focus on expanded hours and days of service to better meet employment travel needs. Also, county providers and other community transit services must consider how to better serve “first and last mile” trip needs, which can cover the gap in services that often exists between one’s home, a transit station/stop, and one’s workplace. Achieving these goals and many others related to service enhancement depends upon first remedying the difficult financial circumstances under which county providers are currently operating.

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A final report is available online at: <http://policy.rutgers.edu/vtc/new/>