

Development of Transportation Services To Expand Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in Tennessee

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A process to facilitate the development of alternative transportation service options to assist persons with disabilities in overcoming barriers that limit employment opportunities was initiated. Activities concentrated on collecting information about existing transportation resources, work-trip problems, and potential solutions. A study team was assembled and a survey of county executives and city mayors across Tennessee was conducted to identify existing transportation services for workers with disabilities. Transportation study groups were formed and group interviews conducted to obtain information from service providers and users about employment opportunities, transportation problems, and potential solutions. These activities have produced recommendations about transportation services for workers with disabilities. The recommended services represent potential service demonstration projects, which will be pursued in the next phase of the project.

Tennessee, along with many states across the nation, is experiencing substantial economic development and growth. Each of the three major regions of the state (east, middle, and west) is reaping the benefits of increased employment opportunities resulting from the expansion of existing businesses and the relocation of new businesses to the state. Many persons have taken advantage of the opportunities to obtain new employment or experience career growth as a result of increased economic activity. However, certain segments of the population, such as persons with disabilities, are unable to participate fully in this economic growth. Such problems as lack of education and training, day care, and worksite inaccessibility are barriers that must be overcome to facilitate job placement and retention. In many cases, employment opportunities are limited simply because employees cannot drive or cannot afford transportation. In addition, many potential worksites are located in areas not served by existing transportation services, and work schedules often do not correspond to scheduled public transportation services.

The overall intent of the project described in this paper was to initiate a process for developing alternative transportation service options, which would assist persons with disabilities in overcoming barriers that limit access to employment opportunities and inhibit participation in the economic growth of Tennessee. The targeted client group was composed of Tennesseans with disabilities who are currently employed or

will be employed in competitive positions. In addition to employees with disabilities, other audiences involved with the project included transportation operators and community service agencies who transport employees with disabilities to worksites, employers who recruit and hire employees with disabilities, and support agencies who provide funds to facilitate the employment of persons with disabilities. Under the direction of the University of Tennessee Transportation Center, these groups provided input on the development and design of transportation services for employees with disabilities.

The project was conducted from October 1989 through June 1990. The results pertain to activities conducted during the first phase. On the basis of study results, the project will continue into a second phase in which transportation service demonstration projects will be developed, implemented, and evaluated as solutions to work-trip transportation problems for persons with disabilities. The major objectives of the first phase of the project were to

- Establish a study committee to work with staff to formulate project goals and objectives, develop a work plan, and review and monitor progress;
- Develop a profile of existing transportation services in Tennessee that serve the work-trip needs of workers with disabilities;
- Assemble and conduct transportation study group sessions in urban and nonurban areas of east, middle, and west Tennessee to assess transportation problems of employees with disabilities and to define a specific package of service options that can provide solutions; and
- Select specific transportation service options defined by transportation study groups and develop a service demonstration and shared-cost financing plan for implementing and field testing selected transportation services.

The methodology used and the initial results of project implementation during phase one are now discussed.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Project Study Committee

A project study committee was assembled to assist the project staff with formulating project goals and a general workplan

and to review and monitor progress. The study committee was formed in November 1989 and includes 17 members, who represent a variety of local and state community service agencies and transportation organizations. Many of the representatives are members of the Tennessee Initiative on Employment Management Team (TIE). TIE is an interagency team of state agencies and organizations who collaborate to develop a statewide system of services that will facilitate the employment of persons with disabilities.

The committee members have assisted in developing survey instruments and group interview guides and in recruiting participants for transportation study group interviews. These interviews were conducted in six locations throughout the state. Committee activities will continue during the second phase of the project and will include assisting with tasks regarding the development, design, and implementation of selected transportation service demonstration projects.

Existing Transportation Services

To identify existing services for the transportation work-trip needs of persons with disabilities in Tennessee, project staff conducted a statewide survey of county executives and city mayors. A transportation services information form (copies are available from T. J. Newsom) was developed and mailed to a total of 114 potential respondents. Persons completing the survey were asked to identify existing transportation services that serve workers with disabilities in their jurisdiction. Approximately 40 percent of the surveys were returned by mail. Follow-up phone calls were made to encourage the completion of surveys and to obtain information. Information was obtained for all 95 counties in the state and for 19 cities with populations of more than 15,000.

Rural and urban public transportation providers were identified for each county. Additional public agencies and private transportation providers were identified for many of the counties, in particular for those with large urban centers. All respondents expressed an interest in the work-trip transportation problems of persons with disabilities and acknowledged the need to identify and expand current services and develop new services to fill any remaining mobility gaps.

The final product will be a document that inventories the work-trip transportation services for persons with disabilities in Tennessee. The document is being prepared for review and comment by the study committee members. The final document will be distributed to appropriate individuals and organizations as a referral resource on available commuter transportation services for employees with disabilities.

Transportation Study Group Formation and Meeting Results

The next task was to assess transportation problems of employees with disabilities and to explore potential solutions. Modified focus groups, referred to here as transportation study groups, were assembled. Group interviews were conducted in urban and nonurban areas across Tennessee. Transportation study groups were assembled in March 1990 in Sevierville and Knoxville in eastern Tennessee, in April 1990 in Columbia

and Nashville in middle Tennessee, and in May 1990 in Martin and Memphis in western Tennessee. Each group consisted of invited representatives of transportation providers, supported-employment programs, employers, Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) agencies, and consumer organizations. A total of 70 individuals participated in the transportation study group meetings and the typical size of each group was 11 participants.

Project staff conducted group interviews with each of the six groups using the research study group interview guide (copies are available from T.J. Newsom) that had been developed by the staff and the study committee. The interview guide was designed to obtain qualitative information about employment opportunities, current transportation options, preferred transportation options, incentives and disincentives, and financial considerations. Each group session was taped and notes were taken. Participants were also asked to complete a short opinion questionnaire before the group discussions.

The information obtained from the six transportation study group interview sessions was reviewed and analyzed to ascertain overall opinions and thoughts about transportation needs, problems, and solutions for employees with disabilities. These qualitative results from the group interviews are now summarized.

- *Employment opportunities* for persons with disabilities are numerous, primarily in the food, hotel, and janitorial service sectors. These jobs offer pay increases and benefits, but advancement opportunities are limited. Both full- and part-time employment opportunities are available. However, work-trip transportation continues to be a major problem in obtaining employment. Transportation to accommodate part-time workers, especially when public transportation service is not operating, is a major problem that creates lost employment opportunities. Of those participants who responded to the questionnaire, 95 percent stated that transportation availability was a major barrier to employment opportunities for workers with disabilities.

- *Current transportation options* for employees with disabilities are limited. Employees will ride public transit to work in urban and rural areas if the service is available and can accommodate the work trip. Many employees cannot ride public transit when priority seating is assigned to medical or other trips, or when the bus or van can get them to work but cannot provide a return trip home, or when door-to-door service is not available. Most workers rely on transportation provided by family members or friends, job coaches, or volunteers. Many workers are able to ride on agency vans during job training programs, but must find other transportation options after the training period has been completed. On occasion, workers must use taxicab service for all or part of a work trip, but most workers find taxicab service too costly to use on a regular basis. Some workers with disabilities own vehicles and are able to drive to work, but others who are capable of driving do not because they lack driver training and experience, cannot afford a new vehicle or the costs to repair currently owned vehicles, or cannot qualify for, or afford the cost of, auto insurance. The responses to the opinion questionnaire are in general agreement with these findings in that 45 percent indicated that public transportation was the

typical means for persons with disabilities to commute to work. Riding with family, friends, coworkers, and volunteers was stated as the typical means of traveling to and from work by 34 percent of the respondents. Fourteen percent of the respondents indicated that driving was the usual means of traveling to and from work.

- *Preferred transportation options* for employees with disabilities included various options, but an emphasis was placed on developing options that provided a maximum degree of independence for the worker. These transportation alternatives included

- Expansion of existing transit services provided in urban and rural areas. Suggestions included obtaining more vans and drivers for rural transit systems, purchasing additional lift-equipped vans and buses, and establishing new routes or extending existing services into evenings and weekends. This option was clearly the preferred one among persons completing the questionnaire: 54 percent of the respondents were in favor of expanding existing public transportation services.

- Develop a door-to-door, dial-a-ride type service, which features taxicab service at low-cost group rates. A reservation-based system that would operate on a 24-hour schedule was suggested.

- Establish modified driver education programs to help persons with disabilities learn to drive and obtain drivers' licenses. Programs may need to be lengthened to accommodate special needs of drivers with disabilities.

- Create a vehicle procurement program for workers with disabilities who can drive. The program could offer opportunities for workers to lease or purchase vehicles for commuting to and from work.

- Provide technical assistance to agencies in identifying individuals (i.e., coworkers, volunteers, etc.) willing to transport persons with disabilities to worksites. It was suggested that computer software be obtained to assist agencies with ride matching.

- Develop a system to disseminate information about existing transportation resources available for workers with disabilities. Printed information and perhaps a telephone "hotline" were suggested as alternatives.

- Expand programs that teach workers with disabilities how to use available transportation services. This program would move beyond classroom instruction to a "hands on" approach (i.e., field training on how to ride a bus or how to form a carpool).

- *Incentives and disincentives* for agencies to provide work-trip transportation options for persons with disabilities were linked primarily to funding resources available to operate specific services. In most cases, a contract between a community organization (e.g., senior citizen center or vocational rehabilitation agency) and a transportation provider is sufficient to obtain transportation for special groups. Service priorities are generally established by a board or an advisory committee that sets transportation policy. Work trips are given priority by some transportation agencies, but most agencies provide a greater number of trips for medical and nutrition purposes. Transportation providers indicated that an increase in funding levels for service operations would be the major incentive to increase work-trip transportation services for employees with disabilities. Indeed, more than 70 percent of the

respondents to the questionnaire indicated that additional grant funding would be a major incentive to encourage transportation providers to expand work-trip services for employees with disabilities.

- *Financing* the suggested transportation options for workers with disabilities should incorporate shared-cost arrangements among service providers, service users, employers, and the community. It was consistently expressed that the employee was expected to pay a fair share of the costs of transportation to work. In addition, it was strongly believed that any major improvements in transportation must be shared by the community as a whole through increased funding of existing and new services. Mechanisms to obtain such new funding would involve increased taxes or fees, such as wheel taxes, sales taxes, and other forms of dedicated taxes for community transportation. Sixty-four percent of the respondents generally agreed that a shared-cost arrangement was the appropriate way to pay for the transportation services.

Transportation Service Demonstrations

Pertinent information about transportation service problems and solutions was obtained through the group interviews conducted throughout the state. As mentioned previously, various options were suggested as preferred alternatives for transporting workers with disabilities to and from work. Several of these options, such as information dissemination programs or technical assistance to establish computer ridematching services, are low-cost alternatives relative to the costs for implementing such options as developing a door-to-door, dial-a-ride service or creating a vehicle procurement program. The expansion of existing services and modification of current transportation education programs are feasible from time to time, but would depend on financial assistance in addition to current operating funds. All of the options suggested by the participants in the group interview sessions are potential service demonstration projects. The development of specific service demonstrations, selection of test sites, and service financing options are activities that are currently underway as phase two project tasks.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES

The overall intent of the project was to initiate a process to facilitate the development of alternative transportation service options that will assist persons with disabilities in overcoming barriers that limit employment opportunities. Activities during the first phase of the project have been completed and, as described previously, concentrated on collecting information about existing transportation resources, work-trip problems, and potential solutions. During this phase, a study team was assembled, a survey of county executives and city mayors across Tennessee was conducted to identify existing transportation services for workers with disabilities, and transportation study groups were formed and group interviews conducted to obtain information from service providers and users about employment opportunities, transportation problems, and potential solutions. These activities have produced recommendations about transportation services for workers

with disabilities. The recommended services represent potential service demonstration projects, which will be pursued in the second phase of the project.

Phase two will continue the development of alternative transportation service options, which will assist persons with disabilities to overcome barriers that limit employment opportunities. The work during phase two will focus on developing and implementing transportation services at demonstration sites throughout the state. The major tasks to be accomplished during this project phase include the selection of demonstration sites, the design of transportation services to be tested at each demonstration site, and the development of financial resources to fund the demonstration projects. The

operations of funded demonstration projects will be monitored and the benefits, costs, and lessons learned from the demonstration projects will be evaluated. The results of the project will be documented and disseminated to other communities in the state interested in implementing similar transportation services for workers with disabilities.

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