

Technical Assistance on Tap

HIGHWAY AND TRANSIT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS OFFER HELP NATIONWIDE

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Research results can be put into action more quickly and effectively if technical assistance is given directly to the end user. New technical assistance programs have been initiated in the past few years to help local and state governments take advantage of federal research and to provide a forum for sharing information. FHWA's Rural Technical Assistance Program, UMTA's Rural Transit Assistance Program, and the Multi-State Technical Assistance Project are similar programs, but each addresses different problems and needs. In this article, the three programs are described by those who know them well. Harry H. Hersey explains FHWA's RTAP, Carol T. Everett describes UMTA's RTAP, and David H. Clawson summarizes MTAP.

FHWA'S RTAP

In the United States, 37,000 local road agencies are responsible for more than 70 percent of the roads and more than 50 percent of the bridges in the nation. The Federal Highway Administration's Rural Technical Assistance Program transfers modern highway technology to these local agencies, allowing them to improve their roads efficiently at the least overall cost.

The Highway RTAP is administered as a fed-

eral aid program through FHWA and the state transportation agencies. Congress, concerned about the growing demands placed on rural roads, allocated a yearly average of \$4.3 million for the program. About 80 percent of this allocation supports technology transfer centers. The states sponsor these technology centers, and FHWA allocates budget, oversees the program, and ensures effective communication.

FHWA's National Highway Institute, located at the Turner-Fairbank Highway Research Center, is responsible for RTAP. FHWA field offices deliver the federal aid and channel information from the National Highway Institute to the state agencies and technology transfer centers.

Technology Transfer Centers

The heart of the program is the 46 technology transfer centers, which provide engineering extension services to counties, municipalities, and local agencies. These centers publish newsletters, issue technology transfer materials, conduct training sessions, and perform program evaluations. The average center spends about 40 percent of its funds on training and conducts 17 workshops each year. Topics studied during a recent year by the 27,000 center trainees nationwide include asphalt paving, geotextile engineering, and value engineering.

The centers are now developing videotape libraries, audiovisual "road shows," and microcomputer program collections to deliver how-to road maintenance, safety, and operations information to local agencies. In a related project, the American Public Works Association has used RTAP funds to establish a central clearinghouse for training materials.

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Results

Through interviews of its users, one center recently determined that the financial benefits of its programs for a 2½-year period were \$700,000. One user agency, for example, reported a 90-percent decrease in recurring potholes. The center calculated that 55 percent of the reported benefits were due to the training courses and road shows, with the remainder due to the center's technical publications. The operating costs of the center were \$340,000 during the same period.

Financial gain is not the only benefit provided by the centers. Among the other advantages offered are increased work zone safety; more effective use of human resources; better working relationships among state agencies, local agencies, and universities; and a continuing exchange of information on common problems and solutions.

UMTA'S RTAP

In late 1986, Congress authorized creation of a second RTAP, this time for rural transit. The Rural Transit Assistance Program, which falls under Section 18(h) of the Surface Transportation Act and is administered by the Urban Mass Transportation Administration, has been funded at some \$5 million per year. The program is meant to establish

a coordinated training, technical assistance, and research system to improve transit services in nonurbanized areas.

Specific targets of the Transit RTAP include more efficient use of public and private resources to provide safe and effective public transportation, development of state and local capacity for providing training and technical assistance, and improved distribution of resource materials. An additional goal is the construction of a national data base on nonurban transit.

Methods and Projects

The RTAP National Program is operated through a consortium of organizations that includes the American Public Works Association (APWA), Rural America, and the National Association for Transportation Alternatives. A 15-member advisory board of state officials and rural operators provides guidance for program development, with APWA providing technical assistance.

All 50 states have state-level Transit RTAPs, which receive 85 percent of the program funds. These programs vary according to each state's needs, but as with the Highway RTAP, training is the highest priority. The state programs arrange workshops, distribute and develop training materials, and provide operator scholarships for courses and conferences. State transit associations and the FHWA-sponsored technology

transfer centers established for the Highway RTAP are assisting the state Transit RTAPs with these activities. The remaining funds support national RTAP endeavors, such as a clearinghouse for training materials, the RTAP National Resource Center, and a peer-to-peer technical assistance network.

Results

The state RTAPs have successfully used surveys, working groups, and meetings to involve local transit operators in developing the programs. The program output includes newsletters and fact sheets, toll-free information and assistance hot lines, system performance evaluations, and statewide insurance pools.

Nationally, a catalog of training materials was prepared, and two modules of a national driver training program were released. In addition, the RTAP National Resource Center now has a toll-free hot line (800-527-8279) for information on rural and specialized transportation.

A cooperative effort is ensuring that RTAP products and services meet the needs of rural operators. UMTA has enlisted organizations such as FHWA, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Agriculture, AASHTO, the International Taxicab Association, and state transit associations to help with this effort.



FHWA's RTAP helps local agencies meet highway challenges unique to rural areas.



Helping local operators provide safe and economical transit for rural and small-town residents is UMTA's RTAP goal.

MTAP

In 1987, AASHTO initiated a program known as MTAP (Multi-State Technical Assistance Project) to encourage state transit officials in a variety of activities to share experiences, practices, and solutions. To date, 20 states have joined MTAP. First-year project activities included identification of state transit practices to be showcased, networking with peers, regional meetings of state transit staff members to exchange information, and production of a resource notebook of information on alternative transit practices.

MTAP program participants are working closely with those involved in the UMTA RTAP to ensure that the two programs are complementary. Efforts are made to prevent duplication of work and to get the most return from the resources available to the two programs.

For more information about FHWA's Rural Technical Assistance Program, contact Harry H. Hersey, National Highway Institute, FHWA, 6300 Georgetown Pike (HHI-23), McLean, Va. 22101 (telephone 703-285-2780). For more information

about UMTA's Rural Transit Assistance Program, contact Carol T. Everett, American Public Works Association, 1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004 (telephone 202-393-2792). For more information about MTAP, contact David H. Clawson, AASHTO, 444 N. Capitol St., Suite 225, Washington, D.C. 20001 (telephone 202-624-5800). The program was also described in the February 1989 issue of the UMTA RTAP Bulletin.

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