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SUMMARY OF POTENTIAL OPTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

The next five chapters will describe particular actions that can be taken to address specific issues concerning improved public transit options for older persons. This chapter provides a quick summary of basic approaches and activities that are generally useful in improving public transportation services.

BASIC CHOICES

Public transit operators have many choices about how they may address the travel needs of older persons. You need to make a firm commitment to one of the following options.

- **PROVIDE:** Offer improved travel services;
- **PROMOTE:** Enhance efforts towards consumer-oriented marketing and services (**promote/sell** the service);

- **PURCHASE:** Contract with other providers, including volunteer services; become a broker (of information as well as services); or
- **PUNT:** Opt out.

Let's look briefly at these possible choices.

Providing Upgraded Transit Services

Issues of **availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, and affordability** must be examined when considering transportation alternatives to driving a car. Only 1.6 percent of Americans age 65 and older uses public transit daily or almost daily. This low rate of frequent usage is often caused by the fact that the automobile is the only travel mode that is practical or available in many

communities. In other localities, although transit is usually the low-cost travel alternative, its usage is often hampered by a lack of emphasis on service, security, and accessibility. In some instances, to attract older riders, it will be necessary to overcome the image of transit as an inferior transportation alternative. Key improvements will often need to include connections between a wider range of origins and destinations, and services available during more hours of the day and more days of the week. It will be a real challenge to find ways to combine more demand-responsive transit service with traditional fixed-route and fixed-schedule operations while collecting revenues that cover the costs of such services.

Promotional Strategies for Upgrading Transit's Image

With a transit system's positive attitude and support, seniors can see that they are being treated with respect. Understanding the service will help seniors make it responsive to their individual needs. Some social marketing may be needed to convince seniors and others that travel by means other than automobile has real value. More people could be attracted to public transportation services if these services adopted a greater customer focus and a more user-friendly attitude and began to cater to riders who ride by choice, not because they have no other choice. Travel training on how to use public transit services can be critically important. Travel training programs have been extremely useful in increasing the usage of public transit services among people with disabilities, including individuals in mental retardation and developmental disabilities programs.

Purchasing Services

It can be highly attractive and effective for transportation authorities to purchase specialized transportation services from other providers instead of providing these services themselves. Many transit providers are purchasing services mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—late-night services, feeder services, end-of-the-route services, and other services—from private providers (including taxi operators) and human service agencies. So-called “brokerage” operations have become commonplace. In these operations, public transit authorities write contracts, which include service quality standards, with other organizations, shifting some typically difficult issues like wage scales and work rules to those other organizations.

Opting Out

Most people in the public transportation industry would be very unhappy to see public transit providers opt out of a major role in providing trips to older persons. Still, this must be recognized as an option that is possible, or even probable, for a small number of communities. Particularly in communities where transit authorities do not wish to extend their activities into the “mobility manager” mode, public transit may wish to focus on what it does best: moving many people cost-effectively, especially for centrally-located work trips. If there are other operators wishing to step into the void with demand-responsive services, there may be no loss of mobility for older persons and others in these communities.

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

A four-step process can be used to increase the use of public transportation services by

older persons. Each of these steps should be included in an overall action plan to improve services for older persons:

- 1. Review Services for Older Persons.** Current public transportation services should be reviewed to ensure that services are **available, accessible, acceptable, adaptable, and affordable**, especially to those seniors with mobility limitations and other frailties. Improvements should be made to key service attributes such as reliability, proximity, flexibility, and comfort.
- 2. Attract Older Persons.** Marketing and community outreach efforts designed to overcome any transportation-related apprehensions or negative perceptions among older persons are imperative. Seniors must see public transportation as an attractive transportation alternative before they will be willing to try it. Service improvements (Step 1 above) are a fundamental component of a good marketing strategy.
- 3. Keep Older Customers.** Older customers can only be retained by consistently high-quality service. This means providing excellent customer service, being flexible, and maintaining tight quality control. Although it is difficult to attract customers, they may be lost very easily.
- 4. Remain Viable for Older Persons.** Improving public transportation services for older persons will require increased funding as well as cooperation from other agencies serving older persons. A proactive approach to community involvement will build coalitions, improve coordination, and secure funding from alternate sources.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING SPECIFIC DEMANDS AND NEEDS

There are three major categories of recommended strategies for improving

public transportation services for older persons:

1. Addressing user preferences for services;
2. Meeting user needs and limitations; and
3. Making fundamental improvements to public transportation.

Addressing User Preferences for Services. These strategies, described in Chapter 3, focus on increasing the comfort and confidence levels of elderly passengers by making improvements in the quality of the transportation services delivered. Improvements also address the amenities, “user-friendliness,” and safety issues that an elderly transportation passenger will face.

Meeting User Needs and Limitations. These strategies, described in Chapter 4, focus on accessibility and addressing the needs of elderly persons with physical, financial, and other limitations. These are not issues of preference and perception; they are issues of ability and accommodation.

Making Fundamental Improvements to Transportation Systems. These strategies, described in Chapter 5, address problems with the “big picture” such as system design, service philosophy, and public relations. Strategies in this category deal with politics and practicality as well as perception and customer service. Also in this category are strategies that deal with community issues affecting the environment in which a given transportation system operates and affecting that system’s ability to provide services to older persons. These strategies involve securing funds, coalition building, and other public relations activities.

Communities where such strategies have been employed are described in the chapters

that follow this one; additional information about specific transportation systems is included in the Appendix to this Handbook. More information on transportation services can be found in the Final Report, the second volume of *TCRP Report 82: Improving Public Transit Options for Older Persons*.

A SHORT LIST OF HIGH-IMPACT STRATEGIES

In many communities, the following strategies can help to improve public transit options for older persons.

If you provide transportation, you should

- Change from a focus on operating vehicles to a focus on **servicing customers**. Develop an understanding of the diversity of needs among older persons and recognize the fact that older persons need different modes of transportation to meet different needs. Develop multiple transportation solutions to fit the varied needs of different older persons. Charge premium fares for the highest quality services. Find ways to help seniors board vehicles when necessary.
- Develop partnership agreements and contracts with human service agencies to coordinate the provision of specialized **services** for clients who need additional assistance. Specialized paratransit service (often provided by volunteer drivers) is an excellent solution for gaps that exist in transit and ADA paratransit service such as trips outside the service area and medical trips that require the driver to wait. These services can also cover trip requests that fall beyond the normal hours of service or are last-minute requests.
- Improve **travel information** by providing more friendly and more

detailed information for trip planning and while traveling. Provide more telephone lines and operators for travel assistance.

- Contract with taxi companies to provide more **flexible service** for clients who need it. Taxi service (such as “guaranteed ride home” services) is another excellent solution for gaps that exist in regular transit and paratransit services.
- Work with other agencies to offer **travel subsidies** for seniors with limited incomes. Other agencies can determine who qualifies for such assistance and can help fund this assistance; public transportation should take the lead in administering these programs.
- Ensure long-term viability by securing **dedicated transit funding** in the form of a piggyback sales tax or millage. Ballot measures approving such funding have been passed in numerous localities, and the rewards are tremendous. Dedicated transit funds can solve many financial issues and free up time and resources to concentrate on serving passengers. Enlist the support of seniors in local referenda for dedicated transit funding.
- Develop a **community-wide travel perspective** with public transportation (or some other agency) operating as a mobility manager for all kinds of trips and all kinds of modes.
- Develop **ongoing relationships with local planning and development agencies** to ensure that public transportation is an active player in the growth and development of your community.

If you operate a fixed-route system, here are some ideas you may want to try:

- Work to improve schedule adherence and **reliability**. Identify high-traffic areas and bottlenecks that cause delays and eliminate these areas from the routes.
- Install intelligent transportation system (**ITS**)-based Automatic Vehicle Locator

(AVL) systems in buses and provide facilities to monitor the location of vehicles via the Internet. You can also install **smart displays** at stops to indicate estimated arrival times for vehicles. Smart display systems monitor the location of vehicles along the route and display the estimated arrival time on a large LED readout (usually attached to the shelter at the bus stop). Smart displays are just beginning to catch on in the United States but are common in Europe. AVL-based systems are appealing to seniors because these systems allow them to know exactly when the next bus will arrive, which can minimize waiting time.

- Purchase and operate **low-floor vehicles**. Nine out of 10 seniors find low-floor buses easier to board, and these buses also reduce waiting time at each stop (by reducing the amount of time it takes for each passenger to get off the bus). The slightly higher cost of low-floor buses is usually offset by the extra revenues generated from increased ridership.
- Consider **expanding service hours**. Many communities do not now have adequate evening and weekend public transportation services.
- Establish **driver training** programs to improve interactions with seniors. Train your drivers to recognize when an elderly passenger needs assistance and how to assist elderly passengers with boarding and alighting from the bus. You can also provide drivers with basic first aid training and emergency procedures training. Emphasize the need for polite and courteous interactions with passengers.
- Provide **maps and schedules** that are easy to understand and read. Make sure all text on the maps and schedules is printed in a large, bold font. Use color-coded maps with contrasting primary colors indicating the different routes. Test the intelligibility of the maps and schedules with groups of seniors and ask for suggestions on how to make them clearer.
- Add **customer service features** such as calling out stops, reserving more seats for older persons, providing more

friendly and more detailed travel information, providing more telephone lines for information, and making services more responsive to customer complaints.

- Institute a **travel training** program for seniors in your service area to welcome people who are not accustomed to using transit services. Sign up participants through the local senior centers and the local Area Agency on Aging. Park a transit vehicle at the senior center and invite participants to board the vehicle. Show them that your vehicle is accessible, clean, and comfortable. Take them for a ride to wherever they want to go and show them that they can enjoy the mobility that transit offers. Take the time to answer their questions and make sure that all participants get a copy of your schedule, route maps, and some free bus passes. Follow up with the participants by telephone to make sure that the training was successful.
- Provide **reserved seating** for older persons at the front of the vehicle. Make sure that this seating has appropriate padding and support and that there are handholds within easy reach (for pulling themselves up off the seats).
- Provide **shelters** and benches at all bus stops. This is especially important if you serve an area with inclement weather. Transfer facilities should also be protected from the elements.

If you operate a demand-responsive system, here are some ideas you may want to try:

- Implement **quality control** measures such as complaint monitoring, “mystery riders,” zero denial policies, and guaranteed rides home. Putting an emphasis on quality control can drastically reduce the number of complaints your system receives, dramatically improve the quality of the service you provide, and greatly enhance your public image.
- Provide extensive **driver training** on passenger assistance. Train drivers to

assist passengers with boarding/alighting. Also train them to assist passengers from door to vehicle and from vehicle to door. Higher levels of passenger assistance will allow more frail elderly persons to ride and increase your total ridership. Drivers should also be trained in basic first aid and emergency procedures.

- Expand **trip-making flexibility** by providing more opportunities for trip chaining and multipurpose trips.
- Provide **customer service training** to drivers and dispatchers. Passengers should hear a friendly voice when they call to schedule a trip, and they should see a friendly face when they board the transit vehicle. Encourage drivers to socialize with passengers and make them feel comfortable. Avoid the use of voice-mail or “press one” automated answering systems on your reservation line.
- Improve your **marketing and outreach efforts** to seniors. Distribute promotional materials to senior centers, elder-care facilities, motor vehicle authorities, doctor’s offices, shopping malls, churches, and any other places frequented by seniors. The goal is to ensure that no senior is left unaware of what your system has to offer and that every senior has your telephone number close at hand. Get the word out! Let seniors know that you can get them where they need to go, even if they are too frail to ride a fixed-route bus.

Most transit and paratransit systems already feature at least one of the service enhancements listed above. The key is to add these enhancements “across the board” and let the improvements build on one another to create a senior-friendly environment in all areas of service.

Improving schedule adherence will make quality control measures easier. Providing easily understood maps and schedules will reduce the number of exasperated telephone calls to transit offices. Travel training programs can reduce the demand for overburdened paratransit services and reduce the number of trip denials. In addition, these service improvements will benefit **all** passengers, not just older persons.

Of the improvements listed above, the least expensive to implement will probably be

- Maps and schedules that are easy to understand,
- Marketing and outreach efforts,
- Reserved/enhanced seating,
- Travel training,
- Driver training,
- Quality control measures,
- Customer service training for dispatchers and drivers,
- Passenger assistance training for drivers, and
- Contracts with other transportation providers including taxi companies.

More expensive improvements would probably include

- Shelters at all bus stops,
- Improved schedule adherence and reliability,
- ITS-based solutions, and
- New vehicles with the low-floor configuration.