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ADDRESSING USER PREFERENCES REGARDING TRANSIT SERVICES

Public transit systems need to improve their services to meet the travel preferences of their older customers. This effort can be called “service development with a customer focus.”

Older persons most highly value transportation services that are reliable, frequent, door-to-door, spontaneous, comfortable, and low cost. They also value transportation that serves a large variety of destinations over extended periods of time. Some transit systems may find it difficult to provide all of these services. Even so, there are still many steps that transportation providers can take to make their services more attractive to current and potential older riders.

This chapter focuses on three key opportunities for addressing user preferences regarding transit services:

- Increasing reliability,
- Increasing flexibility, and
- Improving comfort.

Additional information on the transit systems identified in this chapter in boldface type can be found in the Appendix to this Handbook.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENTS

Increasing the Reliability of Transportation Services

The reliability of transit services is of paramount importance to older persons. If service does not operate on time, time after time, customer confidence is shaken. As appointments are missed, frustration grows,

and the fear of being stranded becomes a big concern. This diminishes older persons' willingness to trust public transit to meet their travel needs.

Key strategies for increasing the reliability of transportation services include

- Reconfiguring schedules;
- Increasing the monitoring of on-time performance; and
- **Implementing technologies that provide real-time arrival information for passengers.**

The strategy in boldface type is discussed below.

ITS Applications That Provide Real-Time Travel Information for Passengers

Schedule adherence has always been a primary concern for transportation operators. For decades, transportation operators have searched for ways to reduce delays, reduce waiting times, and improve the reliability of their systems. Because of factors beyond anyone's control such as traffic and travel demand levels, schedule adherence remains an unsolved problem for nearly every transportation system. Recent ITS developments present an encouraging new approach to the problem of reliability.

Flagler County, Florida, is currently in the process of implementing an ITS-based system that will allow people to monitor the location of buses along the fixed route. Instead of waiting at a bus stop and hoping that a bus arrives on time, transportation users will be able to time their arrival at the bus stop to coincide with the arrival of the bus. The system, financed by a U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) grant,

will also tell them if the bus is late and how long it will take to reach the next stop.

Several companies are now marketing systems designed to provide instant information on actual—not scheduled, but actual—vehicle locations and arrival times. AVL technologies are used to track the speed and locations of the buses in service; this information is used to predict arrivals at specified locations, and this predicted arrival information is then sent to electronic signs on shelters, posted on Internet websites, and sent to Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and other wireless devices. A number of metropolitan and small urban sites are now initiating real-time arrival systems. These include Ann Arbor, Baltimore, Dayton, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Seattle and a variety of locations in California, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Real-time arrival systems have also been initiated in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland as well as in other European locations. Fairfax County, Virginia, is currently using such a system on its CUE (City-University-Energy Saver) bus routes and may expand it to all services in the near future.

Public transportation systems should maximize the benefits that technology can bring to their ability to provide prompt and on-time service to older persons. The result will be loyal customers.

Increasing the Flexibility of Transportation Services

Older persons of the future are expected to have higher expectations for public transportation services because most will be (or will have been) long-term licensed drivers who have been meeting most of their travel needs using their own personal vehicles. Therefore, flexibility in trip

planning and trip-making will be very important for transit services. One hundred percent of the Transit Industry Focus Group participants mentioned “spontaneity” as an important feature in an ideal transportation system. Older adult customers place a high value on spontaneity, the ability to decide on any given day to take a trip later that day.

Offering service for extended periods of time provides greater flexibility for travelers who use fixed-route transit services. The standard paratransit 24-hour advance notice requirement makes it extremely difficult for older persons who use paratransit services to adapt to changing personal and travel conditions. Real-time scheduling affords customers the ability to schedule or change trips based on developing circumstances. Same-day scheduling would be beneficial, for example, for responding to changing weather conditions. Prescheduled trips are interrupted most by rainy or snowy weather on the day a trip has been scheduled. Clearly, passengers want more spontaneity out of their paratransit services. How can a transportation system allow for flexibility and spontaneity in their scheduling?

Key strategies for increasing the flexibility of transportation services include

- **Extending service hours;**
- **Same-day scheduling of paratransit services;**
- Contracting with taxi companies for these services;
- Increased trip chaining;
- Providing service route (neighborhood circulator) services;
- Providing premium (short-notice) service for premium prices; and
- Implementing policies allowing escorts and assistance with packages and boarding/alighting.

The strategies in boldface type are discussed below.

Extending Service Hours

Many older persons in this project’s focus groups complained about the lack of weekend and evening service in their area. Very few transit systems that were interviewed provide weekend and evening paratransit service. **Metro RTA** in Akron, Ohio, provides paratransit services from 5:30 a.m. until 10:30 p.m. on Saturdays, and on Sundays from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. **Tri-Met** in Portland, Oregon, provides their fixed-route and paratransit service from 4:30 a.m. to 2:30 a.m., 7 days a week. In a quick survey, no small, rural systems were found that provided extensive evening or weekend service.

Same-Day Scheduling

Mountain Empire Older Citizens (MEOC), a rural public paratransit system serving southwestern Virginia, is a good example of how same-day scheduling can be integrated into the delivery of paratransit service. MEOC does this by attempting to fit in any trip request, regardless of how little notice is given. Although they do not guarantee that a same-day trip request will be met (trip requests made with 24-hour notice are guaranteed), most same-day requests are, in fact, met. This is accomplished through computer scheduling and radio contact with drivers. Typically, a dispatcher finds the nearest driver, contacts the driver on the radio, and asks him or her to fit in an extra pickup and dropoff. This works very well for small, rural systems, but what about larger systems?

Sun Tran, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has used a computerized scheduling and

dispatching system for the past 6 years with outstanding results. The dispatching system, together with mobile data terminals on each vehicle, allows Sun Tran nearly unlimited flexibility in scheduling paratransit trips. Passengers can call for reservations on the day of the trip, but the reservations are made on a “first-come, first-served” basis. Sun Tran cannot guarantee that every trip will be met, and earlier reservations take precedence over later reservations. The system has provided for major improvements in Sun Tran’s efficiency. Sun Tran’s goal for the future is for passengers to be able to call at any time for a paratransit trip to any destination.

Improving the Comfort of Using Transportation Services

A major dilemma for transportation operators is how to overcome the initial apprehensions of the senior population toward transit services. A quote from a Sarasota County, Florida, transportation official provides an excellent summation of the problems that transit operators face: “Many seniors have never ridden a bus. They believe the stereotypes. They need to see that the bus is clean and that the drivers are friendly.” In many ways, the problem is one of perception. The question is how to change many seniors’ negative perceptions of transit services.

Put yourself in the position of an elderly person who has never ridden a bus. Would you be eager for your first bus ride? Or would you be apprehensive about it? Riding a crowded bus for the first time can be a frightening experience for anyone, especially an older person. Even waiting outside for a bus can be intimidating. What if the bus never shows up? What if you get stranded 10 miles from home?

Fears can be overcome once the new rider becomes familiar with the bus and surroundings. However, if these fears keep an older person from trying the bus, then the fears can never be overcome.

Key strategies for increasing the comfort of using transit services include

- **Conducting travel training workshops with older persons to familiarize them with transit services;**
- **Training drivers to be more sensitive to the needs of older passengers and to be more courteous;**
- **Adding shelters and other amenities;**
- Increasing seating capacity; and
- Providing comfortable seats.

The strategies in boldface type are discussed below.

Travel Training

Travel training programs have become a popular way for transportation systems to reach out to elderly passengers. Travel training programs are intended to acquaint older persons with the transportation system, showing them how easy it is to board the bus and to ride to a destination. In most cases, a travel training program involves “classroom” time in which the seniors learn about transportation options, and “field time” in which they can try out riding the bus. Sometimes the transportation system will park a bus at a senior center or senior facility and invite the residents to board the vehicle and try out the seating. There may also be a seminar on reading transit maps and schedules or a discussion of bus pass options and discounts. The most successful travel training programs take it a step further, showing the trainees that public transportation can be a gateway to

independence and recreation. These successful travel training programs employ some of the following techniques:

- **Travel Buddies**—Some travel training programs, such as the one operated by **LIFT** in San Diego, encourage the participating seniors to find “travel buddies” in their group. These travel buddies will accompany each other on trips and outings, looking out for one another. The buddy system serves several purposes: it dramatically increases the comfort level for both participants, it increases the safety level for both participants, and it makes the bus trip into a social outing.
- **Seniors Choose the Destination**—Both **Great Falls Transit District (GFTD)** in Montana and **LIFT** report that allowing travel training participants to choose the destination for a “training trip” is a very successful selling point. A lot of times, the elderly participants will be surprised to find out that a bus can get them where they need to go. Additionally, it is exciting for the seniors to choose a destination, which makes the training experience less strenuous and tense.
- **Group Leaders**—GFTD adds another element to the travel buddy system. Each group of seniors that undergoes travel training is assigned a group leader. The group leader is a senior citizen who rides transportation regularly and is familiar with the system. When a group of seniors takes its first trip in the travel training process, the group leader will ride along with them to answer their questions and concerns. The leader also provides an example for the seniors, demonstrating things such as how to ask for a seat, when one should stand up to exit, and the proper way to pay the fare.
- **Peer Training**—The **Austin Resource Center for Independent Living (ARCIL)** and the city of **Napa**, California, employ a similar approach in their travel training programs. ARCIL and Napa employ senior volunteers as “travel ambassadors” to assist with travel training programs. In exchange for a year of free transportation service, volunteer travel ambassadors work one-

on-one with other seniors as peer-trainers. Travel ambassadors assist trainees with their trip planning, answer their questions and concerns, and accompany them on the bus. Travel ambassadors must complete a 5-hour training session, and commit to a year of training service (8 hours per month).

- **Follow-up**—Transportation officials at **LIFT** in San Diego stressed the importance of follow-up calls to each of the 15 to 30 seniors participating in their travel training programs. These calls are made 3 months and 6 months after the completion of the program. The calls are intended to ensure that the seniors are comfortable with riding the system and also to evaluate the success of the travel training efforts.

Driver Training

In terms of helping older persons to feel comfortable on a bus, driver training is at least as important as passenger training. When the bus door opens, the driver is the first face that a passenger sees. The driver is the face of the transportation system, and he or she is responsible for the first impression that the system makes. If the elderly passenger is confronted with an unfriendly face, that senior may turn around and go home, or he or she may not come back. Positive interactions with drivers go a long way toward establishing a strong customer relationship. Transportation systems are aware of the importance of driver interaction, especially with older persons, and for this reason many systems have instituted extensive driver training programs. These programs normally include training in basic first aid, assisting passengers with frailties and disabilities, and emergency procedures. In order to improve interaction with elderly passengers, some transportation systems have expanded on the normal driver training curriculum.

Driver training at **GFTD** includes a special emphasis on recognizing the differences among passengers who are 60, 70, 80, and 90 years of age. GFTD officials believe that there are huge differences in perception, vision, and ability among these age groups and that passengers in some of these age groups will need considerably more attention than others. GFTD drivers are trained to recognize when passengers require assistance with getting to the bus, boarding the bus, carrying parcels, and getting seated. They are also trained to recognize when elderly passengers do not require assistance, which is just as important.

Shelters

Another major concern for elderly transportation users is exposure to the elements. Long waits at bus stops can be unhealthy for a frail elderly person and will deter future public transportation usage. Many systems, especially those in particularly cold or hot climates, have taken steps to protect their bus stops from the elements. **GFTD** has recently built an indoor transfer facility and has equipped all outdoor stops with shelters in order to alleviate one of the main complaints of their older passengers. With more than 50,000 senior trips annually (in a service

area populated by less than 80,000 people), it is clear that GFTD is doing a great job of attracting senior riders.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING USER PREFERENCES

Other strategies for addressing user preferences, drawn primarily from focus groups with transportation industry professionals, are shown in Table 1.

OTHER TRANSIT SYSTEMS WITH IMPROVEMENTS REGARDING USER PREFERENCES

Other transit systems that have made significant steps in addressing user preferences regarding transit services are shown in Table 2. More information on these systems is available in the Final Report, the second volume of *TCRP Report 82: Improving Public Transit Options for Older Persons*.

Table 1.	
Additional Strategies for Addressing User Preferences Regarding Transit Services	
<i>Issue</i>	<i>Strategy</i>
<i>Older customers in the future will have higher service expectations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct forward-looking market research and service development planning to anticipate and plan for the needs and expectations of the market
<i>Public transportation services will need to match the features and benefits of personal travel as closely as possible</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift the transit focus on operating fixed-route bus service to a focus on service development that is driven by a thorough understanding and acceptance of customer needs and desires
<i>Older persons need a better understanding of public transportation services</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement effective programs that encourage successful trial use of service • Develop new transit programs based on models in other industries • Implement effective training programs in collaboration with other partners who are interested in mobility options for older persons
<i>Older persons have stereotypical, negative perceptions about public transportation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide higher quality services • Provide education and outreach with success stories from other older riders
<i>Targeted transportation services are needed to support programs to encourage older persons to reduce or cease driving</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the older traveler market and modify transit services to meet existing and anticipated needs • Develop mobility planning and training programs to help older persons transition from driving to transit use

Table 2.		
Other Examples of Improvements Regarding User Preferences		
<i>Service Attribute</i>	<i>Type of Improvement</i>	<i>Transit System / Location</i>
Reliability	Technological innovations	Cape Cod Regional Transportation Authority Arrowhead, Minnesota
Flexibility	Service routes	Cleveland, Ohio Fort Worth, Texas Uppsala, Sweden
	Contracted services	Fort Worth, Texas ACCESS, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Comfort	Travel training	Fort Worth, Texas
		Eugene, Oregon
		Edinburgh, Scotland