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TRANSIT INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES ON THE MOBILITY PREFERENCES OF OLDER PERSONS

Transit industry professionals were contacted to determine their perspectives on the mobility preferences of current and future older persons and how these preferences might be met by public transportation providers. Focus group discussions were held at industry conferences with professionals in the fields of transportation and aging, and personal interviews were completed with leaders in the public transportation industry (see the Appendix for details).

The 42 participants in the transit industry focus groups represented local, state, and federal agencies, and transportation systems serving urban, suburban, and rural areas across the country. The participants were in top and middle management positions. A significant number of participants were the key

decisionmakers or assistants to the key decisionmakers at the transportation system. Management staff were typically in charge of transit services, paratransit services, marketing, or service development. The discussions were conducted in a standard focus group format, following a structured discussion guide. Areas of questioning included

- Personal interests in travel needs of older persons;
- Transportation services presently offered to older persons;
- Features and characteristics of ideal transportation services for older persons;
- Potential benefits to older persons of ideal transportation services;
- Responsibilities for implementing ideal services (especially, the role of transit operators); and

- Key messages to local leaders regarding improvements to transportation services for older persons.

Personal interviews were completed with 38 people, some representing public transportation, and some representing aging agencies. Of those people who were interviewed, 22 were general managers or executive directors of their agencies. The others were managers of paratransit systems or special transportation services within larger organizations. They represented transportation systems serving urban, suburban, and rural areas across the country. Discussion topics in these interviews included

- Transportation services presently offered to older persons;
- Marketing programs to introduce older persons to services available;
- Travel needs of older persons;
- Partnerships and linkages formed in developing transportation services;
- Opportunities and barriers associated with developing and implementing services;
- Creative and innovative approaches to services;
- Features and characteristics of improved transportation services; and
- Visions of transportation services for older persons in the future, barriers to achieving these visions, and steps required to achieve these visions.

TRAVEL NEEDS OF OLDER PERSONS

Many transportation professionals see the travel needs of older persons as similar in nature to the travel needs of other individuals. Those contacted recognized that, like others, older persons need to

travel around their communities to engage in life-maintenance and life-enriching activities. Some differences in travel needs were also recognized, but the idea that travel needs can change as people age has not been reflected in a variety of transit options or services for the public. Changes to health, activities, living arrangements, and other conditions may alter the ways seniors travel, the circumstances under which they travel, how they view travel, and the place of travel in their lives as they grow older. Many people working in the public transportation industry consider fixed-route bus service as their best opportunity to help older persons meet their travel needs, but some transportation professionals recognize that older persons may need a variety of travel modes to meet their travel needs. Contacts with transit industry professionals produced comments on personal circumstances, weather, accessibility, safety and security, transitions from driving, socialization, and service and area travel patterns.

Personal Circumstances

Transit industry personnel see fixed-route bus service as possibly very responsive to the travel needs of older persons. If seniors are healthy, a 1/4-mile walk to a bus stop is a reasonable expectation. However, more than one-third of the respondents in our focus groups reported that they are unable to walk that far.

Some public transportation providers recognize that older persons may need assistance getting to and from a vehicle and assistance getting on and off a vehicle. Low-floor buses are seen as a significant way to improve boarding and alighting for older persons. However, low-floor buses improve access for everyone, not just for

older persons. Thus, they represent a good example of the benefits of universal design.

Depending on their health, older persons may require more time in boarding or alighting from a vehicle. Further, experience shows that a number of people, including those who are not elderly, use a fixed-route bus to reach a destination but need paratransit service to return home. Examples include grocery shopping and kidney dialysis treatment.

Older persons who are cognitively impaired are not able to read and understand public timetables and maps, nor are they able to access customer information via telephone and teletype (TTY) lines to get the information they need to travel. Personal assistance is required. One provider specifically acknowledged that serving older persons requires compassion.

Many older persons may become disabled later in life. They may not be able to adjust and adapt to their disability as easily or effectively as a younger person can. Older persons who have lived with a disability for many years may have already developed strategies to deal with that disability.

Transportation professionals expected seniors to have more flexibility in when they travel than other riders, for example, people who work or have fixed schedules. Transit personnel also expected seniors to be less sensitive to overall travel times than other travelers. The seniors interviewed in the focus groups probably would not have agreed with these assessments.

Weather

Weather variation is a key factor in the ability of older persons to use specific transportation options. In northern climates,

older persons may not be able to walk to a bus stop in extremely cold weather or under snowy or icy conditions. Similarly, older persons may not be able to stand and wait for a bus in the hot sun in a warmer climate. In both climatic extremes, shelters and seats provide significant comfort, as do strategies such as building waiting areas inside commercial establishments (e.g., coffee shops).

Accessibility

Travel modes other than a personal automobile usually require that an older person walk, at least a short distance, to the designated stopping point. Older persons who are frail or have a disability may not be able to walk to catch a fixed-route bus, even if that walk is ¼ mile or less. Even the walk to a curb outside a person's home may not be possible without some personal assistance. Consequently, regardless of the frequency of fixed-route transit service, some older persons may not be able to access such service. Few transit operators are enthusiastic about providing door-to-door paratransit services. As travel is important to maintaining quality of life, not being able to access public transit service would mean depending on travel options offered by other providers.

Safety and Security

Public transportation providers recognize that older persons are concerned about their safety and security when using public transportation services. Part of this is due to their potential exposure to crime in certain neighborhoods; part of the concern is probably due to heightened feelings of vulnerability that many older persons experience. Fears regarding personal safety are significant but may be difficult

for transit providers to address. One transit provider observed that seniors may have a need to travel, but because of physical limitations, they may have fears about negotiating stairs, missing a bus stop, or getting lost on the transportation system. In some communities, seniors have expressed fears about using taxi services. They are reluctant to be picked up or dropped off at home because they believe that if some taxi drivers knew where an older person lived they might try to rob him or her.

Some older persons may fear using public transportation services simply because they are unfamiliar with the services that are available and how to use those services. This unfamiliarity with transit services is generally due to a previous reliance on automobile travel (and is not due to cognitive problems sometimes associated with aging). Seniors may not know where they need to go to reach a destination or where the closest destination may be. Some older persons will need help in becoming comfortable enough to learn about and use available transportation services.

Transition from Driving

Transportation providers need to recognize that very few older persons make plans for a time when they are no longer able to drive. Older persons who have not made plans for the time when they can no longer count on traveling by automobile may be quite concerned if they find themselves unable to drive, or if they no longer have a relative or friend available to drive them. These older persons will need help in finding other effective modes of transportation to meet their travel needs. This means that transportation providers need to have the information that older persons require—such as timetables and

maps that are easy to read (large type) and understand—so they can successfully begin to use available public transit services.

Given that some older persons lose their ability to drive as they grow older, public transportation services can become increasingly important to them. One transportation provider recognizes the need for older persons to maintain their driving skills and, therefore, encourages participation in training programs such as AARP's 55 Alive Program. Participation in such programs can extend driving skills later in life and introduce considerations of other, non-driving options.

Socialization

Travel can represent an older person's connection to the world; it may be one of the important ways by which they stay connected to other people and community activities. Transit providers see the use of public transportation services as an important opportunity for older persons to socialize with all kinds of people, not just other older persons.

Service Area and Travel Patterns

Older persons need to reach specific locations that may be different from locations that other riders need to reach. Examples include local grocery stores and banks, adult daycare centers, nursing homes, doctor's offices, and other medical facilities. Although work is becoming an increasingly important reason that older persons travel, their other trips are still far more frequent than their work trips. Some transit professionals recognize the need for public transportation providers to connect to the destinations that older persons need

to reach and provide service responsive to the activities at those destinations. Fixed-route bus service may not go where older persons need to travel, and it may not provide the kind of service required by some activities.

Depending on the structure and frequency of fixed-route bus services, older persons may be able to use public transit for their trips, but they may be unwilling to travel by this mode because of the complexity and challenge of using these services. In this regard, older persons are no different than non-elderly people who look at public transportation services and choose not to use them. Some negative perceptions about public transportation services may be based on problems (for example, service or safety problems) that seniors hear about. If such perceptions are widespread, some older persons will choose not to even try transit services. Seniors may also need to deal with driver attitudes and public criticisms (and even ridicule) that serve to discourage public transit usage.

Older persons are a diverse segment of the population, have a range of travel needs, may have needs that differ from other travelers,³ and should not be expected to be able to meet their needs through a single travel mode such as fixed-route bus service. Additional modes may be appropriate and necessary for helping older persons effectively meet their travel needs.

Where older persons choose to live can affect their ability to meet their travel needs. This is true especially if and when they cannot rely on driving or riding with someone else to meet their travel needs.

³ Regarding paratransit services, one transit operator reported that older persons travel less frequently than younger persons with a disability.

Transit operators believe that older persons should check on the level and availability of public transportation services before they make a decision about moving into a new residence.

PERCEPTIONS OF SENIORS' PREFERRED TRAVEL ATTRIBUTES

Key Service Attributes

During the transit industry focus group discussions, participants were asked to design an ideal transportation system for older persons. Most participants felt that an ideal transportation system for older persons would be driven by a consideration of customer needs, with services designed and provided in response to those specific needs.

The transportation service attributes that transportation industry professionals expected to be highly valued by older persons were, in fact, nearly the same attributes that emerged from the focus groups of older transit users and non-users. The top-ranked features, selected by 100 percent of the industry group participants, were

- Reliable departure and arrival times;
- Flexible service available on demand;
- *One central number to call to meet any transportation needs;*
- *Reduced walking distances to fixed-route bus stops;* and
- Door-to-door service.

(The attributes shown above in italics were not on the list of most important or key attributes selected by seniors, although these attributes were often discussed in depth in the focus groups of seniors.) Many

transportation system features were discussed in the transportation industry focus groups and interviews, but only about one-quarter of them were selected by even half of the respondents as attributes of ideal systems. These often-mentioned service attributes are shown in Table 21.

The industry professionals agreed that transportation services that would be attractive to older persons would be widely available on weekdays and weekends to meet all travel needs. Customer information would be easy to understand and use. Information on services and schedules would be available through a single telephone number. This telephone number would access a coordinated, brokered system of transportation services that would appear as one seamless operation to older persons and anyone else calling for service.

Other Transportation System Features for Older Travelers

Some of the transportation system features that were discussed in the transportation industry focus groups appeared to have real promise, even though they were not mentioned by large numbers of industry representatives. Ideas appearing to have some promise, based on the focus groups with seniors and other research, included

- Regularly assigning drivers to the same routes so that riders and drivers could get to know one another;
- Ensuring that services for older persons were also open to other members of the general public;
- Not restricting trips for older persons to any specific purposes;
- Allowing and encouraging trip chaining and multiple stops;

- Training drivers to identify and understand older individuals with special needs and problems, such as persons with dementia;
- Developing a cadre of volunteers, or perhaps even paid older drivers, who could provide special assistance for certain trips (including those too expensive for transit agencies to supply with regular transit staff);
- Creating service features that would provide improvements for all riders, not just the elderly (known as universal service design);
- Offering assistance (perhaps through special personnel, not drivers) for persons who needed special help boarding and alighting;
- Offering taxi vouchers for trips hard to serve with regular transit vehicles and staff;
- Providing services that would stop closer to a person's home in nighttime hours; and
- Creating the capability for passengers to communicate directly with drivers regarding trip needs and pickup times, perhaps by using cellular telephones.

Although some of these service features could not be applied in all communities, some transit operators are providing services like these today to their older riders and other passengers.

Industry Perspectives on Specific Service Attributes

The following sections describe the perspectives of transportation industry professionals on key specific service attributes including acceptability, accessibility, adaptability, availability, affordability, and alternative travel options.

Acceptability

Older persons should have reliable, on-time service provided by drivers who are

Table 21

Ideal Transportation System Features for Older Persons: Composite Industry Association Focus Group Results

<i>Transportation Features</i>	<i>Feature Category</i>	<i>Percent of Respondents</i>
100%		
One stop shopping—call one number to meet any transportation needs	Local Service Delivery Organization	100.0%
Spontaneity: “call today for trip today” – same for elderly as disabled	Service Features	100.0%
Door-to-door	Service Features	100.0%
Reliable	Service Features	100.0%
Reduce walking distance to stops	Service Features	100.0%
85-99%		
Safety issues – well-lit, security, visibility	Service Features	91.7%
Any trip counts – purpose not important in trip regulation	Service Features	91.7%
Need well-trained, sensitive staff	Drivers	90.0%
On-time service	Service Features	90.0%
Place services to minimize travel; livable communities	Geographic Area	87.5%
Go to other groups or organizations to help meet needs – collaborate	Local Service Delivery Organization	87.5%
Vehicles: accessible, low-floor, padded seats, wide aisles, clean, arm-rests, small latrine on board, parcel carriers, soft ride	Vehicles	87.5%
75-84%		
Wonderful drivers, charming, safe, multilingual, patient, appreciative; not just a “job,” but a customer-service position	Drivers	83.3%
Easy for customer to use: info, service design, fare structure and payment	Service Features	75.0%
Pedestrian-friendly, sidewalks and benches	Service Features	75.0%
Service 7 days a week, 24 hours a day	Service Features	66.7%
60-74%		
Keep elderly independent – provide services and marketing that appears to maintain independence, is customer-friendly/oriented	Education, Training, Outreach	62.5%
Travel training	Education, Training, Outreach	62.5%
Adequate funding so no one would be left out because of inability to pay	Funding	62.5%
Incentives; e.g., free monthly bus pass to get people started	Fares	60.0%
Frequent service/global positioning of vans for service	Service Features	60.0%
50%		
Transportation accounts transfer per month – families could pay	Fares	50.0%
Funded through partnerships – all public/private organizations	Funding	50.0%
Services offered across county lines	Geographic Area	50.0%
Cooperation with other agencies; integrated with zoning and land use decisions	Local Service Delivery Organization	50.0%
Services available when elderly need rides	Service Availability	50.0%
Mirror a car – there when you need it; wait for you while in the store	Service Features	50.0%
Services would meet range of needs among elderly according to functional ability, desire, and ability to pay – “personalized”	Service Features	50.0%

well-trained in customer service skills. Services (and marketing materials) should be structured to help older persons maintain their independence. Information about services should be readily available in a simple and easy-to-use format. Older persons should feel safe and secure in getting to and from services and in using them. Vehicles should be easy to access; low-floor vehicles would be preferable.

Accessibility

Transportation services should be easy to access, whether the services require a walk to a fixed-route bus stop or operate on a door-to-door basis like paratransit.

Adaptability

Recognizing that an older person may need paratransit for one trip, could ride in a car for another, and might be able to use fixed-route service for still another trip, transportation services should provide a variety or family of transportation services responsive to specific travel needs. These various services should be designed to meet a range of needs determined by functional ability, desire, and ability to pay. Transportation options should give older persons a choice in how best to meet their travel needs. These options should be coordinated through a central or brokered system.

Availability

Transportation services should be flexible, widely available, easy to understand and use, and open to meet travel needs without regard to trip purpose. Service should be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

People should be able to get information on transportation services through a single

source with one telephone call. With proper coordination and collaboration, older persons should easily get the information they need to find the best transportation option to meet their needs.

Affordability

Transportation providers felt that their services—fixed-route, paratransit, or another mode—should be priced so that those customers with the best ability to pay are charged the highest fare, and those with limited economic means are charged lower fares (through the use of subsidies). Older persons could be introduced to transportation services through the provision of temporary incentives that lower fares.

Alternatives

Transportation providers felt that travel options should be as responsive to specific travel needs as possible. Whether services are fixed-route, paratransit, or some other mode, the service should be available when a trip needs to be made. Older persons place a high value on spontaneity. Access should not require making trip reservations long in advance or a long wait at a bus stop.

CONCLUSION

Most industry representatives that were contacted felt that an ideal transportation system for older persons would be driven by a consideration of customer needs, with services designed and provided in response to those specific needs. It is noteworthy that the transportation service attributes that transportation industry professionals expected to be highly valued by older persons were, in fact, nearly the same attributes that emerged from the focus

groups of older transit users and non-users (as discussed in Chapter 5).

Transportation industry professionals contacted for this study generally recognize that older persons may have special travel needs that differ from the needs of other

travelers. There was some recognition that a gap exists between the transportation service attributes desired by older persons and the characteristics of public transit services now available to the older residents of most communities. Means of closing this gap are discussed in subsequent chapters.