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INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGES TO OFFERING BETTER TRANSIT SERVICES FOR OLDER PERSONS

The transit industry professionals interviewed for this study were generally very interested in providing better services to older persons, but many see challenges or barriers hindering the transit industry's ability to respond more completely to the travel needs of older persons. On the other hand, a few operators have already designed services that successfully meet many of the travel needs of the elderly. This chapter reports on challenges that public transit providers see in offering better transportation services for older persons.

The challenges described in this chapter were reported in group discussions held at industry conferences with 42 professionals in the field of transportation and aging and 38 personal interviews with leaders in public transit and aging.

When public transportation providers are considering improvements to better serve the travel needs of older persons, they say they expect to face a variety of significant challenges. These current or future challenges fall into two main categories:

- Transportation system services and features and
- The travel needs and limitations defining the older consumers' marketplace.

Some transportation service challenges are internal to the public transportation provider. These internal challenges are those over which the provider has the most control. Other transportation system challenges involve working within the constraints of community resources and regulations. The challenges of providing improved service to

older riders are mostly external to a transportation organization and may include elements that are more difficult for transit providers to directly address or alter.

TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM CHALLENGES

Challenges to providing better transportation services for seniors are sometimes internal to the organization that is trying to improve services. These challenges may be related to the organization's structure or procedures, or they may be specific to a certain type of service or approach to services. Current transportation service configurations within specific localities have resulted from the previous actions of public transportation providers in response to opportunities presented to them. Transportation services and delivery strategies may also exist in a certain way because of particular local conditions or circumstances. Sometimes, even when prior opportunities, conditions, or circumstances do not continue to exist, prior decisions continue to impede progress toward making changes to improve services.

In this report, transportation system challenges to meeting the travel needs and desires of older persons have been categorized into two areas: (1) funding, resources, and priorities; and (2) system and service constraints.

Funding, Resources, and Priorities

Funding was the most frequently cited challenge. The cost of providing service, particularly the complementary paratransit services required by the ADA, and the related lack of funding to cover the increased

costs that transit providers have incurred because of the ADA, are seen as major challenges. Funding programs at the state and federal levels are viewed as insufficient, and funding at the local level is recognized as a problem as well. One public transportation provider has not seen an increase in local funding for nearly 10 years. Without sufficient funding, providing an adequate level of service is obviously difficult.

Lack of a local, dedicated source of funding (dedicated property or sales tax revenues, for example) constrains the ability of public transportation providers to respond to growing travel needs. If local funding does not come from a dedicated source, public transportation providers must compete with other local programs for scarce local financial resources, usually on an annual basis. Even if transit programs need to justify their funding and any potential increases every 2 or 3 years instead of each year, this can hardly be considered a stable funding situation. Without stable funding, more effort needs to be devoted to fundraising and less to other activities. Without stable funding, long-term investments that could increase overall cost-effectiveness are extremely difficult to make. Investments in higher-quality vehicles and other equipment, which costs more initially but saves money over the long term, will be difficult or impossible to make in the absence of stable funding.

Apart from the need for local, dedicated sources, adequate funding was cited many times by transit professionals as the most significant challenge to improved services. The strong feeling expressed was that meaningful improvements in transportation services for older persons would not occur without new and expanded sources of funding at state, federal, and local levels of

government. Although funding can be viewed as a systems problem, it is also a community problem in terms of the level of local support that is or is not made available to local public transportation operations.

System and Service Constraints

System and service constraints are by far the majority of the internal challenges that public transportation providers are facing or will face in the future when responding to the need for improved transportation services for older persons. Public transportation providers feel that their systems are pushed to capacity to meet current travel needs. Taking on the additional assignments and responsibilities associated with an aging society will be challenging.

Overall Service Designs

Transit professionals report that current public transit operations lack sufficient service capacity. Transit providers also are concerned that fixed-route services might not adequately meet future travel demands, and that, therefore, paratransit may be required to a greater extent than many current transit industry professionals would prefer.

Among some providers, there appears to be real reluctance to consider changes in the structure and delivery of public transit services. Others feel that additional transportation options must be developed but are concerned that thinking within the industry is too narrow and not sufficiently imaginative to develop these options.

Although public transportation providers might conceivably turn to contracts with taxi companies as a locally available option to expand their range of service, many public

transit providers see taxi companies as not always providing a professional level and quality of service. Furthermore, the transportation providers interviewed felt that taxi companies are generally reluctant to provide transportation services under contract to public transit operators.

Equipment and Resources

Other challenges are more operational and related to service delivery. Transit providers reported that drivers are often not specifically educated to meet the needs of older persons, including the need to take extra time and care when serving them. Professionals reported that pay levels for drivers are often not sufficient to ensure a quality of service. (Human service agencies, with pay scales for drivers about one-half of those for public transit agencies, would probably disagree with this claim.) One transportation provider that relies heavily on volunteer drivers reported difficulties associated with developing and maintaining a core of volunteers.

The size and configuration of vehicles in a fleet might not be optimal for responding to the needs of particular market segments. It is also important to recognize that time and effort, in addition to funding, are required to understand, develop, and benefit from technological capabilities now present and expected to be available in the future.

Access to Services

Weather conditions sometimes make it difficult for people with disabilities or people who are frail to get to a bus stop or to wait there for a bus to arrive. For many older persons, simply walking long distances is a problem; severe weather makes this problem worse.

Changes in service configuration and operating policies might make public transit services more responsive to the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities. For example, service routes are specifically designed to reduce walking distances to the bus and may constitute better service for some people. Operating policies that limit paratransit service to curb pickup might not be responsive enough for individuals with the needs described above; older persons may require personalized assistance to and from a vehicle, in addition to help in boarding and alighting.

Consumer Education and Travel Training

Transportation professionals viewed customer education as a key element in responding to growing travel needs, but many public transportation providers feel that they have not done a good enough job to date. Public transportation providers feel that older persons simply do not know enough about the transportation services that are available and how to use them successfully. Many public transportation providers believe that they have not found effective ways to communicate with potential older customers about public services and to encourage trial uses of those services. Some examples of improved communications strategies are discussed in Chapter 10.

Community Needs, Laws, Policies, and Regulations

Public transit systems may also face obstacles or challenges that are external to the organization, that is, obstacles or challenges over which a single transit organization may have little direct control or influence. Examples of external challenges

include federal and state laws and regulations, community attitudes toward public services, and local fiscal strengths and limitations.

Collaboration and Partnerships

The most significant community challenge identified by public transportation providers is the difficulty and complexity of bringing local leaders together to find a common, shared approach to implementing improved transportation service for older persons. This issue is not new and has been a focus of federal, state, and local concern for many years. Its significance is that it is still viewed as a critical problem even after substantial past efforts.

The challenges cited fall into three areas: difficulty getting local agencies to come together to solve problems collaboratively, failure of public transportation providers to think and act broadly, and a lack of understanding of key issues among local elected officials.

Transportation professionals identified the following specific challenges associated with local agencies coming together:

- The general lack of good interagency relationships;
- “Turfism” and the problems it causes for working together to reduce costs;
- Agencies that want control and are afraid of change;
- Privatization of social services, resulting in contractors not being responsive to client needs;
- Attitudes among social service agencies that foster dependence among clients;
- Time required to develop working relationships with local organizations;

- Lack of agency interest and initiative in taking a lead role to organize and coordinate services;
- Competition among local agencies; and
- Lack of cooperation from agencies and organizations with public transit providers on daily operational issues such as scheduling trips.

Transit industry professionals now engaged in providing public transportation services in their localities reported several specific challenges associated with public transportation providers thinking and acting too narrowly. These included

- Public transportation providers' lack of broad vision in addressing needs;
- Failure on the part of public transit providers to take responsibility beyond their traditional services for meeting the needs of older persons;
- A lack of service alternatives (said to create an unnecessarily high level of reliance upon transit system–operated paratransit services); and
- Failure to realize that there is no single transportation solution that will meet all of the travel needs of older persons.

Finally, specific challenges associated with a lack of understanding among officials included

- A lack of understanding on the part of local elected officials regarding the need for increased funding and the transportation service implications of the growth in the number of older persons;
- Apathy and a lack of understanding that older persons have transportation needs;
- No significant investment from the business community; and
- Failure to enforce state mandates for coordination of transportation services once the mandates are in place.

ADA Requirements and Their Impacts on Service Development

The ADA has changed the way public transportation providers deliver transportation services. Public transit providers had to change fixed-route vehicle fleets to move to full accessibility. Passage of the ADA required some public transit providers to offer paratransit service for the first time. The ADA placed additional demands on those public transit providers who were already offering paratransit service, sometimes requiring a broadening of eligibility for services, changing operating policies to comply with new service standards, or expanding the days and hours that paratransit services were available.

Demand for paratransit service grew as people with disabilities discovered that they had access to new or improved paratransit service. Without new funding to implement these service improvements, service capacity was strained, and financial pressures resulted. One outcome, seen in many localities, has been that paratransit services have shifted away from meeting the travel needs of older persons, unless those older persons also meet strict ADA-eligibility criteria.

CHALLENGES OF THE OLDER CONSUMERS' TRAVEL MARKET

Obvious challenges exist for transit agencies that want to provide travel services for older riders. Satisfying customers is generally challenging in any industry: marketplaces are competitive, and consumers make choices among competing goods and services (just as when they travel). If an organization's

services do not match a potential customer's needs, those services will not be used.

Public transportation providers see the challenges to responding to the needs of older travelers to be

- Customer preferences and service expectations of older persons and
- Special needs of older travelers.

Customer Preferences

Previous chapters have discussed in detail the travel preferences of older persons. Older travelers are essentially interested in those qualities that attract all kinds of consumers to any product or service: control, autonomy, and choice. The specific travel attributes that older persons reported as most important to them were reliability, door-to-door services, flexibility, and comfort. These service attributes are also recognized by transit providers as necessary to attract older travelers (and other travelers as well).

Public transportation providers recognize that the demand for their services will grow as the population of the United States ages and the number of older persons grows in future years. In fact, transit providers are already seeing a growth in trips taken by older persons. They expect that growth to continue.

Many older persons in future years will be more educated, have higher incomes, and have higher expectations for service availability and quality than today's older persons. If public transportation services attract only a small proportion of the older travelers of today, who currently have fewer travel options and less experience with high-quality services, how will current forms of public transportation attract older riders

when these potential riders have more choices and greater demands for quality services?

Part of the solution to addressing the service expectations of the older traveler market will be recognizing that older persons have significant mobility needs and that fulfilling these travel needs is important to them and to society as a whole. Simply encouraging older persons to reduce or cease driving will not be sufficient to change travel behavior; offering new and improved services will be more productive.

Provider Perspectives on the Travel Preferences of the Elderly

Many public transit providers see real challenges in attracting large numbers of older riders because of the perspectives of the older riders. Public transit providers expect that older persons who are able to drive will often prefer to drive to meet their travel needs. Driving provides a sense of freedom and independence that cannot easily be matched by public transportation alternatives. Older persons are seen as strongly linked to their automobiles and reluctant to give them up. Public transit providers believe that current public transportation services, both transit and paratransit, are viewed by many seniors as inadequate to meet their travel needs.

Transit providers feel that seniors often do not understand public transportation or accept it as a means by which they might meet their travel needs. (Not considering transit as a valid travel option probably reinforces the reluctance of older persons to stop driving.) Older persons may have trouble overcoming the stereotypes of bad service and unhelpful drivers that have been

associated with public transit service. Many older persons tend to view public transportation service as fixed-route services only, which is too narrow a perspective in some communities. In communities where older persons are denied access to paratransit, they typically do not turn to fixed-route service to meet their needs.

Provider Perspectives on the Elderly Transit Market

Some transit industry perspectives on the market of older travelers also create challenges to providing better transit services for the elderly. When transit providers view public transportation service as fixed-route services only, that perspective is just as limiting as when older travelers hold that view. Older persons have diverse needs and should not be lumped together under any one category. Assuming that fixed-route services could meet all the travel needs of older persons, if only they would use it, is a perspective that will fail to attract large numbers of older riders. Finally, it would be a mistake not to recognize that younger population groups will be older persons in the next 20 years or so. Providing good transportation services to younger persons now would be a significant strategy for attracting older riders in the future.

Special Needs of Older Travelers

Transit providers are faced with a number of challenges in responding to the special needs of older travelers. These challenges can be organized into three categories: physical limitations, financial limitations, and lack of travel information.

Whereas many older persons are somewhat limited in their ability to independently

perform certain activities of daily living, these limitations are often not severe enough for them to be officially classified as disabled. If an older person is not officially classified as disabled, he or she often may not qualify for ADA-complementary paratransit services. If ADA-complementary paratransit service is not available to older persons, they may have so much trouble walking to a bus stop, waiting for the bus, climbing the stairs necessary to board the vehicle, or maintaining balance while the vehicle is in motion that they seldom attempt using fixed-route transit service.

Although some seniors are financially independent, some are not. Those seniors who are not financially independent will need assistance of some sort to enjoy a reasonable level of mobility.

Finally, almost 90 percent of older travelers have not used public mass transit services in the last year. Should they have some need to begin using transit services, many older persons would not know how to do so and would not try because of their lack of knowledge. These kinds of special needs must be addressed if transit providers are to serve a greater proportion of the trips of older persons than is now the case.

CONCLUSION

A surprising discovery from the contacts with public transit providers—in focus groups and expert interviews—was the degree to which these individuals reported feeling overwhelmed by the current demands of their jobs. This led to the observation that new roles, responsibilities, and service markets—such as the emerging travel demands of older persons—were not being actively pursued and certainly would not be

pursued without substantial additional funds and other resources.

Significant levels of energy and resources will be required for the resolution of many of the challenges to better meeting the needs of older travelers in the future. Although prospects for the investment of significantly enhanced levels of energy or resources appear dim to some public transportation

providers, the good news is that other public providers are charging ahead with new and improved services. Strategies and procedures for addressing the challenges of meeting older persons' transportation needs are presented in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 describes transportation systems that have implemented some of the services and strategies needed to address the travel needs and demands of older travelers.