Successful Local Transportation Coordination Case Studies

Coordination Strategy: Contract between agencies
Rainbow Rider Service Contracting

Background
Rainbow Rider Transit was created in 1995 to expand transportation access beyond the existing service center in Alexandria into the five-county region of Douglas, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, and Grant. Todd County was added to the service area in 2007. Rainbow Rider bus service is available to any destination within the six-county area, and a volunteer driver program is available for destinations outside of this area. The program is staffed by 40 full- and part-time employees.

The program is funded primarily through the state/federal 5311 program, which covers approximately 85 percent of operations and 80 percent of capital purchases. The remaining funding comes from fare revenues (8 percent), and contracts from schools and nursing homes (one bus is funded via a 5310 nursing home program).

Service Area
- Serves Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens, Traverse, and Todd Counties
- 4,000 square miles
- 65,000 residents
- Clients include older adults, people with disabilities, other adults, and children

Financial
- 2010 budget: $1.4 million
- Funding primarily via state/federal 5311 program
- Cost per mile: $1.92 (fare revenue covers about 15 percent of the cost)
- Fares: $2 to $5, depending on distance

Operational Characteristics
- Created in 1995
- 25 agency vehicles; also have about 25 volunteer drivers (use own vehicles)
- Staffed by 40 full- and part-time staff

Results
- 143,453 rides in 2010 (average of 750 rides per day)

Lessons Learned
- Created and adjusted the system to meet client wants and needs

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There are no income or age restrictions; all buses offer a child seat and are equipped with handicapped accessible lifts. Fares are $2 for 0-5 miles, $4 for 5-10 miles, and $5 for 10-20 miles. In 2010, passengers consisted of 22,524 individuals with disabilities, 29,977 older adults, 39,022 other adults, and 3,212 children.
Problem/Opportunity
The areas around Alexandria were lacking transportation options to and from the service center located there.

Solution
Rainbow Rider Transit began by coordinating with human resources personnel, businesses, nursing home communities, developmental day treatment centers, and veterans administrations in the surrounding five counties. The counties began by offering a community-to-community fixed route, but they eventually found that there weren’t enough riders to sustain this approach in such a rural area.

Once the dial-a-ride system was established, ridership climbed, and now the program incorporates both fixed route and dial-a-ride approaches.

A volunteer driver program is offered in four of the six counties. Rainbow Rider runs background checks and vehicle checks on all volunteers and operates the ride schedules, which typically include trips to the Twin Cities or other locations outside of the bus service area. There are 25 volunteer drivers, and 15 to 18 of them are very active.

Results/Benefits
Benefits of the Rainbow Rider program have included getting clients to their medical appointments, work, shopping, and school. As the program’s resources and vehicles have expanded, so has service to each of the communities. Ridership is on track to increase again in 2011.

Challenges/Lessons Learned
One of the early challenges was the lack of riders on the fixed route system. The program had to be altered to address what services the clients wanted and would use by offering dial-a-ride services to fill the more specific needs of each community.

This strategy has been implemented in a few other nearby communities, and now the program starts small and expands as needed. Administrators found that the communities in their service areas had different needs from areas with a larger population, where programs often know that riders will be there from the get-go.

“The challenge was adjusting what we thought would work to what actually does work,” said Rainbow Rider Transit Director Harold Jennissen.

Future Direction
Rainbow Rider still has some communities that are relatively new to the program (e.g., Todd County) and whose transportation solutions have not yet been fully developed. Since there is not enough demand for the program itself to grow, future plans include cooperating with some of the local transit providers in that area. Some coordination is already done with Otter Transit, and more is likely in the future.

Additionally, Rainbow Rider is considering some regional dispatching, possibly helping out nearby transit systems that don’t currently have their own dispatch center.