Successful Local Transportation Coordination Case Studies

Coordination Strategy: Offer customer travel training
St. Cloud Metro Bus Travel Training

Background

St. Cloud Metro Bus created its Travel Training program in January 2009. The program has two components: individual, step-by-step travel training sessions and larger community outreach efforts. All of the services provided by the program are free and tailored to the specific needs and skill level of the participating individual or group.

Training sessions are designed to teach individuals to use the fixed route bus system in the St. Cloud, Sartell, Sauk Rapids, and Waite Park area. Sessions are specifically designed for older adults, those with disabilities, the low income, and the multicultural, but anyone may schedule a session. Trainings can be completed one-on-one, in small groups, or in a classroom setting.

The outreach component of the program aims to educate the community about the services offered through the Travel Training program. Travel trainers visit area schools, older adult living sites, and agencies that serve those with disabilities and the lower income to talk about the program. School visit topics range from introducing preschoolers to the idea of riding the bus to an integrated travel training curriculum at high schools. Outreach efforts with local agencies and organizations are designed to encourage referrals to the Travel Training program.

When an individual calls to set up a travel training appointment, the travel trainers collect information

Service Area

- Serves St. Cloud, Sartell, Sauk Rapids, and Waite Park
- 49 square miles
- 101,206 residents
- Primary clients are older adults and people with disabilities, but also serves the low income, multicultural, and general public

Financial

- 2010 budget: $106,792
- Funding from New Freedom grant
- Additional $40,000 local Bremer/Morgan grant from 2010–August 2012 for multicultural trainings

Operational Characteristics

- Created in 2009
- One full-time and one part-time travel trainer
- Two part-time Somali/multicultural travel trainers

Results

- 40-50 travel trainings per month
- 2,922 clients served in travel trainings and outreach activities from January 2009–May 2011

Lessons Learned

- Worked through cultural and attitude barriers; asked bus drivers to provide more assistance

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to determine the passenger’s specific needs. For example, the trainer will find out if the person is a first-time bus rider, is new to the community, or has physical or cognitive disabilities. After this initial information intake, the travel trainer meets the passenger at his or her home, determines a plan of action, practices the skills needed to ride the fixed route bus, and accompanies them on the bus to a destination of interest.

As part of the training session, the passenger learns how to pay the fare, board the bus, recognize landmarks along the route, and signal for a stop. Trainers explain what to do if a passenger gets on the wrong bus or gets off at the wrong stop. Individuals also learn how to read the bus schedule and put together their own routes. Throughout the process, passengers are reminded that the bus driver is always there as a resource if help is needed.

Some passengers complete the training in one session, but other individuals require multiple sessions before they are comfortable riding the bus on their own. In addition, some passengers require specific destination training rather than a complete system overview. For instance, an individual with a cognitive disability may only want to learn how to get to work at first and add other destinations later. Trainers will work with passengers as many times as needed to build their confidence and ensure that they continue to use the fixed route bus system.

Problem/Opportunity

St. Cloud Metro Bus has limited capacity on its dial-a-ride services, and many individuals in need were unable to receive service due to overwhelming demand. In spite of efforts to bring the dial-a-ride denial rate down, many passengers were still being denied a ride. In response, St. Cloud Metro Bus completed a recertification process to determine if all riders were truly eligible to receive service. Some passengers were subsequently denied or only allowed to ride under certain conditions.

Solution

The Travel Training program was implemented to allow passengers capable of riding the fixed route bus system on their own to learn how to use it. The program’s goal is to work with such individuals before they apply for St. Cloud Metro Bus dial-a-ride services, thus increasing that program’s capacity to serve those with no other options. St. Cloud Metro Bus has worked closely with area agencies and organizations that serve the targeted populations, such as seniors and those with disabilities, to encourage referrals to the Travel Training program.

The program has also allowed St. Cloud Metro Bus to create other services targeted to this group of riders. For example, multiple passengers with the same destination now ride the fixed route bus system to a transfer point where they all board a dial-a-ride bus to the shared destination. By providing passengers with the resources to make the first part of such a trip on their own, the Travel Training program has helped decrease demand for dial-a-ride services. Instead of dial-a-ride buses picking up ten individuals separately at their homes, all ten can now be transported on a single bus.

Results/Benefits

From January 2009 through May 2011, the Travel Training program served 2,922 people through individual travel trainings and outreach activities. The program averages 40 to 50 individual travel trainings per month, and there is often a waiting list. More than 80 percent of passengers who have completed training sessions continue to use the fixed route bus system. Because more people are using the fixed route bus, rides have opened up on the dial-a-ride service and denial rates have dropped.

The Travel Training program has provided many other benefits beyond the initial goal of reducing demand for dial-a-ride services. For example, travel trainers are now available to offer specific trainings to the growing Somali population in the service area. The program also sparked the organization of area travel clubs to help groups of passengers travel to their favorite destinations together.

Challenges/Lessons Learned

One of the greatest challenges faced by the Travel Training program is that the area’s culture does not always favor public transportation, especially for some of the program’s targeted groups. For example, care providers and family members may be unsure about allowing those with disabili-
ties to ride the bus independently. In order to break these barriers, travel trainers worked closely with local agencies that provide care and other services to the target groups. These organizations recognize the importance of matching people with the right type of transportation and understand that dial-a-ride services are not the best fit for everyone. Other strategies have included allowing the passenger to demonstrate their ability to ride the bus on their own while the travel trainer followed in a car.

During the program’s implementation, travel trainers also worked with fixed route bus drivers to hold them accountable for providing assistance to those in need. The trainers asked drivers to actively identify and assist those that might need extra help not only with boarding, but also with paying fares or acquiring route information.

**Future Direction**

The goal of the Travel Training program is to continue meeting the needs of the growing community in its service area. One possibility under consideration is the creation of a mobility assessment and training center to serve the region. This potential facility would include an in-house functional and cognitive ability assessment that would allow travel trainers and others at St. Cloud Metro Bus to assess individuals’ abilities and determine the appropriate mode of transportation for each passenger. This center could also provide travel training services on-site and possibly offer training to drivers from other area organizations.