Successful Local Transportation Coordination Case Studies

Coordination Strategy: Hire mobility manager
Tri-County Action Program Transportation Resource Center/Mobility Manager

Background
The Transportation Resource Center (TRC) is a project of Tri-County Action Program Inc. (Tri-CAP). It was created in 2008 to be the central access point for transportation in the four-county region of Benton, Morrison, Sherburne and Stearns Counties. Wright County was added to the service area in 2011. The TRC connects passengers with available transportation resources in the area, offers ride referrals, and coordinates ride appointments. It is staffed by 1.5 full-time employees, including a mobility manager.

Tri-CAP partners with several faith-based organizations as well as the American Cancer Society and Central Minnesota Council on Aging to coordinate transportation services through the TRC. They also work closely with the St. Cloud Hospital, Coborn’s Cancer Center, many adult day centers and assisted living facilities as well as Veteran’s Affairs and county veteran offices, county volunteer driver programs, and public transit.

Although anyone is eligible to call the TRC, the current focus for assistance is on older adults and people with disabilities getting to health-related appointments. Individuals seeking assistance must also have no other funding source, such as Medical Assistance or an insurance program, available to meet their transportation needs. Qualifying passengers may receive transportation to locations within the TRC’s five-county service area and also to the following destinations: Alexandria, Eden Valley, Litchfield, New London, Princeton, Rochester, Spicer, Willmar, and anywhere within the seven-county metro area.

The TRC fills numerous roles for passengers seeking transportation assistance. First, the mobility manager serves as a resource to individuals unable to locate suitable transportation on their own. The mobility manager will attempt to locate an appropriate resource and provide a referral. If no other options are available, the mobility manager may coordinate, authorize, and fund a ride for individuals in need. These rides are generally provided by a local volunteer driver,

Service Area
- Serves Benton, Stearns, Morrison, Sherburne, and Wright Counties
- 3,975 square miles
- 435,490 residents
- Primary clients are older adults and people with disabilities

Financial
- 2010 budget: $82,000 in mobility management, $184,800 in operations
- Funding from New Freedom grant
- Average cost: $4.75 per one-way ride, or 26 cents per mile
- $135,170 in fare revenues in 2010

Operational Characteristics
- Created in 2008
- No agency vehicles; rely on about 175 volunteer drivers from various partner organizations
- Staffed by 1.5 full-time employees

Results
- 34,923 one-way trips in 2010

Lessons Learned
- Satisfied partner organizations; defined precise guidelines for service

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but the TRC will also contract with a for-profit company to provide an accessible vehicle if needed.

There is no required fee for assistance, but the TRC uses a subsidized suggested donation scale to determine the potential cost of each ride. For example, a round-trip ride of 20 miles or less has a suggested donation value of $5 and a round-trip ride of 21 to 50 miles has a suggested donation value of $10. A statement is created and sent to the passenger detailing their rides from the previous month, including a suggested donation amount for each ride received. If the passenger is unable to give at that level, any donation is appreciated. If the passenger is unable to make any donation, they are still eligible to receive ride assistance.

**Problem/Opportunity**

Around 2005, a lack of coordination was identified between the transportation services provided by Tri-CAP and other area nonprofit organizations that used volunteer drivers. For example, two volunteer drivers from separate organizations would sometimes originate in the same community and end at the same destination. A volunteer driver brought this issue to Tri-CAP’s attention, pointing out that existing resources were not being used in the most effective and efficient way possible. In response, Tri-CAP organized a large transportation summit to bring together interested parties involved in local transportation efforts to determine how they could work together to become better coordinators.

During this process, the lack of funding for many of these local organizations was identified as a barrier to improved coordination. Many were in need of additional funding to keep their programs running, and some were even unable to reimburse volunteer drivers for their services.

**Solution**

In 2007, Tri-CAP used the information gathered from their local partner organizations to write an application for a New Freedom grant under the United We Ride program and create the TRC, which now serves as a multi-county, one-call resource center for transportation needs. The TRC and its mobility manager have provided a new coordinating level for transportation organizations in the area. The mobility manager keeps track of the overall transportation network, helping to eliminate duplicate or overlapping trips by different organizations and allowing each partner organization to make the most efficient use of its resources. By providing this coordination, the TRC has also helped connect more passengers with the services they need.

The New Freedom grant has also provided an opportunity for local agencies to receive additional funding for their efforts. Each organization that provides rides to medical appointments for the target groups—older adults and people with disabilities—is eligible to submit a monthly statement to the TRC and be reimbursed for a portion of the ride cost. This has allowed the participating organizations to receive financial support for their participation and provided them with additional funds to support their programs. This support benefits the organizations as a whole, allowing them to provide transportation services as well as continue their work meeting other community needs.

**Results/Benefits**

From 2008 through May 2011, the TRC coordinated about 100,000 one-way trips to medical appointments for older adults and people with disabilities, enabling Tri-CAP and its partners to provide essential transportation services to a previously underserved population. The mobility manager acts as the designated staff person for individuals with the most difficult problems and is able to spend the extra time often needed in such cases. By tracking down resources and coordinating and funding rides when no other options are available, the mobility manager provides an important service to those who would otherwise receive no assistance.

The TRC has also encouraged the participating partner organizations to become financially invested in the coordination effort. The New Freedom grant provides a 50 percent fund match for each ride provided by the TRC, and each partner has committed to contributing the other 50 percent. This means that for every $100 in transportation services a partner agency provides, it is responsible for $50 of that cost. When the agency submits an expense form for that $100 service to the TRC, it must also submit its $50 payment so the TRC can
obtain the additional $50 from the grant. The agency then receives its $100 reimbursement, which consists of its own $50 in addition to $50 in grant funding.

Challenges/Lessons Learned

One of the greatest challenges the program faced was developing a strategy to keep all partnering organizations satisfied. In the program's first year, Tri-CAP found that many partner groups believed they should receive a larger portion of the funding. To address this issue, the TRC adjusted the reimbursement policy. Each agency is now reimbursed based on a standard administration fee per trip, plus mileage over the base amount. This has been viewed as an equitable compromise by the partner agencies.

Another challenge was clearly defining the target group of clients and making the best use of available funds. The mobility manager often has to probe deeply to be sure that a person has no other funding source available. If a person lives on a bus line but can't afford the fare, it doesn't mean that the TRC will fund a volunteer driver as an alternative. They may instead focus on finding a way to make the bus a more viable option. Although it can be challenging to turn people down, the program's limited funds would be quickly depleted without adhering to service guidelines.

Future Direction

As the TRC progressed in providing transportation services for medical appointments, it began receiving numerous calls from people in need of transportation to work. The mobility manager formed a task force in late 2009 to facilitate discussion among partnering organizations on options for filling this need.

In January 2011, the TRC received a 24-month pilot grant award to begin coordinating ride-to-work services. The TRC will use the funds to promote carpooling and ridesharing and once again have limited funds to provide rides for those with no other options available. This effort will be in addition to the medical transportation coordination services the TRC will continue to provide.