

Transportation Coordination Best Practices

November 2005

Best Practice – Transportation Brokerage

Topic: Creating a Transportation Brokerage

Target Audience: Human Service Agency Transportation Providers, Section 5310 Agencies, Section 5307 and 5311 Public Transit Systems

Goal: To present the steps necessary to form a transportation brokerage

Issue: Why Form a Transportation Brokerage?

In communities where both the public and private sectors are already providing some level of transportation, these services can offer a strong base from which to build a coordinated transportation network. One of the most common forms for this coordination is a transportation brokerage. The brokerage concept is not new, but has gained new interest in the last few years because of its use with Medicaid transportation. An excellent example of a transportation brokerage is Minnesota's own MNET system (see the Private/Public Partnerships write up in this Toolkit to read more about MNET).

A transportation brokerage is simply a mechanism to match ride requests with available transportation resources. Someone, an individual or agency, must manage or "broker" the ride requests to the transportation providers. Typically, this broker should be an independent and objective party that performs the

matches based on the best transportation (mode and timing) for the lowest cost. A variety of transportation modes can be used, for example, taxis, volunteers, fixed route bus service, demand-responsive dial-a-ride type services, etc. Brokerages can yield a number of benefits. Efficiency can be achieved by a clearinghouse for each ride request to be matched with the lowest-cost trip that meets the needs of the individual requesting the ride. Other benefits can include improved quality and safety of the ride, and increased capacity.

Brokerages can be formed by cities, counties, state or local human service agencies, transportation providers or any combination of these entities. In any case, it is important to the brokerage's long-term success to establish both the reporting mechanism or hierarchy to which the broker is accountable and the guidelines and procedures which must be followed. This oversight entity could be a new advisory council or brokerage board or an existing body, such as a subcommittee of a city council or county commission.

Issue: Establishing the Broker's Role

Defining the role of the broker, or mobility manager as it is often referred to, and the services you wish to be delivered is your first step to establishing your transportation brokerage. The duties and responsibilities of a broker includes, but is not limited to, 1) building on the existing transportation

services in the area, 2) facilitating and incubating coordination efforts among the existing service providers, 3) encouraging regional services, where available, 4) encouraging a “team approach” to service provision, working to minimize unproductive competition, and duplication, which could include working with local and state officials to change legislation, policies or practices that have institutionalized exclusive-ride service and which prohibit lower cost coordinated service delivery, 5) working to promote the use of the most efficient and appropriate (in terms of service type) service provider, including public transit services, 6) providing technical assistance, which could range from the development of a plan and strategy to identify opportunities for coordination in areas such as information and referral, joint procurement, risk management and others, to developing joint training events, providing assistance with technology and automation, vehicle inspections, and scheduling and dispatching, to regulatory compliance, and 7) creating a regional information clearinghouse for consumers to access up-to-date information on the transportation services available and how to access these services.

Before you can carry out these activities, however, you must retain the services of a transportation broker to lead your efforts.

Issue: Retain a broker/mobility manager.

Now that you’ve established what it is you want the broker to do, your next step is to retain the broker that will lead your coordination effort. Your broker can be an individual (with support staff) or an

existing agency or transportation provider, or some combination of these two. For example, an individual could be hired but housed and supported by an existing agency or provider that will be participating in the coordination effort.

The advantage of using an individual, especially someone that may be new to the area or the project is that they come to the project with no preconceived ideas or biases. The disadvantage, obviously, is that they will not be familiar with the resources available or some of the nuances or particular needs of the area. The advantage of using an existing agency is that its staff would be familiar with the area and the services that already exist. They would most likely be aware of local issues and how those issues can best be addressed. The disadvantage might be the perception that the agency is biased toward a certain population or provider. Bias, perceived or otherwise, can end a coordination effort before it begins, therefore, it is paramount that any hint of bias is addressed.

Can an existing transportation provider, e.g., the local transit system, be fair and objective? Another, or perhaps better, question might be, can a local transit system dispel the perception of bias toward its own service? These are questions that must be addressed. The answer to the first question, we believe, is yes, as long as the rules and procedures for assigning trips have been established first. Typically, these procedures will have been established by the advisory council or board (discussed earlier in this document), which will work to ensure that any misconceptions or inaccuracies regarding the brokerage or the broker’s duties are addressed.

Why would a local transit system want to act as the broker? Some might say to maintain “control” of the service being provided. Actually, many transit systems are just better equipped, with the staff and resources already trained and available and knowledgeable of the area. Having the transportation brokerage succeed will only strengthen the transit system’s position in the community, therefore, the transit system will be committed to performing this function as objectively and responsibly as possible.

Regardless of whether you hire an individual and/or set up a new brokerage office or use an existing agency or provider, here are a few of the attributes that you will want to look for in a broker.

The transportation broker must:

1. Be fair and objective. The broker will be responsible for assigning trips among various transportation providers in the brokerage. The perception of bias or “playing favorites” could create hostile feelings among the providers which is not conducive to cooperation. Having a process and a set of guidelines in place for taking and referring trips can help ensure this objectivity.
2. Be familiar with the transportation providers and services available. This does not necessarily mean the broker has to be a local individual or agency, but does mean he or she must become thoroughly familiar with the services to be offered.

3. Be an advocate for the brokerage, the services offered, and the guidelines by which those services are provided. The broker should be available to speak to individuals and groups about the benefits and services of the brokerage.
4. Be a diplomat. A major part of the broker’s role will be to encourage and facilitate coordination efforts in the area, minimizing competition and duplication which can effectively thwart coordination.
5. Be vigilant in the need for services and other support for the brokerage members. Could one member benefit from drivers training? Is dispatching and scheduling assistance needed? A good broker identifies the areas where help is needed, then works to put together a plan to fulfill those needs.

Now that you’ve established the broker’s role, hired the right individual or organization, you’ll need to expand on those areas and duties that you wish the broker to carry out.

Issue: Build on the Existing Transportation Services in the Area

The strength of a transportation brokerage is that it is built on a structure that is already in place. The time normally spent on hiring and training drivers, purchasing vehicles, etc. will be spent on assessing the capabilities and resources available from the existing providers. For instance,

- How many drivers are available? What training have they had?

- How many vehicles and at what times and days of the week are they available?
- What types of maintenance services are available?
- Do any of the providers have trainers on staff that are available to the brokerage?

Next, brokerage policies and service guidelines must be developed for such items as:

- Who will be responsible for dispatching and scheduling?
- How will calls for service be received (800 number or other centralized number, etc.)?
- Will providers be directly billed, or will the broker handle the billing?
- How and when will participating providers supply their schedules to the broker?
- What training will be required?
- How will training be monitored?

Issue: Facilitate and Incubate Coordination Efforts Among the Existing Service Providers

Concurrent with trying to build a network from your many individual transportation services, coordination among the providers must be facilitated. This is a major role for your transportation broker. Typically, regular meetings are held both as a group and individually with the various providers. It's important for the transportation provider to develop a good working relationship with each of the providers, and for them to be able to communicate their needs and concerns. In most coordination efforts, an advisory council or task force is convened to represent the

transportation providers. This provides a structured mechanism for addressing issues that will affect the group as a whole.

Issue: Encourage Regional Services, Where Appropriate

Transportation brokerages most often operate within a designated municipality or county. However, today, few transportation services are limited to such a finite area. There is always need to access services outside the city or county limits. If there are already transportation providers operating in these areas, the broker should investigate these services for the potential of coordinating with the brokered system.

Issue: Encourage a "Team Approach"

In addition to being objective and facilitating coordination among its providers, the transportation broker should adopt a team approach for service provision, working to minimize unproductive competition and duplication. This might include working with local and state officials to change legislation, policies or practices that have institutionalized exclusive-ride service and which prohibit lower cost coordinated service delivery. To this end, the broker will want to be a part of other planning groups or task forces in the area looking at transportation issues, and cultivate good working relationships with those organizations as well as with local and state officials.

Issue: Promote the Use of the Most Efficient and Appropriate Service Provider, Including Public Transit Services

In a transportation brokerage, all transportation providers are not created equal. In addition to the standard divisions of public, private for profit, and private nonprofit providers, there are also different levels, and costs, of service within these divisions. The job of the transportation broker is to match these services with the passenger to provide the best service at the least cost. These two characteristics are not mutually exclusive. The “best” service for one client might cost more than that for another. It is the role of the transportation broker to make these matches, as fairly and objectively as possible. Again, the need for the brokerage guidelines and procedures to have been developed early by the brokerage advisory council or board is paramount. It is, then, the role of the transportation providers to provide the best service they can for the lowest cost.

Issue: Provide Technical Assistance

A transportation broker will wear several hats: leader, facilitator, administrator, planner, negotiator, trainer, and more. It will be the broker’s role to be constantly aware of which “hat” is needed at designated times. For example, in areas where no coordination exists, the broker may need to develop a plan and strategy to identify opportunities for coordination in areas such as information and referral, joint procurement, risk management, joint training, insurance coverage, technology and automation, and more. He or she may need to actually develop training or arrange for it to be conducted. Or, assistance might be needed for streamlining or automating dispatching and scheduling activities.

Issue: Create a Regional Information Clearinghouse

A brokerage is only as good as the consumers who request its service. If no one is aware of the service, or aware of how to access the service, then the services will go unused. There are two issues for consumers accessing information. First, it must be easy to access. Second, the information has to be readily available and kept up-to-date. Brokerages use tollfree numbers and websites most often today to meet the information needs of consumers. These should not take the place, however, of printed materials such as flyers, brochures, and posters to get the word out. These types of materials should be available in human service offices, senior centers, grocery stores, pharmacies, and other frequented businesses. Transportation brokerages also make great human interest stories for local newspapers.

Best Practices

Winston-Salem Transit Authority (WSTA)/Trans-AID

Trans-AID is one of the longest, continuously operated paratransit systems in North Carolina. Moreover, the system has successfully coordinated urban and rural paratransit needs in Forsyth County throughout its history, one of the few examples of integrated service delivery, using a transportation brokerage, or mobility management, model.

Trans-AID was established in 1978 to transport elderly and disabled citizens in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. Trans-AID was operated as a division of the Winston-Salem Transit Authority that

provided advance reservation, curb-to-curb demand response transportation to eligible individuals in the service area. The system has grown from providing a few thousand trips per year to over 100,000 unlinked passenger trips per year today.

Trans-AID operates from a “mobility management” center located on the second floor of the downtown transit center in the heart of Winston-Salem. All customer service functions are provided at this center including, but not necessarily limited to:

- ◆ Reservations for ADA service
- ◆ Information on WSTA fixed route services
- ◆ Information on all other paratransit services
- ◆ Information regard ADA eligibility certification
- ◆ Paratransit trip information and trip cancellation

Trans-AID coordinates virtually all human service agency transportation. It is a direct recipient of Title III transportation funds for older adults and provides most of the Medicaid transportation in the county. The organization has service contracts with more than 15 other social service agencies, operating a non-dedicated fleet of vehicles to serve all paratransit needs. State-of-the-art computerized scheduling and dispatching technology is an integral component of the Trans-AID program.

For more information on the mobility manager project, contact Winston-Salem Trans-AID at (336) 727-2648.