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What to Consider When Establishing a Volunteer Driver Program

Volunteer transportation programs – also known as volunteer driver programs – provide vital transportation to many people in Massachusetts. Most volunteer driver programs serve seniors; but some programs serve people with disabilities, veterans and cancer patients. Volunteer driver programs can be a cost-effective and flexible way to address the transportation needs of communities and can save money for both the organization and the consumer.

There are many volunteer driver programs¹ operated by senior service agencies or Councils on Aging (COAs) in Massachusetts. They range from very small operations with just a few drivers to a large, statewide program with hundreds of drivers. In addition to providing vital transportation, these programs also provide an element of social connectedness for their riders.

This document contains information about what to consider before establishing a volunteer driver program. The content of this brief was developed from interviews and surveys of current programs in Massachusetts.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Host Organization

Finding a host organization for your volunteer driver program is essential. Volunteer driver programs can be run by senior service organizations, Councils on Aging (COAs), medical advocacy groups, such as the American Cancer Society, or be stand-alone programs, such as the Northern Essex Elder Transport in Amesbury, MA. Generally, the host organization performs administrative work including running a Criminal Offender Records Information (CORI) check, a driving record check through the Registry of Motor Vehicles on prospective volunteers, and administering mileage reimbursements or stipends, if applicable.

Administrative work is sometimes shared among multiple organizations. For example, the Old Colony Area Agency on Aging hosts an optional volunteer driver program for the

¹ <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/provider/guidelines-resources/services-planning/hst/mobility-manage/recommended-practices/finding-local-volunteer-driver-programs.html>

Councils on Aging in their region. Old Colony provides mileage reimbursement and the Councils on Aging recruit volunteers and schedule rides for passengers.

Vehicle Ownership

There are two general types of volunteer transportation programs: 1) volunteers driving agency vehicles, and 2) volunteers driving their own personal vehicles. The second type is the most common type of program and has two sub-types: a) passengers call the host organization to request a ride, and b) passengers find their own volunteers and schedule their own rides. In Massachusetts, TRIP Metro North is the only example of the latter type of program, which is described in the *Profiles of Successful Volunteer Driver Programs in Massachusetts*.

Program types have different implications for the agency hosting the program. When an agency supplies the vehicles, often there are more training requirements for drivers. If the vehicle was acquired through a state or federal program, there may be additional requirements² –including drug and alcohol testing– that drivers must meet. Volunteers may prefer to drive an agency vehicle so that they do not increase wear and tear on their own cars. When volunteers drive their own vehicles, the agency must make sure that the vehicles are in good working condition, and that drivers are adequately insured.

Program Cost

Volunteer driver programs are generally seen as cost-effective. Most programs do not require paying drivers or buying vehicles. However, it is important to factor in the cost of staff time. Most programs have at least a part-time coordinator who works on recruiting, screening, and training volunteers, scheduling rides, and administering mileage reimbursement. If a program does not have a dedicated coordinator, one staff member will have to spend time performing such tasks. Sometimes a volunteer can be recruited into a position of program coordinator, particularly in small programs. If the vehicle is owned by the agency, costs associated with maintenance and driver training also have to be factored into the cost of running the program.

Sources of Funding

Sources of funding for volunteer driver programs include municipal budgets, private foundation grants, and individual fundraising efforts by non-profit organizations affiliated with COAs.³ In addition to local sources, there is federal and state funding available.

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<http://www.massdot.state.ma.us/Portals/12/docs/communityTransit/5310AuthorizedVehicleUseGuide.pdf>

³ Many COAs have a Friends of the Council on Aging group, which is a non-profit organization devoted to raise funds on behalf of the COA.

For organizations looking to acquire a vehicle, federal (Section 5310) or state (Mobility Assistance Program) funding is available through a competitive grant program (Community Transit Grant).⁴ In order to get a vehicle, the grant sub-recipient must supply a 20 percent local match. For COAs that operate in a region with a Regional Transit Authority (RTA), it may be possible – but not as a matter of rule- to apply for a vehicle through the RTA. The RTA then leases the vehicle to the volunteer driver program. While the lease may not be free of charge, the local match is provided by the RTA.

The Massachusetts Rural Transit Assistance Program's⁵ Helping Hands mini-grant may award up to \$1000 to applicants from small urban or rural areas. The funding can be used for purchasing vehicle technology, spending on marketing, or driver recruitment campaigns.

Peer Support

The Massachusetts Volunteer Driver Network has a listserv for volunteer transportation program staff to share ideas and make connections. In addition to an e-mail list, there are in-person forums where people gather to discuss best practices and share solutions to challenges. These forums have been found very useful by program staff as well as by people exploring whether implementing a volunteer transportation program is a good fit for their organization.

ESSENTIAL TASKS OF VOLUNTEER TRANSPORTATION PROGRAMS

Recruiting Volunteers

Programs report that finding volunteer drivers is an ongoing challenge, thus they are not always able to fulfill transportation requests. Passengers and existing drivers can help recruit drivers with a number of different approaches including:

- Word-of-mouth through friends and families
- From a pool of retired local police officers and firefighters
- Placing notices in local newspapers
- COA newsletters
- Presentations to community groups
- On-line programs such as RSVP (Retired Seniors Volunteer Program) or Idealist

⁴ <http://www.massdot.state.ma.us/transit/CommunityTransitGrantProgram.aspx>

⁵ <http://martap.org/>

Programs often alleviate the challenges to recruitment by offering mileage reimbursement or a small stipend to offset the cost of vehicle use. In addition, some programs offer umbrella liability insurance policy that extends to the driver and passenger in the driver's car.

Elder Services of Berkshire County ran an innovative volunteer recruitment campaign using billboards. The agency based the design of the billboards on a national advertising campaign called *"Got an Hour? Give it Back."* These billboards brought 20 new volunteers to the agency, many of whom became volunteer drivers for the transportation program.

Mileage Reimbursement

Mileage reimbursement is a common component of volunteer driver programs where volunteers drive their own cars. In Massachusetts, reimbursement rates range from \$0.22/mile up to the IRS reimbursement rate (currently \$0.54/mile). Most programs have their volunteers submit monthly totals and then the program sends them reimbursement checks. While mileage reimbursement may help with volunteer recruitment and retention, some successful programs do not reimburse their drivers, such as Road to Recovery and programs run by COAs.

Program Publicity

Successful volunteer transportation programs need drivers and passengers alike. Finding passengers can often be accomplished through the same methods as recruiting volunteers.

It is helpful to have an up-to-date website where potential users of the service can find details about how to schedule a ride, who is eligible for the service, and whom to contact for more information. Even if passengers themselves do not look up information online, their friends and family members may prefer online resources.

Scheduling Rides via Phone

Except for the TRIP program, where participants are responsible for finding their own drivers, scheduling requires dedicated staff time. When a person calls to schedule a ride, the scheduler collects information including name, day and time of requested trip, origin and destination, and contact information. Occasionally programs may also request contact information for the location the passenger is traveling to, particularly if it is a medical appointment. Then the scheduler will call the list of volunteers until one is found who can fulfill the request. It is helpful for host organizations to ask each volunteer to give an overview of their weekly availability, so that the scheduler knows when someone is likely to be able to volunteer for a ride. In most programs, once the ride has been

scheduled, the volunteer then calls the passenger directly to re-confirm either the night before or the day of the trip.

Scheduling Rides via Software

In a statewide survey of volunteer driver programs conducted in June 2016, programs reported that they made use of a wide range of software programs to help organize their trips and make administrative tasks easier. Generally, software packages can help cut down on staff time needed to track ride requests, make volunteer assignments, look up each volunteer's availability, and call that volunteer personally. Software programs also capture program statistics, which helps with reporting. Access to comprehensive program reporting is particularly useful for funding applications.

My Senior Center

- This program is a comprehensive package used by senior centers to track classes, meals and other activities, including volunteer hours. While the software is not transportation-focused, Councils on Aging tend to use it to manage their transportation programs instead of purchasing a separate transportation software package. My Senior Center is also designed to be used by consumers as they enter the senior center and sign in to classes and attend other activities.
- Initial setup fee: \$10,000. If your organization allows local businesses to place advertisement on the customer interface, the fee can be reduced to \$4500 by choosing the sponsor package.
- Annual fee: \$1800/year. If you opt for the sponsor package, the annual fee is \$1200/year.
- Website: <http://myseniorcenter.com/>

Assisted Rides

- Assisted Rides started as a transportation program and then expanded to track other kinds of services offered by senior service agencies. This package is not designed to be used by consumers. However, it does have the capacity for volunteers to assign themselves rides in the system. This software can support multiple organizations for an additional fee.
- Initial setup fee: \$1000.
- Annual fee: \$1500/year for up to 5000 rides/year. This increases by \$500/year for each additional 2500 rides/year.
- Website: <https://assistedrides.com/>

Better Impact

- The focus of this software is on volunteer management. It does not have a specific transportation component, but has been successfully used by Meals on Wheels programs.
- Initial setup fee: \$395-\$995, depending on how much training and customization your organization wants.
- Annual fee: \$120/year for up to 50 volunteers
- Website: <http://www.betterimpact.com/>

Trip Trak

- This is a proprietary database that supplements the TRIP program. This database helps to track mileage for volunteers and produces reimbursement checks.
- Initial setup fee: \$275
- Annual fee: \$628.20 (\$568.20 subscription fee + \$50 administrative fee)
- Website: <http://ilpconnect.org/store/>

RESOURCES

Resource Guide for Volunteer Driver Programs provides you helpful tools for everything from driver training, volunteer screening, liability protection, to launching a new program. It also provides you links to local best practice models and national organizations focusing on volunteer driving.

USEFUL CONTACT INFORMATION

Please contact rachel.fichtenbaum@state.ma.us with any further questions about volunteer driver programs, or if you would like to join the statewide email list for volunteer driver program staff.

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Reference: Theadora Fisher. (2016) *What to Consider when Establishing a Volunteer Driver Program*. Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Human Service Transportation Office, Quincy, MA