

April 2017

Coordinating Senior Transportation among Multiple Councils on Aging

In an era in which federal transportation dollars have been level-funded while the cost of operating transportation services continues to rise, municipalities are increasingly looking to make their transportation programs more efficient. In Massachusetts, coordinating with other towns to regionalize services is one path municipalities are pursuing to increase efficiency, including regionalization of the transportation services that most towns provide to their seniors. MassDOT and other funders have also prioritized regionalized models for grant awards, as a way to stretch limited dollars to as many regions and riders as possible.

Many Councils on Aging have questions or concerns about what coordinated or regionalized transportation service would mean for them and for their seniors. This research brief seeks to inform the decisions of COAs and municipalities that are exploring regionalization or coordination of transportation. The first section provides an overview of different approaches to coordinating service, and the second section discusses key considerations related to coordinating transportation. Although many COAs provide a range of transportation services to their seniors, this brief focuses primarily on COA transportation in which a paid driver drives a COA van.

APPROACHES TO COORDINATING TRANSPORTATION

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to transportation coordination; each municipality is free to determine what type of coordination – if any – will best meet the needs of their seniors within the constraints of their municipal budget. Current examples of coordination in Massachusetts include models operated by Councils on Aging (COAs), by organizations formed by COAs, and by transportation providers.

Councils on Aging

In 1989, Hampden COA Director Carolyn Brennan noticed an opportunity. Her town's van was driving through a neighboring town on its way to the local hospital. Because Hampden is a small town, her van was usually half-empty, but she had heard that the neighboring town was at capacity for rides and was turning people away. Brennan reached out to suggest a partnership. Over time, the partnership grew to include four towns. By pooling the resources of each town, Brennan was able to purchase an extra van for the region. Partnering gave the larger towns more capacity, and also increased the amount of service the smaller towns were able to afford.

Brennan left her job and later returned as Director of the East Longmeadow COA. In the interim, the Regional Transit Authority had consolidated all COA transportation under one private provider, but Brennan saw opportunity for improved efficiency. In 2011, she applied for and received a Community Innovation Challenge grant to implement the Two-Town Trolley, a coordinated COA transportation service for East Longmeadow and Hampden. She is currently working with her Regional Transit Authority to coordinate senior transportation for four local towns, as part of a pilot

to see if towns can offer senior transportation more efficiently than the private provider currently under contract.

According to Brennan, the main benefit of coordination is money: it's cheaper to centralize instead of each town paying for a driver, a van, and staff time to take reservations and schedule trips. She cautions that a region should not get too big; it's important for the call-taker, dispatcher, and driver to be familiar with the region and the riders so that they can plan efficient routes. If a senior lives up a mountain, the person doing the scheduling needs to be aware of that and build in time for the van to climb the grade; similarly, the scheduler needs to know which seniors can handle waiting for a van, and which riders are too frail to wait long, in order to route the vehicle efficiently while providing high-quality service to the seniors. In addition to the cost savings, Brennan emphasizes the value of having a full-time driver who gets to know the passengers, provides companionship to isolated seniors, and notices if something is wrong with a regular customer.

Organizations Formed by COAs

West of East Longmeadow toward the New York border, another COA transportation coordination program has been operating for over 30 years. The Southern Berkshire Elderly Transportation Corporation (SBETC) was founded by a group of small, rural towns that had no transportation. By pooling their resources, they were able to afford the costs of starting and running a transportation program for area seniors, which would have been out of reach had the towns acted alone.

Whereas in East Longmeadow, one COA ran the transportation program for both partnering COAs, in Southern Berkshire County, the COAs opted to incorporate a new non-profit to run the transportation program. Each member town pays an assessment based on its population of seniors, and SBETC has also received grants from Elder Affairs and MassDOT. SBETC currently provides transportation for seven towns: Alford, Great Barrington, Egremont, Monterey, New Marlborough, Otis, and Sandisfield. Riders can easily travel across town borders within the region, and SBETC also takes riders into Pittsfield.

CrossTown Connect is another example of a new organization formed to coordinate COA transportation for multiple towns. Observing that COA vans from surrounding towns were all piling up at the local hospital, transportation champions in the Acton area recognized opportunities for greater efficiency through coordinating. They imagined the COA van from one town picking up passengers from neighboring towns on its way to the hospital, filling seats on the van and allowing the other towns to keep their vans local to fulfill other trip requests. Because the region also had employers with transportation needs, Acton and partner towns decided to form a Transportation Management Association (TMA) to coordinate both senior and employment transportation in the region.

CrossTown Connect progressed slowly and surely toward its vision. They started with COA transportation dispatch for Acton, Boxborough, Littleton, and Maynard. When they began, each town had a part-time person assigned to take reservations and schedule trips. CrossTown Connect saw potential for greater efficiency through coordination. If they pooled resources among the towns, they could hire two full-time call-takers. That would improve customer service, since it would increase the hours during which callers could call to request a ride. It would also improve

efficiency, since the dispatcher would be more likely to get a message if someone was cancelling a ride, and would be able to adjust the route accordingly.

Allowing vans from one town to pick up residents in other towns on their way to a common destination, such as the hospital, proved more difficult to implement. Some CrossTown Connect member towns are served by one Regional Transit Authority (RTA), while others are served by a second. The RTAs, which provide the vehicles to CrossTown Connect, were hesitant to allow their vehicles to pick up riders in another RTA's service area. CrossTown Connect worked with the two RTAs, MassDOT, and the Baker-Polito administration's Community Compact program, and in 2016 the partners were able to complete a Memorandum of Understanding that resolved the concerns and established a process that would allow COA vehicles to pick up residents from other towns on the way to a common destination.

Transportation Providers

In addition to fixed-route services, all RTAs run demand-response paratransit services that require riders to schedule trips in advance. Thus, RTAs have an infrastructure to support reservations, scheduling, and dispatch. Some have made these platforms available to COAs so that COAs do not have to spend staff or volunteer time duplicating these services.

The MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) began offering this service to its member COAs in 2014. MWRTA takes the reservations, prepares the manifest, and sends it to the town. If a town cannot complete a trip, MWRTA will try to pick it up through their other local services – a benefit to the town and its riders. MWRTA does not levy any additional fees on member towns that take advantage of the reservations and scheduling service, and fares collected go back to the town.

The first town to join was Holliston. In the transition process, MWRTA and the COA tried to change as little as possible so that Holliston's seniors would not have to learn a whole new system. The drivers and the cost for a fare did not change, but the phone number seniors called for reservations changed from the COA to MWRTA. In addition, instead of paying cash during the ride, MWRTA asked seniors to set up an account with them.

The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) runs a similar program for COAs in its service area. It began as a pilot in 2008 with two towns, and has grown to include seven. COAs retain their own drivers, who are town employees, but WRTA's paratransit department handles the reservations and dispatch. Local trips take priority, but vans also do regional runs when available, in order to maximize the number of riders served.

RTAs are not the only entities already set up to do reservations and scheduling: other demand-response transportation providers also have this infrastructure in place. A new coordination model that is planned for 2017 takes advantage of capacity within a local non-profit transportation provider to assist a COA and a human service agency with transportation needs. The South Shore Community Action Council is a non-profit that has been providing transportation for over 40 years.

Currently, their fleet of 44 vehicles provides over 200,000 trips per year. After piloting the model with one COA, they hope to invite other local COAs to join.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY

Quality and efficiency are the two main considerations in a decision of whether or not to coordinate COA transportation. COAs want to offer a high-quality service to their seniors. For transportation, that translates to reliable, affordable, friendly service that will get seniors to their medical appointments and other key destinations. But given limited budgets, COAs are also eager to find ways to provide the same level of service for less cost, to provide a higher level of service for the same cost, or to increase the number of seniors who can be served without increasing the COA budget.

Quality

The quest for quality can lead COAs to be wary of coordination, as collaborating requires ceding some decision-making to partners. For this reason, communication is critical to the success of partnerships. In order to build trust, all partners should feel that they have a seat at the table, and that their concerns are listened to and addressed.¹ Key partners may include the Town Administrator, the COA director, the transportation manager at the COA, and the driver, as well as any other partners outside the COA.

A best practice for COAs interested in coordinating but wary of ceding control is to identify key features of your program and work with the partnership to find ways to ensure that those features are maintained to your standards. For example, many COAs think of their transportation services holistically as part of the social services they provide, and consider their drivers to be outreach workers on behalf of the COA. The driver gets to know the passengers and notices if a regular customer's behavior changes, or if they appear unwell, and can alert COA staff. In order to retain these benefits, the MWRTA coordinated model did not make any changes to driver staffing; COAs that sign up for centralized dispatch keep the same drivers.

COAs may also consider call-taking to be part of their outreach, as the call-takers have the opportunity to provide referrals to other senior services above and beyond transportation if they hear a need when a senior calls. When switching to a coordinated reservations model, Pamela Campbell, Director of Elder and Human Services in Littleton, provided training to the CrossTown Connect dispatchers on the services her COA offered, to ensure they were aware of key components of her transportation program – and so that they would be aware of all COA offerings, not just transportation, when speaking with callers.

Coordination can lead to service improvements, such as increasing the amount of transportation service a COA is able to offer. When CrossTown Connect centralized dispatch, COAs were able to offer their seniors longer hours to call and request rides. Later, when CrossTown Connect began allowing residents from one member town to ride on vehicles from another member town, seniors

¹ TranSystems Corporation et al., p29

from all partnering towns gained access to Littleton's weekly shuttle to Burlington and Boston hospitals. Littleton lost nothing because their residents had never filled all the seats, and neighboring COAs gained access to a new service they could offer to their seniors. Through partnering with its Regional Transit Authority, the Holliston COA is able to access backup vehicles if their vehicle needs maintenance. This access ensures that the COA does not have to cancel trips if a vehicle breaks down or suffers an accident.

Efficiency

Increasing service without increasing cost is one form of efficiency; another is reducing the budget without reducing service. Running a successful transportation program requires a call-taker, scheduler, dispatcher, and driver, but not every town has a large enough program to need their own. COAs can share these costs, instead of each outlaying the full amount, when they work together. To accurately calculate the cost-effectiveness of different models, towns need to account for all costs associated with a transportation program, including the value of staff time spent answering phones and scheduling rides.

Another way coordination can improve efficiency is through increased access to resources: time and money. When a COA shifts call-taking and scheduling to an outside entity, the COA can now allocate the staff or volunteer time from the person who was working on transportation to another COA program. Linda Marshall, Outreach Coordinator at the Holliston COA, reports that she has had a lot more time to focus on outreach since MWRTA took over her ride reservations and scheduling.

Coordination can also open up new access to funds. A town that joins a multi-town partnership gains new access to funding sources that focus on the partner towns. In addition, MassDOT and other funders have prioritized coordinated transportation and regional partnerships for grants.

Filling empty seats on a vehicle speaks to both efficiency and quality; it is a more efficient use of the money used to pay for fuel, the driver's salary, insurance, and maintenance, and it implies improved quality since it means more seniors are getting rides. The ability to fill empty seats is one of the strongest arguments for coordination, especially in areas where seniors are frequently crossing town lines to get to medical appointments, shopping centers, or other popular destinations. COAs looking to measure their efficiency may wish to record passenger miles traveled instead of pure mileage, so that the data will reflect the increased usage of the van.

Conversely, towns whose senior vans are already at or above capacity have raised concerns about how they are expected to coordinate with other towns given that they are already turning away their own residents' ride requests. Towns should look to where their needs lie, and see whether coordination might help them meet those needs. Towns whose problem lies in insufficient capacity could explore whether any neighboring municipalities have spare capacity they could use. Two neighboring towns struggling to meet trip requests might find that partnering with each other would enable them to afford a new vehicle or additional driver that might be too expensive for either town acting alone.

Towns may also worry about policy or regulatory barriers to coordinating, but exiting coordination efforts have been able to overcome any such challenges. With technical assistance from MassDOT and support through the Baker-Polito Administration's Community Compact program, CrossTown Connect was able to sign an MOU with two RTAs to allow vehicle sharing across service areas. If the coordination plan calls for local vans to travel outside of town for the first time, towns should ensure they have a plan for what to do in case of an accident happening outside of town lines.

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD WITH COORDINATION

COA Directors and Town Administrators must weigh the benefits and challenges of coordination carefully, and ultimately make the best decision for their town and their seniors. While this brief has focused on coordination among COAs, COAs can also partner with other types of agencies locally or regionally to address shared transportation challenges. Keep in mind that there are many different ways that organizations can coordinate together. Work with partners to try to find an approach that meets all agencies' needs.

If a town decides to change its transportation program structure – either a shift into a coordinated partnership, or away from one – making the change gradually can help seniors adjust and fully understand the new system. In addition to public meetings and private conversations with seniors, COAs should also communicate clearly with COA staff, drivers, and any other stakeholders about the changes.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following individuals contributed to this report: Bruce Bernstein, Carolyn Brennan, Pamela Campbell, Carl Damigella, Jennifer Goewey, Linda Marshall, Connie Mellis, Sharon Mercurio, Franny Osman, Steve Salwak, Dawn Valinaggi, and Scott Zadakis.

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