

# ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION

## ***Neighborhood Transportation Service***



*It's more  
than just  
a ride.*



### **The Challenge**

Transportation should never be a barrier to employment. Sometimes the simplest idea can be the most profound. Many businesses are moving to the outlying reaches of urban areas leaving behind potential employees who have limited transportation resources. Often employers take the approach that they are providing the job and it is up to the employee to figure out how to get to work. New or relocating businesses often search for a location with an inexpensive footprint and a large parking lot for their future employees but may give little or no thought to how workers without vehicles will get to the job. In many cases these are the people who most need the job: workers with disabilities who either can't drive or can't afford a car, workers coming off welfare who don't have a dependable car or have no car at all, and workers toiling at low-wage jobs who cannot afford the upkeep of their own car. If simply getting to work isn't enough of a barrier, many of these workers have the added burden of securing access to childcare so they can work. Many entry-level positions are second or third shift jobs, including telemarketers, restaurant service workers, care facilities aides, and janitors. All are traditionally low paying and require employees to work at night when public transportation is nonexistent except in larger cities. Taxis often are prohibitively expensive.

There may be many additional reasons why an individual will choose public transportation, such as environmental consciousness, freedom from finding a parking space and paying for it, or not wanting to impose on friends or spouse. However, it is clear that a large pool of actual and potential workers use this form of transportation because they have to. Driving is not a choice; without such a transportation option, they cannot work. It's more than just a ride.

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## The Invention

A convenient, affordable transportation service that connects workers to jobs when public transportation is not available.



## The Solution: Getting the Idea to Fly

Those who have an interest in transportation accessibility are probably familiar with at least one group of people that is dealing with transportation barriers. An accurate needs assessment is a critical first step. Determine how people are currently getting to work. What public and private transportation options are available? Start with the local public transportation agency. Who are their riders? Who are they not serving and whom do they perceive that they are not able to serve efficiently? Contact with the local Chamber of Commerce or comparable group can provide initial access to local businesses to determine if some of their workers need transportation.

People who are economically disadvantaged often need transportation. Contact with a welfare-to-work program and local poverty agencies can help to identify transportation needs of this group. Get in touch with the local Workforce Development Center, shelters, and transitional housing programs. Look at a list of agencies funded by the local United Way and try to identify organizations working with individuals who may need to utilize an after-hours transportation service. Talk to all the local temporary employment services.

Corrections clients are another group in need of transportation assistance. Identify the local halfway houses. Developing a strong collaboration with such organizations can provide a modest amount of funding and a steady stream of customers to use the service. Often halfway houses have their own job developers who work with the residents to help them find employment.

Find out who in the community is doing vocational training or case management for people with disabilities. What organizations run group homes? Are there support groups in the area for people with brain injuries? The local offices that help to manage compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act may be a valuable resource for identifying agencies and organizations in the area that work with people with disabilities.

A transportation service cannot operate without dependable vehicles. Identifying resources to acquire vans/busses of an appro-



*Neighborhood Transportation*

ropriate size that are handicap accessible is essential background information. How these are acquired also influences the overall cost of providing the service. There may be grants available to purchase vehicles. It is also possible that they could be leased—for a nominal fee—from existing entities like the local public transportation service. Some organizations that consider such a service consistent with their mission may loan or donate busses. Even during the startup phase, it is critical to identify a source for vehicles for backup and service expansion.

Establishing an advisory group can be a great help in all of the above tasks. Its composition depends on the service. At a minimum

## **ABOUT NEIGHBORHOOD TRANSPORTATION SERVICE**

NTS (Neighborhood Transportation Service) is a neighborhood-run transportation service in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, that provides affordable evening and weekend, vocationally related rides during times when the fixed-route public bus service is not available. Passengers are picked up or dropped off at their home, work, school, or life skills class by appointment. The cost of a ride is \$3.00 anywhere within the NTS operating area. Childcare drop-off and pick-up is available as well. NTS drivers are familiar with area human service providers and advise passengers where assistance is available when needed.

Launched in 1994 with one minivan, NTS provided 566 work- and school-related rides in the Wellington Heights neighborhood. By 2002, NTS served the entire Cedar Rapids metro area and provided 43,128 rides using seven mini-busses and vans. Through collaboration with the local United Way, NTS has expanded its hours and now operates until 6:00 AM. Local residents now have affordable public transportation to get to and from work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In September 2002, NTS and the City of Cedar Rapids were honored with the Iowa League of Cities All-Star Community Award for their collaboration in providing off-hours affordable transportation at a savings of over \$1,000,000 per year when compared with fixed-route service.

it should include representatives of the major constituencies of the service. Sometimes overlooked but of critical importance is legal advice. In addition to helping to clarify and establish personnel policies, this resource can be critical to acquiring 501(c)(3) status and to meeting Federal Transit Administration regulations that accompany funding.

It is important to think of alternative transportation as both a process and a philosophy. The process is described in detail here; the philosophy may be less visible. After hours, door-to-door transportation is underpinned by a belief that people's work-related transportation needs have to be given both attitudinal and procedural priority. It is critical to get people to work. In addition, it is critical to create a service atmosphere that emphasizes the needs of the riders. Accommodation (scheduling, driver attitude, flexibility) becomes a very important part of the implementation of the service and allows it to distinguish itself from other options.



*Neighborhood  
Transportation*

When starting an alternative transportation service, it is essential to identify the central mission and purpose. In the case of NTS, the priorities for such a service are to get people to work on time and get them home after work. This needs to be done in a safe manner—both when in transit and at the pick-up and drop-off sites. Depending on the climate of the area served, comfort may also be a consideration. Keeping in mind that reliable childcare is important to working, the service providers need to decide whether transporting the children of riders to care arrangements before dropping the rider off at work is within the scope of the service.

The number of staff necessary to start a transportation service will depend on factors such as geographical area served, hours of service, projected demand based on the needs assessment, and start-up funds available. There are two main tasks that staff need to get done: scheduling/record keeping, and driving/vehicle maintenance. In most cases this means a minimum of two people.

It is useful to consider initially locating the administrative activities in an existing organization that is compatible with the mission of the service. In this instance, staff are already available to help with taking calls, office space may be available, time on computers may be loaned to the service, and resources for handling budget and payroll are already in place. This type of arrangement can help the service to establish itself and stabilize, and to devote the time and energy necessary to actual provision of rides.

The person responsible for scheduling must be very well organized

with an orientation to detail and accuracy. Rides should be scheduled at least 24 hours in advance. This allows enough time to determine the route and make adjustments as needed. Accurate addresses and home and work phone numbers of riders are very important. The scheduler also must have strong customer service skills. This person may be the first to interact with riders and collaborating partners. He or she has to present a positive image of the service. Computer skills—especially in spreadsheet and data management—are a must. Accurate scheduling also requires knowledge of the geographic area served.



In a small transportation service, everyone (including the director and office staff) needs to be licensed and willing to be backup drivers. A non-hierarchical organization is the best way to assure this backup and cross-tasking. Maintaining communication among staff can be a challenge, particularly since the service will operate outside of office hours and many of the drivers may have day jobs.

Drivers clearly need to have driving skill and enjoy it. They also need knowledge of the geographic area in which they will be providing rides. Keeping to a schedule, anticipating the route they will travel, and being flexible enough to make midcourse adjustments is important. It is also important that the drivers consider it their primary responsibility to get people to work on time. They need to have enough mechanical knowledge to be able to service the vehicle at the end of their shift (topping off fluids, cleaning the exterior and interior, checking the tires, etc.). They also need to recognize when the vehicle may need more extensive work. Keeping the fleet ready for dependable service must be a priority. The vehicles are traveling billboards that reflect the quality of the service.

Considering the life situation of many likely riders, driver knowledge of community social service resources is also helpful, as is the instinct to assist someone in need. Equip each staff person with an extensive community resource guide and encourage him or her to make referrals to riders as needed. Make sure all staff are familiar with where to get assistance with healthcare, housing, food, childcare, transportation

as well as well other basic needs. By forging a link between available resources and those who need them, the service becomes much more than just a ride.

Spreading the word about the service is important. There are several strategies that can help with this marketing. Any of the following suggestions depends on the unique characteristics and location of the service:

- Put a logo on the buses and include a phone number
- Actively nurture relationships with people contacted during the needs assessment
- Get brochures to people/organizations who are likely to channel riders to the service (human resources people at businesses, marketing personnel for the public transportation services, staff at temporary employment services)
- Use media contacts to help spread the word about the service (and about any changes in the service as it matures)
- List the service in the phone directory—both under its own name and under transportation headings



*Neighborhood Transportation*

Funding sources vary and each service needs to explore and discover what is available in its area. The rider fee should be influenced by the income level of the riders, reflect a proportion of the actual cost of the ride, and be high enough to discourage “no shows” at the point of pickup. External sources are the main source of stable funding. Possible sources are subsidies by local governmental bodies and public transportation services, contracts with employers and agencies with regular riders, and businesses that subsidize employee rides to work. Daytime contracts that are consistent with the mission of the service can also help provide funds. There have been federal dollars available to subsidize rides under the Federal Transit Administration’s Job Access for Reverse Commute (JARC) Initiative.



## **Measuring and Adapting: Did it Fly?**

Determining whether the service works is critical, especially in the early stages when there may be skepticism about its need or the workability of the delivery format. Set up a data collection strategy from the outset.

There are two major types of data that should be gathered: one is about the customers/riders; and two, information on the rides provided

and the vehicles customer/rider data should be gathered for every rider at the time he or she first starts using the service and at the place where they either sign up or purchase the ticket. It is essential to have enough demographic data to document that the primary target population is being served. If the needs assessment has shown a transportation need for particular type of household (e.g., single parent with young children, welfare to work, recent immigrant population), those data should be gathered. Income level of the rider as well as the type of work they do and whether it is full or part-time (or perhaps a combination of both) is also important. Especially important is gathering information on the rider's transportation-related barriers to working, such as their ability to get or keep a job because of transportation, the availability and affordability of other means of transportation, and if they have a car, why they are not using it.

After the person has ridden for a while, it is helpful to periodically gather some information related to their experience and satisfaction with the service (e.g., actual affordability, qualitative dimension of the ride, driver attitude, and relationships with riders). There may also be some quality-of-life areas that could be explored (e.g., increased level of independence, greater feeling of safety, reduction of social isolation through development of relationships with other riders). Once a year a more extensive survey on the impact of the service on the riders can provide valuable insight into their perception of the balance among work, financial, and quality of life results related to the service. Getting surveys returned is a challenge. Anonymity of the respondents can help assure more candid responses. Providing incentives for return of the survey such as free rides or addressed stamped envelopes can increase return rate. Also, if the riders have valued the service and it has really provided them a resource they do not have, they will feel a desire to "help the service out" in its effort to understand itself better.

The second major area of data to gather is about the rides provided and the vehicles. Most of this information can come from carefully kept scheduling records (office logs, driver logs, and vehicle maintenance records). Pick-up and drop-off records can identify the number of riders in any particular time frame (nightly, weekly, monthly), what areas are being served most frequently, where the riders are going, how long they waited for pick-up, and the length of time in transit. Those records can also help to identify cancellations and "no shows." This valuable information can be used to document the extent to which the initial

need is being met. It can also identify how frequently the service meets its benchmarks for length of wait before being picked up and length of time in transit. Additionally, it can provide information when the service needs to be expanded to an available rider population (e.g., requests for service that cannot be met, too long a wait time for pick-up or too long in transit). Setting up an accurate electronic recording system with calculated summaries and the capacity to import and export data between spreadsheets reduces repetitive data entry and provides crosschecks of the accuracy of the totals. It also greatly simplifies creation of reports to deliver to various constituents. Some scheduling software is available that may meet some of these record-keeping needs.

Vehicle records probably do not need to include more than miles driven in any particular time frame, fuel and oil costs, and maintenance. Often funding sources or governmental bodies will have additional requirements.



*Neighborhood Transportation*



## **The Ripple Effect: Expect it and Encourage it**

By providing access to work, a transportation service opens opportunities that, for many riders, did not exist before. The number of hours worked can increase, a work history can be built or improved, there can be upward mobility within a job, and there is a chance to make career shifts. Stabilization and the increase of income can reduce debt and make savings a possibility, perhaps for the first time. Positive change in one's living arrangements, perhaps even home ownership, may come within the worker's grasp. Riders can experience an expanded sense of empowerment and control over their lives. For those who work nights in isolated areas, there is a very real increase in safety.

Clearly, the transportation service is not in control of all of these issues. But it must see itself as a major factor in creating these kinds of opportunities for its riders. The service is definitely more than just a ride.



## **Caution**

The biggest challenge to a service of this type is the danger of overextending itself. There can be overextension inherent in starting the service with limited staff and vehicles. Once the service is successful, it will be asked to do more. Typical expectations are to expand hours, expand geographic area served, or enter into special contracts outside of the service hours as revenue enhancers or to respond to a request from a funder or major constituent. Each of these should be examined

for its consistency with the core mission of the service. For all of these, the negative impact will be felt most directly on the driving and office staff. The level of efficiency that needs to characterize this type of service depends on dedicated people, many of whom will be working part-time until the service gets established. Spreading people too thin will likely have a negative impact on the core service and on the energy and goodwill reserve in the service's human capital.

There is another caution that is also important. Having vehicles that are available and in good repair is essential to fulfilling the core mission of the service. It is unlikely that an after-hours transportation service will have the luxury of all-new vehicles, or even a deep pool of back-up vehicles. Caution must be taken to weigh the short-term gains of responding to requests that are not yet built into the ongoing workings of the service system against the negative impact that could actually harm the core service by not being available.



## Summary

Connecting people with jobs via affordable transportation is a surefire way to support local employment and build economic self-sufficiency. Through careful assessment of residents' and employers' needs, strategic marketing, and constant attention to performance, an after-hours transportation service can complement a community's existing transportation infrastructure.

## RESOURCES

University of California Transportation Center:  
[www.uctc.net](http://www.uctc.net)

### **Federal Transportation Administration pages:**

Job Access Fiscal Year 2002:  
[www.fta.dot.gov/office/program/2002/pfjarc.html](http://www.fta.dot.gov/office/program/2002/pfjarc.html)

Transportation Resources for Employers:  
[www.fta.dot.gov/wtw/trfe/trfe.html](http://www.fta.dot.gov/wtw/trfe/trfe.html)

Welfare to Work (JARC Initiative):  
[www.fta.dot.gov/wtw](http://www.fta.dot.gov/wtw)

### **Some Examples of Existing Transportation Services:**

[www.dialaride.org](http://www.dialaride.org)  
[www.metrocouncil.org/transit/dialaride.htm](http://www.metrocouncil.org/transit/dialaride.htm)  
[www.yubasuttertransit.com/darroutes.htm](http://www.yubasuttertransit.com/darroutes.htm)  
[www.bft.org/ifo.html](http://www.bft.org/ifo.html)  
[www.laketran.com/infodar.html](http://www.laketran.com/infodar.html)