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Coordinating for success

by Ira Allen

Few know more about doing “more with less” than rural transit managers and workers. Agency staff take a certain pride in keeping services consistent; when the financial winds shift and blow, transit remains a shelter in the storm. A streak of rugged self-sufficiency runs through transit—rural transit in particular. This self-sufficiency, however, becomes a curse when



agencies refuse to cooperate. Sure, each individual agency is doing more with less, but the transit community as a whole can still be inefficient. Services may be duplicated. In extreme cases, one agency’s bus may follow right behind another’s for miles, but they serve two different populations—one transports seniors and the other the general public. So coordinating wouldn’t work, right? Wrong. According to the brand-new *Toolkit for Rural Community Coordinated Transportation Services* (developed for the Transit

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Federal agencies to strengthen coordination efforts








Presidential executive order brings 10 federal agencies to the coordination table.

by Pat Weaver

On February 24, 2004 President Bush issued an Executive Order on Human Service Transportation Coordination which calls on 10 federal departments to work together improve the coordination of human service transportation. The Interagency Transportation

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Coordinating for success,

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Cooperative Research Program), coordinating transportation services can be described as “the best way to stretch scarce resources and improve mobility for everyone.” If you think transit in your community could be more streamlined, and if you are interested in doing more with less on a broader scale, read on and decide if coordination is for you.

What coordination is and is not

The *Toolkit* defines coordination as “sharing of the transportation resources, responsibilities, and activities of various agencies with each other for the overall benefit of the community.” Not everyone would like this definition, however, mostly because sharing resources remains frightening to many. Most efforts at coordination, whether resources are shared or not, fall into one of three broad categories:

—*Cooperation*: when each agency retains its own identity and authority, including control over its vehicles; cooperation may focus more on information-sharing than actual coordination.

—*Coordination*: when agencies work in concert, managing resources jointly through a formal set of arrangements.

—*Consolidation*: when all operational authority is vested in one agency, which then provides services based on contractual relationships.

In the past, providers feared that consolidation was the inevitable result of efforts to coordinate, and many resisted coordination on these grounds. Fortunately, more recent studies have shown that “these three levels of service integration are not necessarily part of the same continuum: each can be an end result by itself,” as the *Toolkit* puts it. There are

Coordination works best in:

- areas where some services are duplicated while other needs go unmet, as when an array of operators pursue their own missions with their own equipment, funding, and institutional goals;
- areas without formal mechanisms for cooperation or communication between transit providers;
- areas where service quality varies widely, including safety standards, between operators;
- areas where consumers, planners, and service operators do not have reliable information describing the services provided and their costs;
- areas where there is no overall compendium of services provided and their funding sources; and
- areas lacking a reliable mechanism for quantifying overall service needs and creating a comprehensive plan to address these needs.

many cases of coordination that do not result in one agency “taking over.” There is also a fair bit of cooperation within the transit community, although this service level cannot always achieve the degree of efficiency that makes coordination so valuable.

Whatever level of integration agencies decide is right for their community, the focus is on joint effort. It can be difficult to convert perspectives of narrow self-interest or interests of a single segment of the community into broader, community-centered viewpoints, but it is possible. Transit coordination is, at its most basic level, the process of community-building, applied to transit. It can increase service efficiency, lower per-unit costs, and allow for more services to be offered.

Coordination is not, however, a cure-all. It does not guarantee you will be able to meet all of a community’s mobility needs. As the *Toolkit* says, “In communities where persons who need services are not being served but where there is little room for efficiency improvements, coordination by itself will not be an effective strategy; in these cases, additional resources are needed.”

Coordination does not, cannot, and will not create additional

resources. It is a management tool. What it does do is help agencies use their resources more efficiently on a community or multi-community level.

What coordination offers and requires

Coordination offers participating agencies a variety of benefits, some of which we will discuss in detail later in this article. Generally, coordinating agencies see “great improvements in unit costs, such as costs per trip, per mile, or per hour,” says the *Toolkit*. Because of greater efficiency and economies of scale (i.e., buying in bulk is cheaper), agencies spend less for what they get.

A word of caution, however. Cheaper unit costs and greater efficiency rarely translate into dollars returning to the agency. This is why coordination requires such a community-centered attitude. The agency-centered manager says, “If it’s good for my agency, it’s good for me,” and then does what’s best for the agency, not worrying too much about how it affects the larger community. Sometimes this leads managers to build little “empires,” with their agency at the center. The trouble with empires, though, as history shows us from Rome to Great

Britain, is they don't last. The community-centered approach is more sustainable.

A community-centered approach to transit takes a broader view of each agency's mission, looking at how transit as a whole can benefit the entire community or even a network of communities. A manager with this viewpoint would say "If working together will help provide better or more extensive services, there is no reason not to do so." This is the attitude required for coordination to be successful, and it can be a difficult one to practice. After all, if you're meeting your target population's needs, why should you coordinate services with Joe Schmoe's tran-

Like anything else, it comes down to how willing you are to invest in the process.

sit agency, whose business practices you don't think much of anyway, to serve a broader population? And if you're Joe Schmoe, why should you restructure your services to coordinate with Prairie County's Eldercare transportation, especially when you never have liked the manager? This is where coordination can easily break down, and what's required is a unifying sense of purpose.

The desire to provide better community transportation and serve unmet needs may serve as the requisite unifying goal, especially when agencies consider the advantages of a coordinated approach. According to the *Toolkit*, coordination's key benefits often include:

- lowered trip costs for travelers and for human service agencies;
- extended service hours;
- services to new areas or new communities and to more people;
- more trips made by people needing transportation (including prior customers/clients);

- greater emphasis on safety and customer service;
- more community involvement in transit planning and direction; and
- more flexible payment and service options.

As you may have noticed, some of these benefits are to the community at large and some accrue to individual agencies, allowing those that benefit the larger community to happen. Specific advantages to agencies include things like spending less money acquiring and maintaining vehicles, since these costs would now be shared. This, in turn, allows agencies to expand services, better providing transit for everyone in the community. Because the money saved by

coordination usually goes right back into meeting previously unmet needs (like most money saved anywhere in transit), agencies shouldn't expect a cash windfall. What you can expect is a general improvement in the quality of transit, in many ways, within your community.

Barriers to coordination: Fact or fiction?

According to the *Toolkit*, "An oft-heard complaint from local transportation providers is that they would like to coordinate their services with those of other providers, but that they are prohibited" and face a variety of barriers from funding sources. There is no question that difficult situations arise in the course of planning coordination, but some agencies have dealt successfully with the very same issues. Clearly, most "barriers" that arise in the course of coordinating transit are not insurmountable. Ultimately, those agencies that genuinely want coordination find ways over, around, under

or between barriers. Although barriers may be more perceived than, real, it would, however, be inaccurate to describe the path to coordination as free of speed bumps, debris, and the occasional cardboard box in the center of the highway.

Both the U.S. Departments of Transportation (DOT) and Health and Human Services (HHS) have made it clear that categorical funding (like Section 5311) permits the sharing of resources, "as long as there is excess capacity and service is not being denied to the primary client group." Because coordination generally increases capacity and enhances service for the entire community, this tends not to be a problem.

Issues can arise, however, within specific programs; "Chief among these are those relating to coordination with the Head Start and Medicare programs," says the *Toolkit*. In addition to these barriers, some providers have had difficulties coordinating with local Councils on Aging (COAs). This last concern we will address later, looking in detail at one Oregon county's response.

At present, the Head Start program accounts for a lot of human service transportation across the nation, especially in coordinated systems. Starting in 2006, however, this could change as new Head Start vehicle regulations go into effect. At that point, all Head Start trips will have to be provided with school buses or "allowable alternative vehicles." The trouble is, "allowable alternative vehicles" are described in such great detail as to exclude almost every transit van, bus and other vehicle in the country. The *Toolkit* says, "At the moment, it does not appear possible for any vehicle to meet these standards, other than a school bus." Unless these standards change radically by January 2006, coordination with Head Start

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programs is unlikely to remain a viable option for transit agencies.

The future of coordination with Medicare looks more hopeful, but present coordination is nearly nonexistent. Medicare provides reimbursement only for transportation provided by ambulances: that is, emergency transportation. Many Medicare patients, however, such as those traveling long distances from rural to urban areas for dialysis services, may not necessarily need ambulance transportation. They receive it anyway, because Medicare will not pay for it otherwise. Efforts are currently underway to revise Medicare legislation, allowing travel by services other than ambulances. Rural transit services will be critical to providing this medical transportation service cost-effectively.

Perhaps the greatest barriers to coordination are internal, not external. As we have already discussed, coordination can be a threatening idea. It takes great personal resolve and unselfishness to look past worries of how it will affect your organization and towards the promise it holds for your community. This is especially true in the many cases where agencies serve underprivileged portions of the population and providers feel coordination may, in fact, threaten their clients' well-being. In these situations, coordinating agencies must agree on a framework that ensures service to participants' clients will not suffer.

Coordinating transit across the United States

The *Toolkit* provides case studies with brief synopses of agencies' experiences with coordination at several levels. Some of these success stories bear mentioning because they offer

hints Kansas providers may find helpful when exploring their own coordination options.

Levels of coordination vary greatly. At the loose and informal end of the spectrum is Greene County, Ohio, where consensus emerged that it was "acceptable to be protective of legitimate personal interests" (*Toolkit*). In Greene County, transportation-interested agencies of all stripes banded together in a loose federation; most members are not bound by contract to coordinate, and 86 percent of the social service agency vehicles in use are only informally coordinated. Participating agencies include the Greene County Commissioners, the County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, the Department of Job and Family Services, and an array of social service agencies. Some agencies continue to provide their own transportation services, while others purchase service from the collective. Despite (or perhaps because of) this laissez-faire arrangement, Greene County reports that not a single one of the 51 participating agencies has left the arrangement, and expansion has been possible as more funding became available and existing funds were freed up.

At the opposite, more centralized end of the spectrum are the regional transit services provided by Arrowhead Transit in north central Minnesota, encompassing seven counties. Encouraged by the Minnesota DOT, several agencies began coordination efforts in the 1970s, and coordination has remained a logistical, not political, effort since then. Arrowhead Transit coordinates all services, using a fleet of 53 vehicles and a corps of 60 volunteer drivers alongside their professional drivers. They report increased access to funding, less duplication of

service and fewer service gaps. Their recommendation to providers interested in coordination? "Work at it! If it saves money, coordinate! It gives you more riders and better service."

A final example of how coordination is working in rural America comes from Malheur County, Oregon, where Malheur County Transportation Services (MCTS) has managed to overcome trouble in providing rural elderly and disabled transportation. Countering the fears of many—that agencies would lose their funding if their vehicles were used for non-elderly purposes—MCTS occasionally borrows vehicles from senior centers or other providers to meet a diverse set of needs. MCTS's primary focus is on transporting the elderly and disabled, but they also carry general public riders. General public riders pay a cash fare, and it all works out. In addition to the cash fares from the general public, revenue from various service contracts, a small Section 5310 Capital Grant, and funds from the Oregon State Transportation Formula, MCTS has been growing and growing.

So, there really is very little regulation standing in the way of coordination. Like anything else, it comes down to how willing you are to invest in the process. Would the benefits be worth the struggle in your community? Increasingly, transit and other agencies across the country are answering this question with a resounding "Yes."

If you are interested in coordinating, copies of the enormously helpful *Toolkit for Rural Community Coordinated Transportation Services* are expected to be available from the Transportation Research Board (TRB) in May. You will be able to order them at www.tcrponline.org or you can call Peggy Wilson at the TRB at (202) 496-4861. ▲



Document this: Rx/OTC drugs and accidents

by Ira Allen

As we all know, even medications that are obtained and used legally can play a role in causing accidents or worsening their effects. Because of this, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) encourages transit systems to develop policy on the use of prescription (Rx) and over-the-counter (OTC) medication, and to develop a training program to help implement that policy. This helps reduce the likelihood that medication will contribute to an accident. But on the other side of the fence—during the post-accident investigation—the possibility that Rx/OTC drugs played a role still needs to be considered.

Any time an initial accident investigation indicates that Rx or OTC drugs could be a contributing factor to the accident, documentation is necessary. The employee's supervisor or the investigator should document any information provided about medication. The agency manager should follow up by soliciting additional information from the employee, including answers to the questions in the box at right.

If the employee is unable to answer these questions, you may need to seek out the answers yourself, if legally advisable. The procedures used to collect this information should be well-defined and institutionalized in your agency's post-accident investigation and follow-up procedures. These procedures need to be sufficient to determine the nature and extent of a causal relationship between medication use and

Ask your employees these questions if they have been involved in an accident and Rx or OTC drugs may be a contributing factor

- What prescription or over-the-counter medications have you taken within the past seven days?
- What are the active ingredients?
- What are the dosage directions (amount and frequency), and what was your dosage practice (amount and frequency)?
- What was the time and amount of your last dose prior to the accident, and what was the time and amount of the dose before that last one?
- How often have you used the medication in the past seven days?
- How long have you been taking the medicine?
- What is the expiration date?
- What warning labels are there, if any?
- For whom was the prescription written? (if applicable)
- What side effects have you experienced? When did they appear/disappear?
- What is the prescribing medical practitioner's name? Did s/he discuss the use and potential side effects of your medication, and can this be verified? Was s/he aware of your safety-sensitive job duties?
- Where did you purchase the medication, and what is the pharmacist's name? (if applicable) Did s/he discuss potential side effects of this medication with you? Can this be verified? Was s/he aware of your sensitive job duties?
- Is there any way to verify the prescription?

the precipitation and severity of the accident. Naturally, they should also be capable of documenting any agency Rx/OTC policy violations.

Keep all information obtained from this process in strictest confidence and treat it as a medical record. You should also, however, make it available to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and FTA as part of an ongoing accident investigation. For further information on this topic, consult the relatively new FTA publication, *Prescription and Over-The-Counter Medication Toolkit*. This is

available from the FTA website, at <http://transit-safety.volpe.dot.gov>, or can be ordered in print by contacting Ms. Alison Thompson at thompsona@volpe.dot.gov or by fax at (627) 494-2684. Additional information is available by contacting Sandy Flickinger, Kansas Department of Transportation Drug/Alcohol Manager, at sandyf@ksdot.org or (785) 368-7091.

Adapted from "Documenting Rx/OTC Involvement in Accidents" in *FTA Drug and Alcohol Regulation Updates*, Summer 2003, Issue 25. ▲



Keeping an eye on things

by Courtney Hansen

In the “security age” born in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, surveillance cameras are popping up everywhere. These mechanical watchmen keep track of people in stores, at traffic lights, and at the airport. However, cameras are also gaining popularity in another, less expected place—on transportation vehicles.

Transportation surveillance is installed primarily to deter vandalism and unruly behavior; however, it can serve other purposes as well. Surveillance footage has been used to refute fraudulent liability claims, to resolve fare disputes, to improve public perception, and to monitor and protect drivers. Transit agencies across the country have begun to realize that cameras can be a valuable supplement or even replacement for existing safety and security measures.

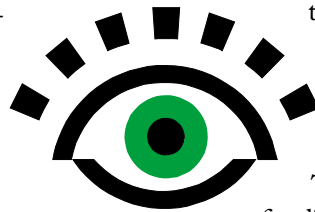
Rural use of cameras

While some of these safety concerns generally are not much of a problem in rural areas, there are situations in which on-board cameras might be a valuable addition to overall security. It’s important for rural managers to take these factors into account when constructing a risk assessment for the agency.

“Eye on safety,” an article published in 2000 in *Tap-In*, the Indiana RTAP newsletter, described the benefits of surveillance to rural transportation systems. The article surveyed several transit agencies and

found that they “all agree [that] monitoring devices keep costs down, are highly effective, and ensure safety to all.” Benefits cited in the article include the ability to improve the public perception of safety and to monitor both the driver and the passengers.

Monitoring the passengers is one of the main reasons Michigan City Transit decided to request funding for surveillance equipment, according to the article.



The technology

Transit surveillance systems have come a long way since their inception. The earliest, implemented in the 1980s, used VCRs to record on-board events. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transport Authority (SEPTA) began using VCR recording on their buses in 1991. As they found out, the analog medium posed problems: Time and date stamps didn’t work properly. Tapes had to be frequently changed to protect image quality. The VCRs themselves, susceptible to the temperature and humidity extremes, wore out quickly and required frequent maintenance.

In 1995 SEPTA switched to using a digital system for their surveillance. They installed hard drives on their buses to store the data. These more advanced systems allowed for higher quality, less corruptible images. In addition, these hard drives were removable, allowing for transportation of the data to a central place for review.

Concerns to address

As with any surveillance camera, the issue of being watched without con-

sent is significant in transit systems with surveillance on board. While the cameras are generally received in a positive manner, there are some passengers who object to having their actions recorded. In 1995, one such passenger sued SEPTA for emotional distress as a result of the use of cameras. However, the court found the cameras to be non-intrusive and ruled in the agency’s favor.

In general, the law has supported the use of cameras in “public space”—anywhere that a person may be observed by many others—but there are considerations that help promote public and legal approval of surveillance systems. Signs should be posted inside vehicles to warn passengers of the use of surveillance. In some cases, strictly visual surveillance is preferable to surveillance that includes audio, as the former is not considered eavesdropping.

There are also steps to take to make sure that footage, if needed, is admissible in court. Because digital data is susceptible to tampering, procedures should be in place for storing data securely. Additionally, a medium that only allows recording greatly improves the credibility of the surveillance recording.

Legal issues aside, the factor that most prevents widespread use of cameras is cost. In a survey conducted by the Federal Transit Administration, nine transit systems quoted per-vehicle costs of \$1,100 to \$10,000, with a median cost of \$6,500. The wide range of costs can be attributed to the wide range of system configurations. Inexpensive systems would include a black-and-white camera and a VCR recording device, while pricier ones would include multiple, remote-controlled color cameras and digital recording devices.

One example of surveillance use

in rural transit can be found in Columbus, Indiana. ColumBUS manager Sue Chapple said that her agency installed cameras in the front of its buses for security reasons.

“We had a lot of problems a few years ago with kids cutting the seats,” Chapple said. “But that’s pretty much gone away [since the cameras were installed]. It’s helped a lot.”

For more information

The Transit Cooperative Research Program published a report with the FTA on the use of transit surveillance. The 67 page, 4.8 MB PDF file can be found at:

<http://gulliver.trb.org/publications/rtcp/tsyn38.pdf>

“Eye on Safety,” the Indiana RTAP article, can also be found online at: www.indiana.edu/~rtap/issue4safety.html. ▲

Executive order,

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Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility is the forum in which federal programs and services can work to improve interagency cooperation and minimize duplication and overlap to improve access for transportation-disadvantaged persons. “I think it requires *each* agency to report on their actions regarding duplications, streamlining and ensuring customer focus to enhance transportation options. It’s really a point of accountability,” said Bryna Helfer, Transportation Services Advisor to Federal Transit Administrator Jennifer Dorn, when asked what she considered to be the greatest significance of this executive order.

The Secretaries of the Departments of Transportation (USDOT), Labor, Education and Health and Human Services recently hosted the United We Ride National

Leadership Forum in Washington, D.C. Governor-appointed senior leadership teams from 49 states and territories participated, and it was during this forum that the White House announced the executive order.

The executive order expands the work of the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility, first established in 1986 and jointly staffed by the USDOT and the Department of Health and Human Services. Council members include, at a minimum, representatives from Transportation, Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and the Interior, the Attorney General, and the Commissioner of Social Security, with the DOT serving as lead agency. Other representatives may be included at the discretion of the chairperson (the Secretary of Transportation or his designee).

The Council’s goals include increasing the cost-effectiveness of resources used for specialized and human service transportation and increasing access to these services. The Council is expected to promote access to the most appropriate, cost-effective transportation services within existing resources and encourage enhanced customer access to the variety of transportation and resources available.

The Interagency Transportation Coordinating Council has been charged with presenting a report to the President by February 2005. This report will identify federal, state, tribal, and local laws, regulations, procedures, and actions that have proven to be most useful and appropriate in coordinating transportation services for the targeted populations. It also will identify substantive and procedural requirements of transportation-related federal laws and regulations that are duplicative or

restrict the most efficient operation of laws and regulations.

The report will include a description of the coordination results achieved, both on an agency and program basis. These results are to be described in terms of how the agencies have:

- simplified access to transportation services for: persons with disabilities, persons with low income, and older adults;
- provided the most appropriate, cost-effective transportation services within existing resources; and
- reduced duplication to make funds available for more services to more such persons.

The Council is expected to provide recommendations to simplify and coordinate requirements and provide any other recommendations that would advance coordination.

In January 2003, Federal Transit Administrator Jennifer Dorn and Department of Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Aging Josefina G. Carbonell signed a Memorandum of Understanding to increase coordination of transportation services for older adults. The Memorandum of Understanding outlines activities in five areas: public awareness and outreach, data collection and promising practices, technical assistance, stakeholder input, and local and state transportation plan development. The overall goal of the Memorandum is to make it easier for local transportation providers to serve older people and help them remain independent to participate fully in their communities.

For more information about the work of the Coordinating Council, visit the CCAM web site at: www.fta.dot.gov/CCAM/www/index.html. A copy of the entire executive order is available at: www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/02/20040224-9.html. ▲



Public relations: reaching out (sometimes for help)

by Ira Allen

Here's a question for you: How much time should you be spending on public relations, and how can you spend it more effectively? Okay, that's two questions, but they're good ones. While we can't say exactly from our desks in Lawrence, Kansas, how much time managers across the state—with widely different operations—should allocate to public relations, we will share a tip or two that can help you get the most out of the time you do spend. And maybe even expand your PR horizons a little.

Getting help

One inexpensive way to cut the time you personally spend on public relations work (or to increase the time spent on it, generally) is by recruiting

Invest some time forging links with the guidance and career counselors at your local high school.

an intern from a nearby university or community college. You may be able to find a journalism or public relations student willing to volunteer his time, since many need experience writing press releases and can sometimes even obtain academic credit for their work. Even your local high school may serve as fertile ground for recruiting someone to carry out basic PR activities, especially if it has a co-op program. A different tactic is to try working through your local Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS), as it may offer

subsidies to employers who place welfare clients in clerical training positions. Having someone around to help with assorted office tasks that eat up so much time may free you to focus more energy on expanding your public relations horizons (or something else, I suppose, but this article's about public relations).

Expanding horizons

Have you ever written a letter to the editor of your local paper? About a transit-related issue? If not, you may want to consider using this easily accessible forum to let people know how a local issue will affect your agency. A letter signed by the manager or a board member could be just the ticket. As we've mentioned in other articles, a guest appearance on a local TV or radio talk show is another way to garner some free publicity. Be careful, though. While you

might think, "All publicity is good publicity," an argument with a less than credible talk show host might not be the best way to get your message across to the wider public.

If you're looking to appear on a talk show, whether radio or public access TV, do your homework first. Find out whether the host has a history of making aggressive, inflammatory remarks, or whether he is sympathetic to the cause of transit. It's probably best to avoid hosts whose aim would be to make you and your agency look like an unproductive



drain—a waste of local, state and federal resources.

For ways to reach out to the public where you can limit how much the public reaches back (unlike on a talk show), think public service announcements (PSAs) and web pages. PSAs tend to be broadcast only during those rare moments not filled by commercial advertisers, but you might be able to score some time on your public access TV station, and you can almost definitely get some time on your local college radio station. Many PSAs that have been successful in getting airtime in the past centered on transit's value as an energy-saving public service.

Creating a web site, as discussed sporadically in this newsletter, is also an excellent way to reach out. Many of your riders may not yet have internet access, although that's less and less a safe assumption to make, between internet cafes springing up all over and access widespread in public libraries. However, most of those making funding decisions that affect your agency or providing referrals to riders are liable to be hooked up to the internet. You may be able to recruit a local high school student to help out in this project, which can cost anywhere between 50 and 50,000 dollars. For more tips on creating your own web site, check our article about Transitweb in our last issue (January 2004).

Media relations?

Well, media relations is really a whole 'nother story, centering on how

you can interact with the media to maximize positive exposure and minimize negative publicity, but some of the same cost-saving principles outlined here can transfer over. In particular, recruiting college or high school students as interns is widely recognized as a good way to rejuvenate your public relations work.

Lisa Szarkowski, director of public relations at the United States Fund for UNICEF, said, "The caliber of interns is not to be dismissed. There's such a pool of educated, eager and enthusiastic people who are talented and bright and can be trusted to do good work if they're given a chance."

What does that mean for you as a manager? Well, it means that, if you haven't already, you should probably invest some time forging links with the guidance and career counselors at your local high school. Let them know what you do. Arrange an open house or a tour of the transit system, if possible. And while you're at it, get in touch with the career office at a nearby university or junior college; your time investment there may be well worth it over the long run. If this helps you recruit just one intern, you've made your time back already. Of course, then there's the work of training interns and integrating them into the office, but we'll save that for another article.

Sources

Marketing Ideas to Get You There: West Virginia Transit Manual, West Virginia Division of Public Transit, January 2001;

"Spreading the News: Tips on Effective Public Relations," by Craig Causer, *The NonProfit Times*, March 15, 2003. ▲

Ambassadors help ensure a good first impression

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by Courtney Hansen
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A passenger's first experience with a transit system can remain with her for years, shaping the way she thinks about that agency. Training front-line employees, such as

which, they hope, will translate into higher ridership. While the service is available to everyone, elderly, disabled, and under-18 riders are encouraged to use the service.

According to NCTPA, the program, with its 13 ambassadors, costs about \$8,000 a year for training, coordinating staff time, special outings,

NCTPA's transit ambassador program offers one-on-one guidance for new riders. The program is based on the idea that many people do not use transit systems because they are afraid they will take the wrong bus or get off on the wrong stop, and end up lost.

drivers, to communicate a positive message to the public is the best way to create better rider satisfaction. Another more individualized way to improve first impressions is through the use of a transit ambassador program.

In California, the Napa County Transportation Planning Agency (NCTPA) has a transit ambassador program that offers one-on-one guidance for new riders. Trained ambassadors assist riders in learning to read schedules and use transfers, as well as using special features such as wheelchair lifts.

The ambassador will assist a rider as many times as necessary for the rider to feel comfortable using the transit system.

The program is based on the idea that many people do not use transit systems because they are afraid they will take the wrong bus or get off on the wrong stop, and end up lost. The Napa County agency strives to create positive first experiences for its riders,

supplies, and thank-you gifts. The ambassadors are recruited through word-of-mouth and posters on the buses, and must apply and participate in an interview. The ambassadors receive four hours of training and special shirts, vests, and pouches that identify them to other riders as members of the program.

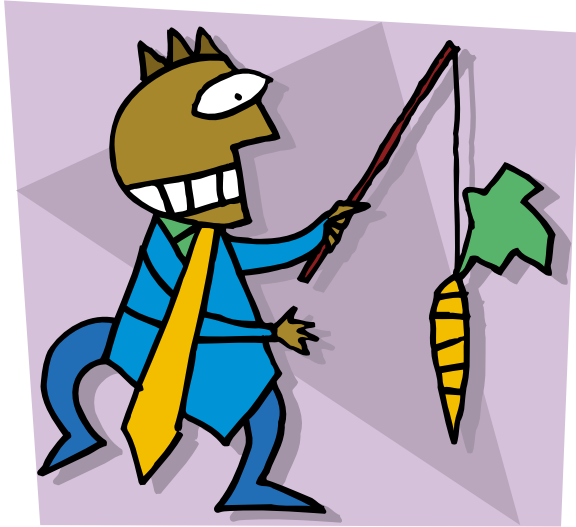
A program like this is a great way to involve the community in your agency, as well as provide a good first experience for riders. An ambassador program, along with general training for communicating a positive message to the public, can significantly help a transit agency boost rider satisfaction.

For more information, contact Adriann Cardoso, Transportation Planner, at (707) 259-8635 or by e-mail at acardoso@nctpa.net.

Source

Senior Mobility Toolkit, Metropolitan Transportation Commission, September 2003. ▲

Incentive enough?



by Ira Allen

Have you been thinking about your safety incentive program lately? A recent TCRP synthesis, *Incentive Programs to Improve Transit Employee Performance*, found a few gaps between what most agencies agreed an ideal incentive program ought to look like and what most programs, in fact, did look like. But that's why those syntheses are commissioned: to give the transit industry a clearer picture of itself, and an idea of where there might be some room for improvement. In this article we'll look at what an incentive program is, criteria for a top-rate program, and ways to improve your own safety incentive program without putting your buses in hock.

Let's talk incentives, baby

So what, we might well ask, is an incentive program? Well, says the synthesis, "in its most generic form,

incentive payment is any compensation that has been designed to recognize some specific accomplishment on the employee's part." But that's pretty broad, so we'll focus this article on safety-based incentive programs.

As Donna Myrick, Technical Associate for the Indiana RTAP, notes, "One of the most important goals in transit is safety...[and]...the best way to

reward employee contributions toward a safe and productive work environment is through a successful safety incentive program." A safety incentive is some compensation that recognizes an employee's extraordinary contribution to system safety. As noted in the synthesis, incentives are not generally meant to be awarded for maintaining the status quo.

According to Myrick, a safety incentive program should have the principal objective of motivating individuals to behave consistently "in such a way that accidents resulting from poor behavior are eliminated." That means the program should be holistic, dealing with a range of employee behaviors rather than trying to address just one action. For instance, pre-trip inspections alone might be an insufficient measure of driver safety, but in combination with criteria such as accident-free days and positive passenger evaluations, a wider range of activities can be addressed. This more comprehensive program results in a higher all-around safety level, and makes the

incentives awarded more meaningful.

The incentives themselves are usually tangible rewards—often cash, gift certificates, award certificates, or some paid time off from work. Although the TCRP synthesis found that most agencies tend to use tangible incentives, non-tangible incentives, such as praise, have a number of benefits. For starters, they're cheaper. But it goes deeper than that. A sincere expression of gratitude can mean a lot more than a \$10 gift certificate to your local hardware store, but only if it really is sincere. One idea is to write employees a personal note, telling them what their efforts mean to the agency as a whole (in realistic terms), and how they affect your job, as a manager. Do they make things easier, less stressful? Let them know!

Of course, simply saying "thanks" a lot is not the same as having an incentive program. After all, as the saying goes, "gratitude doesn't buy any bread." Below, we examine several criteria that are absolutely essential to a successful incentive program, and ask questions that will help you see where you stand relative to these criteria.

Vital criteria for your incentive program

Management support. Employees need to understand your firm commitment to the incentives program, and to know that this is not a "here today, gone tomorrow" managerial whim. If you can't commit to the program, don't start one.

Clearly-defined accomplishment. "The accomplishment must be defined as precisely and objectively

as possible,” says the synthesis. In some cases, this is easy: either you have had 160 days without an accident, or you haven’t. In other cases, more guidance is required. For instance, if you tell employees that incentives will be paid for having “clean buses,” you’ll need to add some information about what that will look like, feel like, and maybe even smell like. Further, if the amount or type of award varies depending on performance, precise standards will need to be set to distinguish which types of performance garner which levels of award.

Definition of the incentive cycle and assessment methods: Naturally, employees need to know which behaviors will be rewarded, but they also need to know how long they need to sustain these behaviors. Is the award monthly? Yearly? Weekly? Does it cover only a certain season? Managers, too, need to be very clear how behavior will be assessed. Will you survey passengers? Enlist an outside observer or hire a consultant? Use a checklist and measure performance yourself? However you measure, the success of your performance rests in part on employees’ perception of that measurement. It must be perceived as fair and reality-based, or the program will lose all motivational value.

Provision for comparison between criteria and results: Right from the start, an incentives program should include plans for how to measure its eventual results. Be prepared to look back over your program, over changes in employee behavior, and compare them to what you had hoped and planned the program would accomplish. How is your agency safer and what role did the safety incentive program play? This self-reflection is critical to management in general, but especially so in matters such as incentives programs, which may need to be tweaked from

cycle to cycle or year to year. In addition, all cyclical programs need to have a starting mechanism for the next cycle built in; a thorough evaluation of the last program cycle can serve admirably in this capacity.

Eligibility to participate: Establish at the program’s inception exactly who may and may not participate, who in the agency the program is aimed at, who can qualify for an award. This may be a knotty issue, as equity among the employee pool is a critical element in the success of any agency, but not all employees contribute to system safety in the same ways or to the same degree. One solution is to establish several types of incentive programs with similar or identical awards, each aimed at a different segment of your employee pool. Of course, if you are like many providers in Kansas, and have only a few employees, you may want a more unified solution. One possibility is to define each employee’s optimal contribution to safety and make the award based on who best meets this standard for their job function.

Assurance of awards: Going along with the first criterion, employees need to be able to trust that incentives will, in fact, be awarded. As the synthesis notes, “Public agencies are particularly vulnerable to rapid changes in circumstances, requiring care in making commitments of future payments of indeterminate size.” An employee who works hard to achieve a bonus can be thoroughly demoralized if a budget cut immediately follows her award, or worse, if the agency can no longer afford the award itself.

Valuable Incentives: Before beginning a new safety incentive program, consider what incentives your agency can afford to offer. Will you give afternoons or even whole days off work as an award for ‘X’ incident-free months or years? Is \$50 enough

for a bi-yearly award? Will local merchants donate gift certificates for your program, or sell them to you at a discounted price? Do you give one cash award, or do you give a package of gift certificates and such? Is a certificate of appreciation enough? We can’t really answer these questions for you. Your best bet is to discuss with other managers what they do and get a consensus of what works for them, and then apply that, as appropriate to your own agency.

Each agency has a different internal dynamic, and your incentives program should reflect your agency’s unique dynamic. We can say, however, that a certificate alone is usually inadequate motivation for serious behavioral change. It is nice to get a certificate, but if you really want employees to behave differently, a bigger carrot usually works better. In addition, as mentioned above, a personal note accompanying the award can make the incentive much more meaningful, and plays into creating a corporate culture where employees feel valued by management, which in turn often helps build a safer and more productive work environment.

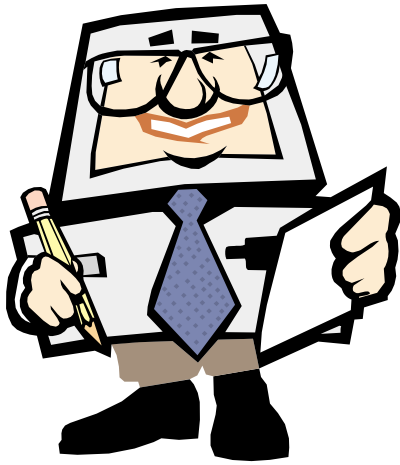
A word of caution

As elsewhere, the law of unintended consequences applies when devising a safety incentive program. Placing too much emphasis on one measure may actually encourage people to be dishonest rather than safer. This effect might be called the Soviet effect, because this was the experience of Soviet Russian and Chinese factories and farms, where pay and promotions were awarded on the sole basis of productivity. There, many managers responded by over-reporting productivity. The problem in this case was not that managers were responsible for reporting their

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All accounted for—electronically



by Ira Allen

With such a bewildering array of accounting software available to non-profit agencies (a recent *NonProfit Times* special report compared 20 different applications), we thought it would be nice to narrow the field down a little. To that end, we spent some time considering just two applications: Quickbooks Pro (www.quickbooks.com) and Peachtree Complete (www.peachtree.com). We talked with Certified Public Accountant (CPA) Jim Long, of accounting firm Bogner & Long, who shared his experience with accounting software and transit agencies.

Software options

When we asked Long about software solutions for financial management that would suit smaller transit agencies, he told us about two different applications.

"I'd say that probably the most common software that we see is Quickbooks Pro," he offered.

Quickbooks Pro, developed by Intuit Software, offers three main functions: general ledger, payroll and accounts payable.

Although it's commonly used, Long doesn't recommend Quickbooks. The trouble with this software, he explained, is also its great selling point: flexibility and ease of set-up and use. Long elaborated, saying, "You used to see a lot of TV commercials about how easy Quickbooks is to use, but they didn't say how hard it is to use right."

Because Quickbooks' set-up allows users so much leeway, many end up setting it up in ways that come back to haunt them. They end up having to work with their accounting firms to fix their mistakes.

"Most of the time, the agencies that 'do the Quickbooks thing' try it themselves, and then we either tweak it or just start over," said Long. Of the 40 or 50 agencies his company works with using Quickbooks, he

Because the set-up of Quickbooks allows users so much leeway, many agencies end up setting it up in ways that come back to haunt them.

said maybe five are using it correctly. One of the ways in which agencies go wrong is in how they choose to track their finances.

Quickbooks gives users the option of seeing their financial statements as cash reports or accrual reports. Many users choose cash reports, perhaps thinking, "what the heck are accrual reports?" The trouble with this, explained Long, is that "if you are looking at a cash report out of Quickbooks, all it will show is

cash made and cash to be spent." If you never spent the cash you allocated toward a certain project—say, new safety posters in the washroom—that would never show up. This can create accounting irregularities that will make your CPA cringe, and can have much worse consequences if the government conducts an audit.

Accrual reports are more useful, said Long. They show assets and liabilities, and every debt or planned expense is tracked as a liability until it is paid. This leaves a much stronger audit trail, definitely a good thing in this era of increasing non-profit accountability.

Long's own agency uses Peachtree, distributed by Best Software, which offers accrual reports but not cash reports. In contrast to Quickbooks, Peachtree requires an initial training period, but this up-front investment in the program can pay off by minimizing problems in the long run. Long said Peachtree's

formality and rigidity made it a better financial tool. Its "Classic" version "requires you to go through certain hoops to make it work, which leaves a better audit trail," he explained.

Because changing numbers after the fact is much more difficult, the program's results are more meaningful and fewer accounting discrepancies can be expected.

Long said, "Peachtree's an odd enough bird that we like to be involved [with agencies using it]

Why specialized accounting software?

Do you really need accounting software? Transit consultant Rich Garrity, who has worked extensively on financial management issues with agencies in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio and South Carolina, said he sees little use of specialized software. He did note, however, that scheduling and dispatching software might be considered a form of financial management software. "Most will have the database functions to generate billing reports, by contract," he explained. Still, though, you may want software to help you organize payroll and other expenses, as scheduling and dispatching software only tracks ridership, and that imperfectly.

Accounting software accomplishes two main aims. First, it lets you track all aspects of your agency's finances, keeping a clear picture of your financial status at all times. Second, it leaves a valuable audit trail. Increasingly, financial supporters and state, local and federal government look for accountability from the nonprofit world, and transit is unlikely to remain an exception to that trend for long. One good way to create a mechanism for accountability is through the use of accounting software. For transit agencies, the bulk of the funding comes from grants, contracts and fares. Accounting software can be useful in helping you track both income sources and expenses. And if you ever do get audited, you'll be glad you have something more organized than a shoebox of receipts and your scheduling records to show the accountants.

right from the beginning. There's usually a training period of a couple months, and then you're set and rolling." This contrasts with Quickbooks, which most people can set up, albeit incorrectly, with no training to speak of.

Like Quickbooks, Peachtree allows users to track payroll, accounts payable, and a general ledger. It offers additional options, however, that some transit agencies might find useful, such as fixed assets and accounts receivable. Accounts receivable can help track income from various sources.

Peachtree can produce "canned" reports, like Quickbooks, but also works with a piece of software called State Report Writer, which helps you develop your own format for financial statements.

Before jumping to buy Quickbooks or Peachtree, users should compare prices with other

software on the market. Ask your CPA about other software options.

Money matters

So how much do these applications cost? Quickbooks Pro and Peachtree are both at the lower end of the accounting software scale, each initially costing between \$400 and \$500. At the higher end of the scale are programs like MAS 90, which costs a couple thousand dollars. Because the rural transit community's software needs are not terribly complex, we won't discuss programs like MAS 90 here.

As hinted above, these programs don't come with free software updates. So, as Long put it, each year "you end up buying the whole software again." To some degree this is avoidable, as many firms keep older versions installed on some computers at their office. Bogner & Long, for instance, still have Quickbooks 2002

and 2003 installed, for those who don't have the 2004 version. Nonetheless, you should update your entire software every two or three years, and update components of the software even more frequently. For instance, if you want to send your employees W-2 forms for 2004, you will need to buy the 2004 payroll update. According to Long, you're probably best off updating every year. "It's pretty much an annual expense, anymore," he said.

And then what?

Once you have the software, the question becomes what to do with it. Long said, "What to do in-house depends on the level of service you want." One transportation agency he worked with wanted everything done by the accountants: from calculating payroll to paying their bills. In that case, all Bogner & Long needed from them was a voucher telling what type of expense each was.

Many agencies will want to take a more hands-on approach. For the most part, how to use your software is a question you can sort out with your accountant, but Long did have a few general tips. He said agencies that own all their own buses need to figure out depreciation calculations and usage expenses. In addition, agencies receiving a grant "might want to get that into a separate department [within the budget], to get a clearer idea of what the grant money is being spent on."

More than anything else, however, Long emphasized the importance of two things: one, a good relationship with your CPA, and two, internal controls. By focusing on both these areas, a transit agency manager can save herself considerable stress down the line.

A good relationship with your CPA is important because "new [or

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Management Training for
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Contact: Washburn U.
Phone: (785) 231-1010 ext. 13

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Conference and Expo
Osage Beach, MO
Contact: Brenda Whitlock
Phone: (816) 373-5193

May 2-5, 2004
APTA Bus and Paratransit
Conference,
Denver, CO.
For more information call
(202) 496-4800 or visit
www.apta.com.

May 11-12, 2004
Transportation Safety
Conference
Topeka, KS
Contact: KU Continuing
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Phone: (877) 404-5823 (toll
free); Email: kuce@ku.edu

May 12-16, 2004
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& Exhibit Show
Overland Park, KS
Contact: Terry Cox, APWA
Phone: (712) 755-5137

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2004 CTAA Community
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For more information, call
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June 20-23, 2004
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Seminar
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July 26-28
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Laurie Revell/Robert Craig
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experienced] managers can call their long-term CPA for help in getting through one of the transition periods" common in the transit industry, Long said. He himself has been doing this work for 16 years, and so has much to offer a manager unfamiliar with accounting software.

Internal controls are policies and procedures related to financial activity. They determine who in the agency enters financial data, reconciles the bank account, signs checks, and approves bills to be paid. These internal controls work better when they involve several responsible individuals, he said, explaining, "If you can get enough people involved, you help prevent headlines like 'Money Stolen from Local Non-Profit.'"

Accounting software can also prevent negative headlines, but how effective your software is depends largely on how financially effective and responsible your agency already is or is willing to become. ▲

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own productivity, but that other measures were not taken into account.

Similarly, a safety program carrying a hefty award might encourage some drivers to not bother reporting their accidental run over the curb or little fender-bender, especially if no passengers or pedestrians were involved. Normally, they would report these incidents, but if the whole incentive program rests on this one measure, that creates a significant, negative, incentive to report "creatively" or not report at all. This highlights the value of a multifaceted incentive program, which places less weight on any one measure than it does on the individual's safety record in a variety of areas.

By carefully planning your safety incentive program, executing it consistently, and evaluating it thoroughly, you are building a managerial tradition of excellence in your agency. And because safety is so vital

to everything that public transit is and does, building a safety incentive program can be an essential aspect of the transit agency manager's job. The resources mentioned in this article (and listed in the back of the newsletter) provide a good starting point for those interested in further research on this topic.

Sources

"Incentive Programs to Improve Transit Employee Performance," *TCRP Synthesis 3*, <https://webmail.ku.edu/redirect?http://gulliver.trb.org/publications/tcrp/tsyn03.pdf>;

"Driver Safety Incentives," by Donna Myrick, *Tap-In*, Indiana RTAP, www.indiana.edu/~rtap/issue7driver%20incentive.html. ▲

Resources Order Form

Use this order form to order the resources described here. Feel free to keep the publications. **Send the order form to:** KUTC Lending Library, 1530 W. 15th Street, Room 2160, Lawrence, KS 66044. Or fax the form to 785/ 864-3199.

Publications

- Ten Ways to Enhance Your Community**, APTA, 2002. Provides ten inspiring tips that can help public transportation help you and your neighborhood.
- Senior Mobility Toolkit**, (56 pages) Nelson/ Nygaard Consulting Associates, 2003. A toolkit describing successful efforts to promote senior mobility, emphasizing efforts that can be implemented by local agencies, advocacy organizations and local elected officials.
- The Benefits of Public Transportation: Mobility for America's Small Urban and Rural Communities**, (4 pages), American Public Transportation Association. Provides information on the changing face of rural America and how transit services in rural communities can make a difference.
- The Benefits of Public Transportation: Mobility for the Aging Population** (4 pages), American Public Works Association. Describes some of the benefits of public transportation for older riders.

Videotapes for loan

- Dazzling Transit Service—Going the Extra Mile**, (20 min.) Minnesota DOT. Outlines the importance of defining customer needs in order to improve services offered by transit agencies.
- Providing Public Transportation to Everyone**, (15 min.) National Easter Seals Society, Project ACTION. This video will help familiarize those involved in transportation about the opportunities and requirements presented by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

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