Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

Improving Rural Transportation with Regional Cooperation

by John Elias

The need for transportation is growing so quickly in some small communities that transit agencies often have difficulty keeping up with demand. Some providers are overwhelmed with requests while others are under-utilized despite need in the community.

Regional coordination offers stretched transit providers the opportunity to focus their efforts and expand service without increasing overhead. Coordination can provide a one-stop information and marketing line to streamline dispatch and educate the public about mobility options. Increased efficiency through cooperation also frees staff to concentrate on other tasks within the organization and furnishes the freedom to seek innovative mobility management solutions to local transit problems.

Coordination expands coverage and lowers cost

As the baby boomer generation turns 65, the senior population will reach an all-time high. "I have seen a big increase in the demand for rural transit. I expect this to increase even more as the population ages," says James McLary, who teaches Coordinated Mobility classes for the National

Transit Institute (NTI) and serves as a community transportation association ambassador for the United We Ride program.

Despite state and federal funding increases for rural transportation, the demand in smaller communities often outstrips agency resources, particularly funding to meet local match requirements. Regional coordination can cushion the effects of these problems by consolidating resources and increasing efficiency. Through coordination transit agencies:

- Pool funding to increase potential resources for everyone
- Expand service area to provide rides to more people
- Allocate pooled funds to expand staff, add vehicles and improve technology and communication
- Utilize centralized dispatch to decrease reservation times and coordinate multiple agencies

Agencies that previously served only the elderly or people with disabilities

can extend service to the general public or other transportation-dependent groups in the region. Rural agencies right here in the Midwest have discovered that regional coordination aids marketing, streamlines dispatch and redirects funds and personnel to improve service for everyone in the area.

How should we organize?

Each region has its own unique transportation needs. Effective regional organization utilizes one of three primary administrative models for coordination: (1) full-service provider, (2) collaborative, or (3) extensive contracting.

Full-Service Provider

A well-funded independent agency may choose to focus all mobility management functions on this Full-Service Provider. A Full-Service Provider directly controls administration, scheduling, funding and personnel for all agencies in a region. Regions with a natural lead agency may benefit from a Full-Service Model.

Collaborative Approach

Many rural communities lack a transit authority but have public and private agencies that provide transportation. Senior centers and health care services provide paratransit

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Administrative Approaches

Full-Service
Collaborative
Extensive Contracting

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for those with special needs. Human and social service departments offer transportation through Medicaid funding. A collaborative approach provides a structure for agencies to coordinate their efforts and more efficiently deliver service.

Extensive Contracting

A third approach utilizes extensive contracting of services with a regionally-employed transit manager as a coordinator of multiple service providers across the area.

Technology aids coordination

Regional coordination can use technology to provide information on all community transportation services from a single call center. A one-call solution decreases marketing costs and allows services to be coordinated across agencies and regions. A central call location turns dispatch operators into travel managers; dispatchers can educate riders about all the transit options within the region. Technology can also help dispatchers at call centers keep in closer contact with drivers.

Demand-Responsive Transit (DRT) software allows dispatchers to update routes and schedule pick-ups with drivers in real time. Dispatchers can also stay in contact with drivers using traditional radio or cellular communication. The Kansas Department of Transportation has deployed Trapeze™ DRT software for pilot projects with Reno County Transportation in Hutchinson and Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas, Inc. in Hays. KDOT plans
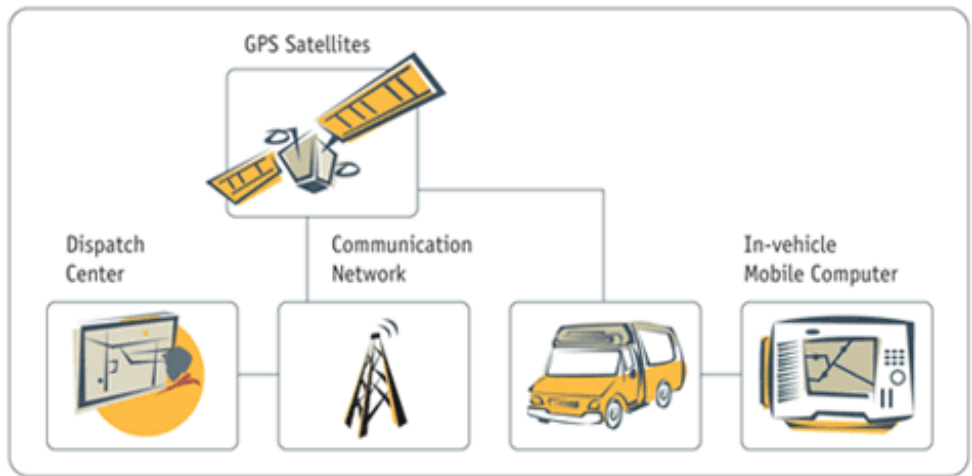
Mobile computing solutions including AVL and mobile data communication.

future implementation in other regions.

With this technology dispatchers monitor vehicles using Automatic Vehicle Locater (AVL) outfitted with Global Positioning System (GPS) units mounted in vehicles to monitor their position in real time. The equipment mounted in the vehicle sends a signal to a satellite that broadcasts vehicle location to the DRT software at the call center. Drivers can also communicate with dispatch via onboard Mobile Data Terminals (MDT) or with software installed on a traditional personal digital assistant such as a Palm Pilot or Blackberry.

Public transportation offices use this technology to reduce the number of routes their vehicles must take.

LeAnne Kroeger: "Our jobs are 110% easier" over the old paper system.

Scheduling software and driver MDTs more accurately track each ride, the reason for the trip and rider/location information. With all of this data housed on the database reports become much easier to create and track. While still relatively expensive, much of this technology has received enough widespread use that the cost has dropped significantly.

Marketing a common solution

Making the public aware of transportation options is one of the biggest challenges in public transit. In rural and suburban areas paratransit services may serve all manner of people from the elderly to disabled individuals and the general public. Often people who need rides aren't aware of these services however. Effectively marketing transportation options can stretch a single agency's budget or be outside the experience of agency staff. A coordinated regional system presents opportunities for multiple agencies to pool resources to develop farther reaching print, radio and even television spots. Rural transit providers across Missouri had great success with MoDOT's coordinated rural transportation campaign. In the campaign advertising materials were developed that local providers could customize for their agencies.

More effective marketing can assist in getting the word out but perhaps the biggest benefit of regional coordination lies in the creation of a regional brand. Coordination can develop a single

Case Study:

Software improves service in NW Kansas

Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas, Inc. (DSNWK) in Hays installed Trapeze PASS™ DRT dispatching system five years ago to help dispatch the ACCESS paratransit service in Ellis County. Ron Straight, Transportation Manager at DSNWK reported that after initial concern over MDT computers, drivers have come to depend upon them for reduction in paperwork and easy data collection. DSNWK's lead dispatcher LeAnne Kroeger reported "our jobs are 110% easier" over the old paper system.

Straight has been very pleased with Trapeze support, reporting 15-minute support call backs and attentive 24-hour support. "I can't say enough good things about working with Trapeze," Kroeger added. Straight and Kroeger are still tweaking the NOVUS™ system installed in the past month but should soon bring the MDTs onto the new platform much to their drivers' relief.

Case Study: Collaborative Approaches

Expanding Service through Efficiency

The RIDES Mass Transit District (RMTD) in southeastern Illinois utilizes a collaborative approach to integrate new counties into its transit district. Beginning with four vans in 1977, RMTD has grown to cover 14 counties and nearly 6,000 square miles.

New counties who wish to join the district bring together all stakeholders and assess the community's current and wished-for transit needs. This process tailors a relationship between county and district based on the unique needs of the region. After a transition period where the District and county operate as a partnership the efficiency and expertise of the District over administrative, liability and coordination allows RMTD to increase service and reduce costs.

Bill Jung, CEO of RMTD, reports that all transit within a county can typically be delivered by the District for less than the county previously spent simply to insure their vehicles. RMTD guarantees all county employees a job in the new District and staff freed from other duties can refocus their efforts. In Jung's experience service almost immediately expands to provide more rides across the whole region.

regional transit identity to foster trust in the level of service provided. Bill Jung with Rides Mass Transit in Southeastern Illinois has found that creating a brand not only makes advertising easier but also gives comfort to riders, "like McDonald's, they know what they are going to get when they choose our service."

**Bill Jung:
Riders across the region "know what they are going to get when they choose our service"**

Coordination encourages mobility management creativity

"Mobility management" describes solutions seek to re-imagine and reform transportation in a region. Mobility managers use knowledge of local transportation trends and needs to seek innovative solutions and fill in gaps left by traditional demand response or fixed route services.

Regional coordination frees staff at local agencies for other duties, including pursuing mobility management solutions. With freedom to implement creative solutions mobility managers can make a dramatic difference in the community. Mobility managers have developed voucher programs to subsidize transit, organized vanpools to serve large local employers, and developed travel training programs to educate transit riders. Regional coordination of transit can provide the resources and time necessary to develop these creative solutions.

Coordination Tool Box

Travel Management Coordination Center in western Kentucky proposes combining its 211 human service information center with one-call transit scheduling/information for its 8-county service area. The joint venture would create an easy to remember one-call number for community information and transportation planning.

MoDOT's rural marketing campaign provided templates for local agency use

Coordination at work -
Full-Service Model

Mid Iowa Development Association Council of Governments (MIDAS) is one of 16 regional transit agencies created by the Iowa Department of Transportation. MIDAS coordinates transportation across six counties and 3,500 square miles serving 102, 000 people in central Iowa. Only one town in the region, Fort Dodge, with 25,000 people, has more than 10,000 residents. Coordination of transportation across such a sparsely populated rural area has many challenges.

MIDAS uses a one-call central dispatch to coordinate all transit trips in the six-county region. In 2008 that amounted to nearly 800,000 trips. MIDAS owns and operates:

- Demand response service in all six counties
- Fixed route service -Fort Dodge
- Intercity connector/feeder service
- School buses in partnership with a school district
- Vanpool service from Fort Dodge to Webster City

MIDAS Transit Manager Rose Lee coordinates regional transit for their 18-member Council of Governments - each county sends three representatives. The MIDAS Council of Governments directs economic and transportation solutions across the region.

Case Study:
Extensive contracting in central Iowa

Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) also provides service as one of Iowa's regional transit agencies. HIRTA utilizes extensive contracting to provide its demand response transit services. HIRTA applies for state and federal funding and disperses those funds to its seven member counties in central Iowa.

One agency serves each county except for Marion County which has two. Each agency maintains autonomous policies, fares and dispatches their own rides while HIRTA procures insurance and vehicles for the entire region to reduce costs for individual contractors. HIRTA also provides invoicing support, operates a consortium for substance abuse testing and screens driving records for prospective drivers.

MIDAS uses RouteMatch™ DRT software with Ranger® mobile data computers to dispatch and track buses. Lee reports that the software not only provides accurate information for state and federal funding purposes but also allows for real-time route deviation so that MIDAS can offer pick-up/drop-off services at a passenger's home for a $2.50 fee. MIDAS leverages the resources of six counties to provide a wide variety of transportation options in a rural area.

Through the use of regional coordination Rose Lee and transit managers like her can consolidate resources to serve the diverse transportation needs of more people across large rural areas.

For more information about regional transit and more in-depth investigations of regional transit coordination check out the RTAP Case Studies.
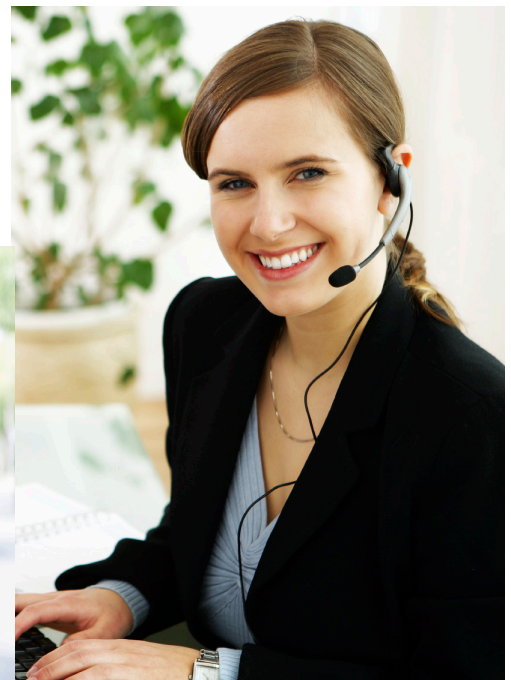
Mobile Data Terminals (MDT) allow drivers to log rides quickly, dispatchers to track vehicles and administrators to simplify paperwork.