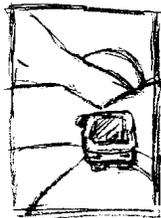


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*RTAP: A Rural Transit Assistance Program of the Federal Transit Administration*

# VOLUNTEERS IN TRANSPORTATION — SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER



Volunteer transportation programs can be rewarding — for you, your volunteers, and your customers — if you are well prepared and well organized. Before beginning a volunteer transportation program for your transit agency, or starting up a transit service that will operate with volunteers, consider your resources. This brief will show you how to evaluate and explore

the human and financial resources necessary for a successful program. It is important to remember that volunteer does not mean free. There are expenses inherent in operating a volunteer program that will be discussed in this brief.

Volunteers come in many forms. Some are retirees who have the time to give something back to their community. Others are part-timers, such as students and homemakers, who wish to help in whatever way they can. Still others are volunteering on a short-term basis to fulfill community service commitments or academic requirements. There are also corporate volunteers — individuals who are allowed time from their employment to work in the community. Many corporations have found that the goodwill such activity generates (in the community, with the recipients of the volunteer efforts, and with their volunteering employees) is invaluable.

There are two distinct categories of volunteer transportation programs, differing in their administration. Community-based volunteer services are administered by the community itself, usually by a volunteer Board of Directors fashioned exclusively for this purpose. Community-based programs may receive technical and financial assistance from their state or county Department of Transportation or an Area Agency on Aging. Community-based programs that coordinate transit for all of the community's single-purpose agencies can eliminate redundant and overlapping services, thus freeing resources for other or expanded services. (For further information on coordinating community resources, call the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.)

Single-purpose, agency-based volunteer services are operated by an existing non-profit agency, such as the American Red Cross, that receives funding from a specific source (sometimes

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from a government body) to provide these services. Typically, the manager or coordinator of the program is a paid staff member of the non-profit agency.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Before designing and implementing a volunteer transportation program - whether community- or agency-based - you will need to carefully weigh the advantages against the disadvantages.

There are six categories of advantages and disadvantages to volunteer transportation. The first four apply to both community-based and agency-based programs. Additionally, there are two that apply only to community-based services.

### Advantage

1. It may save money over use of comparable number of paid staff.
2. It builds a better community.
3. It is extremely flexible.
4. It can be fulfilling.
5. An entire community can be served, not just a specific client population.\*
6. High visibility makes for ease with volunteer recruitment.\*

### Disadvantage

1. Success depends on voluntary citizen recruitment and commitment.
2. Labor or competing private companies might object.
3. It won't work everywhere.
4. It can be stressful.
5. Individual demand/response may be difficult for community-based programs.\*
6. Attracting Board members with the necessary skills may be difficult.\*

*\*Community-based volunteer programs only*

Let's examine each of these one at a time.

### Advantage 1: It may save money.

Community-based service is by far the most cost-effective type of volunteer transportation because it requires very little overhead. The state-level Department of Transportation office (or other public funding source) can initiate a community-based program by merely providing a van and subsidizing vehicle insurance and maintenance costs.

Many factors influence the cost of service in agency-based programs. In some cases, for example, a mixture of paid and volunteer drivers is preferred. If the volunteers drive their own vehicles, the mixture of agency-owned to non-owned vehicles

will influence insurance and maintenance costs dramatically. Keep in mind that your liability insurance can increase when volunteers and their vehicles are added to your agency's services.

The following example demonstrates the savings potential of using volunteers. It compares the cost of hiring one paid driver and purchasing one van with the cost of recruiting ten volunteer drivers (each driving one-half day a week) using their own cars. The salary and benefits for half of the time of a full-time staff manager are included. For the purpose of this analysis, assume that all ten drivers will claim reimbursement at 30 cents a mile (although not all drivers will claim full, and some may not claim any, reimbursement), that 24,000 miles are driven each year, and that administrative overhead costs such as rent, phones, staff salaries, etc., are constant.

The volunteer experience of the Santa Cruz Chapter of the American Red Cross highlights such savings potential. Some years ago, Lift Line - a transportation program operated by a private, non-profit agency - was seeking the most cost-effective solution for providing medical trips to destinations out of the county. The trips often took more than ten hours to complete. Lift Line had calculated an annual cost of \$69,966 using agency-owned vans and paid drivers. The Santa Cruz Red Cross Chapter submitted a bid to Lift Line that, using volunteers driving a Red Cross van, quoted a cost of \$22,519. Lift Line contracted with the Red Cross to provide the rides, largely because of the cost savings.

*Note: Reimbursement to drivers in amounts that exceed the federal government's reimbursement rates is considered income. These payments would have to be tracked by the reimbursing agency*

#### Annual Costs\* Associated with One Paid Driver and Purchased Vehicle

|                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Manager, salary and benefits (50%) | \$15,000                           |
| Driver, salary and benefits        | 24,000                             |
| Vehicle insurance                  | 4,000                              |
| Cost of vehicle                    | 6,000 (30,000 prorated over 5 yrs) |
| Maintenance, gas and oil           | 4,800                              |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                       | <b>\$53,800</b>                    |

#### Annual Costs\* Associated with Ten Volunteers in Their Own Vehicles

|                                    |                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Manager, salary and benefits (50%) | \$15,000        |
| Mileage reimbursement              | 7,200           |
| Excess non-owned auto insurance    | 3,500           |
| Volunteer liability insurance      | 2,000           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                       | <b>\$27,700</b> |

*\*Dollar amounts are based on cost information available at time of publication.*

*and reported by both the agency and the recipient. For information on the federal reimbursement rate, check with the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.*

In all likelihood, your agency will pursue contracts and grants as sources of funding. Many of these programs require matching funds - your agency must provide an equal dollar amount. Some programs will accept the value of your volunteers' time as part of the match. You will need to know how many hours your volunteers contribute, and calculate the value of these hours using criteria provided by the potential funding source.

### **Disadvantage 1: Success depends on recruitment, commitment and, yes, resources.**

Potential monetary savings result from voluntary citizen involvement. Anyone who has ever run a volunteer program can attest to the inherent challenge of recruiting and maintaining a volunteer staff. Continuing to replenish the ranks of volunteers with well-qualified, well-trained, responsible and willing drivers, schedulers, and dispatchers (and administrators and board members, if community-based) is the single greatest problem faced by volunteer systems. (See discussion of risk management and training issues later in this brief.) Once the first flush of excitement fades, the reality of volunteer attrition and the need to continually recruit a stream of new volunteers can be an immense challenge. There are frequently recruitment expenses to be considered as well: creating public service announcements, solicitations, ads and notices in local periodicals, bulletin board flyers, and the like.

Furthermore, getting the bodies does not necessarily address your service's vehicle needs. Some passengers being served by volunteer drivers may be challenged by the accessibility of the volunteers' vehicles, impeding compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA guarantees accessibility for all Americans to services and benefits offered in their communities. The agency arranging the transportation services may need to solicit volunteers with specific types of vehicles (vans, for example). If this is not possible, the agency may have to rent, lease, or purchase the necessary type of vehicle to be driven by the volunteers. Having volunteers drive agency-owned or -leased vehicles raises new considerations of insurance coverage, which will increase the overall volunteer costs. If the volunteer effort operates within a larger program, that encompassing program may have lift-equipped vehicles that can provide the ADA-required service. It also may be possible to outsource the ADA service.

Though by definition a volunteer's work is free, there are associated costs to bear in mind. Training is an important element in your agency's risk management, no less so for your volunteers. Your agency must provide adequate instructions so that everyone - management, staff and volunteers - knows what to expect of each other and understands the parameters within which they will operate. Due to the varied backgrounds and experiences of your volunteer group, the necessary training could cost more than if you were working with an experienced

group of professional drivers. Training requires time and money, making it a necessary budget item both for paid staff and volunteers.

You may be fortunate enough to recruit volunteers that come with vehicles. However, even if your volunteers are driving their own vehicles, your agency must still provide vehicle insurance during the time those vehicles are in operation for service provision. A new concept in insurance coverage has recently emerged. Called "lease-back," this idea involves a transportation agency leasing the vehicles that are owned by its volunteer drivers, but only on the days that the volunteers are driving for the agency and using those vehicles. With the proper leasing paperwork in place, the volunteers' vehicles are then covered by the agency's insurance policy. Investigate insurance providers in your area for information on this type of coverage.

### **Advantage 2: It builds a better community.**

While our homes and cars tend to separate us from each other, volunteer transportation bridges these gaps, giving diverse members of the community an opportunity to interact. These programs allow individuals to assist their peers with a service that they themselves may need in the future. Volunteer positions are opportunities for senior involvement. At the same time, their service helps passengers live independently who might otherwise require assisted-living arrangements.

SAINTS (Seniors' Alternatives IN Transportation) of Fort Collins, Colorado, reports that its volunteers donate their time in part because they want to be certain that the service they provide will always be there - some day they expect to be customers of the service. In fact, SAINTS provides service to a number of individuals who used to be volunteer drivers in the SAINTS program.

Community-based services are especially effective at community-building. In Indiana, for example, the volunteer programs that are sponsored by the Area IV Agency on Aging have been enlivened by an effort that has involved and benefited nearly every family in town in one way or another. By providing guidance and technical assistance, the AoA enabled area town councils to craft volunteer programs to meet their community's specific mobility needs. But these efforts went beyond transportation. Many older residents in these areas - retired from the workforce, their children grown, perhaps widowed - found themselves disconnected from their community. As these individuals took on new roles as volunteer drivers and/or board members, they simultaneously found a new sense of responsibility and contribution. These seniors developed new friendships while taking great pride in making a valuable community service possible.

### **Disadvantage 2: Labor or competing private companies might object.**

Organized labor may object to the use of volunteer drivers where paid drivers might have been employed. Private trans-

portation companies seeking to expand their businesses may feel the use of volunteers gives the non-profit agency an unfair advantage. While the legitimate concerns of labor and private industry must be weighed carefully against the many benefits a community stands to gain from a volunteer transportation program, there must be a clear delineation of duties and a clear understanding of who your transportation serves and why. This understanding must convey the appropriateness of using volunteers to provide a necessary service, emphasizing that the service might otherwise not be available due to economic constraints.

**Advantage 3: It is extremely flexible.**

Volunteer transportation programs are flexible, adaptable tools that can take many forms with nearly limitless applications. They can be paragons of simplicity or extremely complex. They can be the entire transportation system in a county or simply one part of a larger network. To a planner, designer, or administrator, such flexibility can be quite attractive - volunteer programs can be honed to meet specific needs.

**Disadvantage 3: It won't work everywhere.**

Even dyed-in-the-wool, hard-core volunteer transportation advocates admit that volunteer programs won't work in every town, city, or county. You must closely analyze the community you serve to identify a history of volunteerism or the demographics (population size, age, economics) to support a new volunteer operation. The importance of doing this can not be under-estimated, and it will not be easy. However, it will be one of your most important tasks in establishing a volunteer program. (See Question 5 at the end of this brief.)

**Advantage 4: It can be fulfilling.**

With delight, Henry Eaton - the former coordinator of Sonoma (California) Care-A-Van - describes how enjoyable volunteer transportation can be. Volunteering with Care-A-Van, he says, is like belonging to an exclusive club - one that happens to provide direct community service. The volunteers of Care-A-Van have a good time. They enjoy each other's company and get a great deal of pleasure driving the length and breadth of Sonoma, socializing with friends and neighbors along the way.

Most professional managers agree that the greatest joy in volunteer transportation is the interaction with the volunteers themselves. The satisfaction of working with such dedicated, compassionate people who are there because they want to be, accompanied by the knowledge that good is being done for the community, brings a rare sense of fulfillment. Identifying the crucial elements of a transportation program, Robbie Williams, Executive Director of Fort Collins' SAINTS, says, "While funding is very important, it's the volunteers who make the program work. They are there because they want to help, and they make it all worthwhile."

**Disadvantage 4: It can be stressful (especially for the program coordinators).**

While the rewards from volunteer transportation are plainly evident, the organizational and administrative challenges are often stressful. To succeed, programs must be extremely well-organized. The level of stress for managers generally rises in proportion to the number of trips provided. Simple services in rural areas with plenty of community support produce less stress than systems with large numbers of trips, volunteers, and passengers in complex and diverse routing patterns.

Volunteers can also be affected by stress. A heavy workload, vehicle breakdowns, passengers in crisis, and other incidents can all lead to stress-inducing situations for the volunteer drivers. You must monitor how your volunteers are handling their assignments, encourage their feedback, recognize their efforts, and try to eliminate situations that could cause volunteers to lose their enthusiasm and commitment.

The following advantages and disadvantages apply to community-based programs ONLY.

**Advantage 5: An entire population can be readily served.**

Agency-based services could theoretically serve every transit-dependent person in a community, but in reality most do not. These efforts are often targeted at a specific client population, such as the elderly or disabled.

Community-based services are organizations for the community at large. They are therefore naturally suited to providing unrestricted transportation services. The ballpark is as welcome a destination as the doctor's office.

**Disadvantage 5: Individual demand/response is difficult for community-based services to provide.**

Taking individuals to appointments on an advance-reservation basis is a much more difficult management task than either fixed-route transportation or pre-arranged group trips. Single-purpose agencies are usually more experienced with door-to-door transportation than are community-based organizations.

**Advantage 6: High visibility makes for ease of volunteer recruitment.**

Community-based services typically serve small towns. It doesn't take long for everyone to become aware of the service. Such visibility is difficult to attain and sustain in urban environments where agency-based services must compete with hundreds of other worthy causes. Because of their high visibility, rural community-based programs may not struggle as much with volunteer recruitment as do agency-based programs in large population centers.

## **Disadvantage 6: Attracting board members with the necessary skills may be difficult.**

It will be helpful to find individuals with the right combination of skills necessary to be an effective board member. Prospective board members should have experience in or knowledge of transportation, knowledge of the community that is to be served and any community issues or challenges, and at least some financial aptitude. Create a job description that defines the board position and identifies the requirements you seek.

Volunteer transportation poses a challenging management task. The prospect of using volunteers is sometimes discounted by a perception that volunteers are difficult to manage. While managing a volunteer transportation program is by no means easy, program managers swear by their volunteers. Says Mikki Kraushaur of Silver Key Senior Services in Colorado Springs, "The benefits of using volunteers far outweigh the problems."

## **SUCCESS WITH VOLUNTEERS**

Because volunteer drivers are often more difficult to recruit than volunteers who do not have to operate motor vehicles, recruiting for transportation programs can be a struggle, even in communities with a strong history of volunteer work. Investigate whether or not your community has an active volunteer center with good experience in volunteer recruitment. Identify other agencies in town that have had good success with volunteer recruitment over the years. Examine special reasons why people might pull together in the spirit of self-help. The American Cancer Society's programs, for instance, are especially meaningful to people whose lives have been touched by cancer.

A well-recruited, well-managed volunteer program may provide more reliable, satisfactory service than an inadequately funded program that utilizes under-paid drivers. The under-paid drivers may feel little or no commitment to their jobs, while well-recruited volunteers may feel a great sense of pride in the service they are able to provide. But beware of volunteer burn-out. Full-timers get burned out much faster than relief drivers. The volunteer pool can quickly dry up if word gets out that volunteers with your agency get worked to death. Your volunteer program may have more stability and longevity using relief drivers only to supplement an existing professional driving staff - scheduled in advance to cover drivers on vacation, to supplement transit for special events, etc.

Be sure your program includes some form of volunteer recognition. Your volunteers are giving their time and energy because they care about your passengers and your agency, and your agency should show that it cares equally about the volunteers. Recognition does not have to be expensive or complicated. A Volunteer-of-the-Month award can be established, consisting of a certificate or plaque. You might sponsor a simple lunch or dinner once a month or quarter for all of your volunteers. This would not only be a chance to rec-

ognize their contributions, but it would also give them a chance to socialize with each other and compare experiences. Explore having local merchants sponsor the recognition by paying for plaques or lunch/dinner. Merchant sponsorship would help give your volunteer group and your agency more community exposure, as well as getting local merchants involved in your cause. Be creative in your efforts to recognize the contributions of your volunteers. They are driving your success.

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*This technical assistance brief has offered basic insight on using volunteers in transit agencies. For additional information on providing service through volunteers, contact the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.*

*The original Technical Assistance Brief was written by Dennis Studebaker; it was revised by the RTAP National Review Board, APWA staff, and CTAA staff in 2000.*

## **RESOURCES**

The National Transit Resource Center maintains a peer-to-peer technical assistance network, tapping into a wealth of experience from professionals in the community transportation field. For more information, visit the CTAA website at [www.ctaa.org/ntrc/services](http://www.ctaa.org/ntrc/services), or contact the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

Automotive Transportation Center, Purdue University, *Final Report to the Area IV Agency on Aging and Community Service for the Evaluation of the Specialized Volunteer Transportation Program* (Urban Mass Transportation Administration, Office of Technology Assistance, August 1987) Available from the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), PB 88-102157/AS, price code AO3; 800.553.6847.

Del Green Associates, *Use of Volunteers in the Transportation of Elderly and Handicapped Persons* (Urban Mass Transportation Administration, January 1984) An analysis of a variety of volunteer transportation programs. It includes profiles of operational structures and typical volunteers. The second half of this report contains case studies of thirteen volunteer transportation programs. Available from NTIS, PB 84-225168/AS, price code AO7; 800.553.6847.

Freund, Kathy, *Build It and They Will Come: ITN Seeks Sustainable Transit Service with Car-like Convenience* (Community Transportation Reporter, September/October 1998) Case study of a volunteer transportation program. Available on the CTAA website at <http://www.ctaa.org/ct/sepoct98/itn.shtml>.

Hood, Thomas, and Linda Geiss, *The Volunteer Transportation Program* (Tennessee Department of Transportation, April

1982) Although out of print, this is a helpful guide to establishing a volunteer transportation program. Photocopies are available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

*How to Control Liability and Risk in Volunteer Programs* (Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services, 1992) Not transportation-specific, but provides an excellent overview of issues involved in developing a volunteer program. Information on legal and liability risks for management and volunteers, as well as risk management. Available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

Lake, Vern, *101 Ways to Give Recognition to Volunteers* (Minnesota Department of Public Welfare, undated) From the basic to the creative, a plethora of ideas to aid the success of your volunteer program. Available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

Michels, Tom, *Q and A: Reimbursement of Volunteer Drivers* (Community Transportation Reporter, May/June 1999) Presented in a question-and-answer format, this article covers everything you need to know about expense reimbursement for volunteer drivers. Available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

National Center for Nonprofit Boards, [www.ncnb.org](http://www.ncnb.org) This website is a wonderful source of information for the operating boards of nonprofit organizations.

*Repositioning the Volunteer Administration Profession* (International Association for Volunteer Administration [AVA], 2000) Includes conclusions and recommendations based on results from a survey requesting information on key issues affecting volunteer leaders. Free. Available from the AVA at 804.346.2266 or [avaintl@mindspring.com](mailto:avaintl@mindspring.com).

Stuebaker, Dennis, *Succeeding with Volunteer Transportation* (1990) The basis of this informational brief, this step-by-step manual includes information on vehicle selection, personnel selection, system design, volunteer recruitment and management, and risk management. Free. Available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

*Transportation in Indian Country: Getting Started* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Community Transportation Assistance Project [CTAP], 1995) Although focused on technical assistance for American Indian tribes, this brief provides useful information for anyone tackling issues of funding, vehicle inventory, and human agency resources. Free. Available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

*Volunteer Driver Handbook* (York County Community Action, 1999) Volunteer driver manual covering job description, expectations, accident policy, drug and alcohol policy, insurance laws, reimbursements, pre-trip inspection, etc. Free. Available from the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279.

Wallin, Theodore, *Volunteerism in Public Transportation: Financial and Management Aspects* (UMTA, August 1986) Results of a survey of transit providers using volunteers. Includes characteristics of agency structure, role of volunteers, economic aspects of volunteers, and productivity. Available from NTIS, PB 87-168795/AS, price code AO5; 800.553.6847.

Wallin, Theodore, & Alice Kidder, *Manual for Financing and Sustaining Low-Cost Systems for General Public Mobility Programs in Rural Areas* (UMTA, August 1986) How to plan the start-up of volunteer- or brokerage-based rural transit systems. Available from NTIS, PB 86-248218/AS, price code AO5; 800.553.6847.

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