

New Options for Transportation in Rural Communities

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Mobility and transportation was one of the "hot topics" that was discussed in the Facilitated discussion of the Small town and rural planning division. Many of the participating planners recognized transportation as one of the main issues for seniors who want to age in place, especially in rural areas where transit options are limited. Many elders rely on automobiles and face difficulty using public transportation not only because of unavailability but also because of the distance they have to walk to find a bus stop. Participants in the STAR Facilitated Discussion referred to the importance of mobility for seniors, the high expenses of para-transit services and different possible solutions from their communities.

One of the ideas was to utilize existing community assets like school buses, an idea that has already been implemented in NYC. In NYC, city school buses are shuttling seniors to grocery stores and other shopping options for free, an initiative that started in 2008 as a pilot program in Brooklyn and now covers the whole city.

Another idea was to subsidize on-call rural bus services, a system that has been successfully implemented in communities in Indiana, Nebraska and Illinois. As the traditional fixed route system is not efficient and communities are dealing with empty buses and high costs, there is an increased need for alternative transportation services such as the "on-call system", ride-sharing or volunteer drivers. An example is ITN America, a 24/7 membership-based vehicle cooperative that uses cars instead of vans or buses to pick up clients at their doors and take them anywhere in the service area. ITN differentiates from other transportation options as it offers affordable fares that are typically lower than a comparable taxi ride and it provides arm-through-arm, door-through-door service. Participants mentioned how informal networks can be used to facilitate the transportation needs of the elders without requiring local government funding by neighbor-to neighbor car sharing and time banking to support transportation (For more information: <http://cms.mildredwarner.org/p/177>)

Partnerships with organizations that develop alternative transportation systems can achieve better results and reduce costs. Some examples participants referred to were church or charitable organizations that offer senior ride options for low-cost access to health services, or hospitals and medical centers that form partnerships with counties to provide alternative transportation services for seniors. Grants that can be awarded to non-profit organizations or to the county were referenced as a good way to fund rural transportation systems. Medicaid funds can be used to pay for emergency ambulance service and transportation to non-emergency medical appointments for low-income elders and other medically needy persons.

Discussion ended with the role small town and rural planners can play in advertising and informing residents, service providers and local governments of the available options and ways to fund and meet the transportation needs of seniors.