

# A New England Perspective on Important Trends and Issues

by David L. White

We may be in the midst of an economic downturn, but that doesn't alter the following reality: that numerous convincing reasons remain for expanding non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) programs at the federal, state and local levels. This issue is as important as any facing the future of community and public transportation. There are three major areas that demand our attention: Medicaid, Medicare and our veterans' health care system.

## Medicaid

Over the years, the Medicaid NEMT benefit has provided millions of low-income beneficiaries throughout the country with the opportunity to access and receive much needed medical care, a service that benefits them personally and supports the goal of controlling Medicaid costs because patients can access medical care sooner rather than later.

With the expansion of the Medicaid program in response to the recession and the push toward universal health care, the existing programs will be providing services to an ever-growing population that will depend on NEMT services to access their health care benefits. However, at the same time that this is taking place, we have a proposed federal policy that may impede the opportunity for Medicaid members to receive this critically important benefit.

Last year, the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS)/ U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services proposed to put into effect a new policy entitled, Medicaid Program: State Flexibility for Medicaid Benefit Package. This policy is often referred to as the Benchmark Plan. In general, giving states more flexibility to design and administer health care benefits can have positive benefits for states and beneficiaries. However, this particular policy gives the states the latitude to eliminate NEMT services under certain circumstances for whole classes of enrollees once a Benchmark Plan is implemented. Based on the way this policy is written, there is nothing to prevent this from occurring – and in fact a couple of states have already tried even before the rule has been finalized. In addition, there is no process included to assess the negative impact of deleting the NEMT benefit before the Benchmark Plans are put into place. It is clearly not the right time to allow states to arbitrarily remove NEMT services from government-sponsored health care plans.

## Medicare

Unlike Medicaid, the Medicare program has not yet taken advantage of the cost-control opportunities that can result from offering NEMT benefits. In fact, Medicare-sponsored transportation is very limited. The program only covers transportation provided by ambulances for severe medical situations such as life-threatening emergencies or bed-ridden patients.

Several years ago, under the leadership of CTAA Executive Director Dale Marsico, many

members of the CTAA Board and members around the country undertook an effort to secure an NEMT benefit under Medicare modeled on the Medicaid benefit. Working closely with members of Congress (principally Senator Dodd of Connecticut and then-Senator Santorum of Pennsylvania) we crafted a bill to provide these services to America's most at-risk seniors. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, we were unsuccessful during our first try at this important legislative undertaking. With the baby-boomers not getting any younger, with expensive emergency ambulance trips often responding to non-emergencies, and the difficulty of providing non-emergency medical transportation to our seniors becoming ever more challenging the time to try again is now.

## Veterans

The fact that veterans do not have a world class NEMT program is an embarrassment and a situation we should not tolerate.

Because of Congressional budget cuts in 1987, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) stopped reimbursing veterans for the cost of transportation to and from VA facilities. The current transportation services offered by the VA are limited and fragmented. Realizing that many disabled veterans are on small fixed incomes and live many miles from the nearest VA, the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) organized a nationwide volunteer transportation network to provide transportation for veterans seeking a variety of services and benefits to

and/or from a VA facility or other approved health care provider. The DAV does an excellent job, but finding volunteers is getting more challenging with increasing fuel costs and the economic downturn. Also, the vehicles used by volunteers only occasionally include lift-equipped vans. According to many veterans advocacy groups, the need for transportation services is increasing as more Veterans return from active service and for many veterans, transportation services need to be extended to their family members in order for the therapies and care they are receiving to succeed.

It's time to bring together managers of the VA medical facilities and officials at the VA with transportation advocate organizations, U.S. DOT officials and members of the United We Ride initiative. Using the success of managed Medicaid NEMT programs as a starting point, together we should be able to outline a transportation management program that meets the needs of VA clients and that is at the same time designed to be cost-effective and encourage transportation coordination in local communities.

Finally, let me share with you that for 25 years CTAA has been committed to advocate for mobility as a right for all Americans. Wherever they live around the country, the CTAA staff, state delegates, Board members and nearly 5,000 members are committed to this goal. I can't think of a better goal to set for myself as I go to work every day or a better organization with which to be associated.

*David L. White is the founder and President of Coordinated Transportation Solutions, Inc. (CTS), a not-for-profit transportation management services company. Since 1997 he has been a member of the CTAA Board of Directors representing the six New England states, serving as President and Vice President of the Board and now serving as Treasurer.*

## Fast Mail

**Urgent Message -- Your Association has introduced a special e-mail newsletter full of information you need! If you are not receiving Fast Mail already, simply send an email to [fastmail@ctaa.org](mailto:fastmail@ctaa.org) and we will start your e-subscription right away.**



**Additionally, RAIL Magazine recently debuted its corresponding monthly E-Mail Newsletter, Fast Mail for RAIL. Subscribe by emailing [fastmailrail@ctaa.org](mailto:fastmailrail@ctaa.org).**