

OUR WORK IN COMMUNITIES

Recent times have powerfully demonstrated that inherent in every community is the commitment to share those efforts and experiences that have overcome obstacles and serve those who need help the most. The transferring of knowledge, resources, and perhaps most importantly, the support of colleagues and peers are crucial aspects of success when addressing significant challenges.

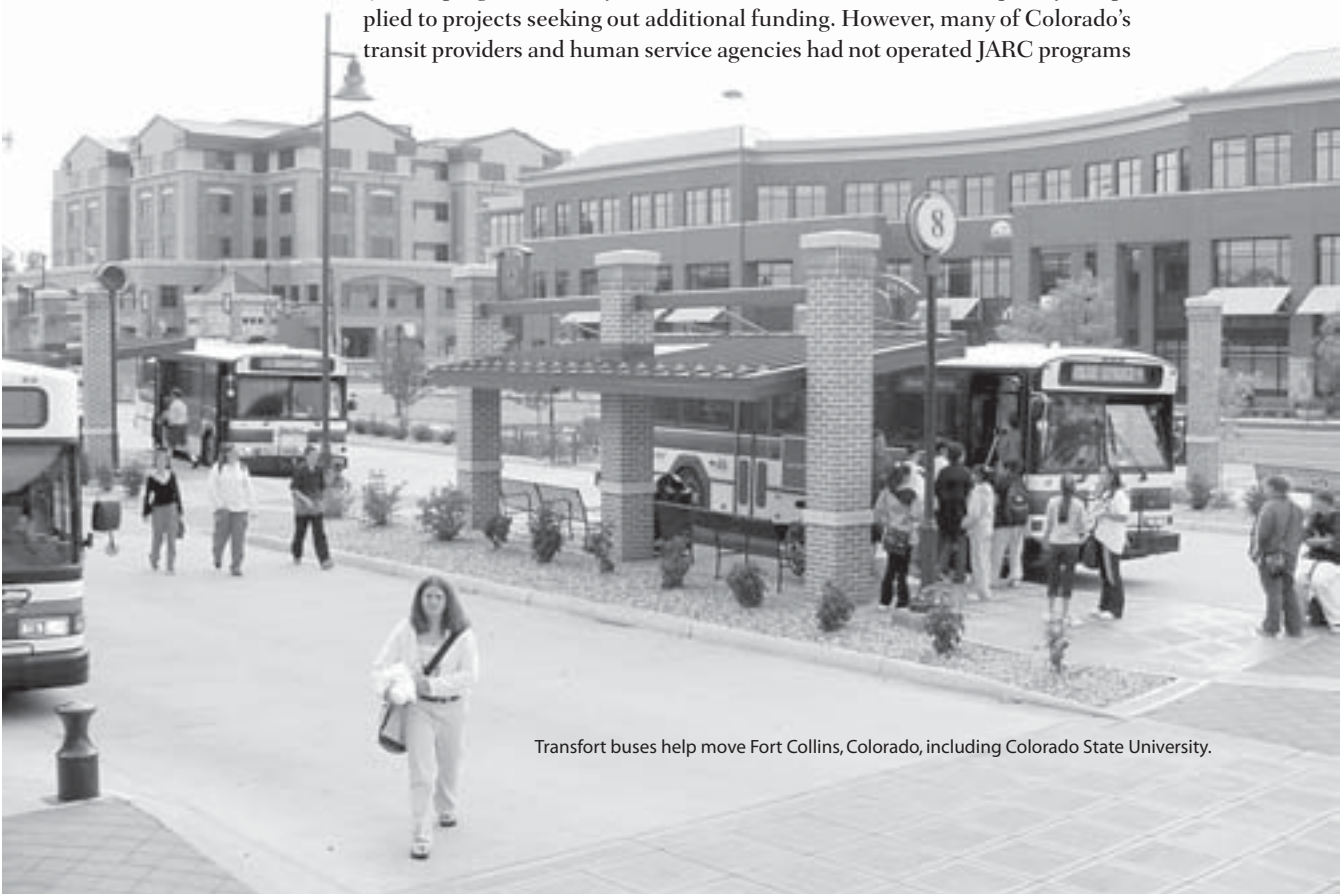
*By Rich Sampson and
Carolyn Jeskey*

This is no less true for leaders and officials in community and public transportation and human services who are attempting to bridge longstanding barriers to mobility. By reaching out to their counterparts across the nation, those dedicated to enhancing services and access are finding the advice and perspective of those who have been there before, and are pointing in the direction of progress.

These are the stories of communities in three states across the country that did just that, and are building upon connections between colleagues to deliver substantial improvements to their mobility options.

Knowledge Sharing in Colorado

In early 2005, transit providers in Colorado faced an unusual and challenging predicament: the state had received an influx of new funding from the Federal Transit Administration under the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program. Usually, such a windfall of investment would quickly be applied to projects seeking out additional funding. However, many of Colorado's transit providers and human service agencies had not operated JARC programs



Transit buses help move Fort Collins, Colorado, including Colorado State University.

Birmingham's united community leaders organize to improve its mobility options.



to that point, and were encouraged by the opportunity to expand service in their communities. The providers looked to their state's transit association, the Colorado Association of Transit Agencies for ideas.

"Transit agencies were interested in these funds because they wanted to institute innovative programs to truly benefit those who need to access jobs and those who wish to employ them," said Jeanne Erickson, Executive Director of the Colorado Association. "Also, transit providers were preparing to use JARC funds for the first time and wanted to be certain that they used appropriately and according to FTA guidelines."

Through their longstanding affiliation with the Community Transportation Association, Erickson reached out to the Joblinks program at the Association for guidance. Working with Associate Director Charles Dickson, and Joblinks Program Director Carolyn Jeskey, Erickson and her colleagues arranged for a special workshop session in Denver so that those interested providers and agencies could learn not only of job access guidelines and structure, but also gain first-hand knowledge from existing JARC programs from across the country. Joblinks arranged for four transit professionals from across the country who manage these programs to address their counterparts in Colorado, and share their experiences and strategies in implementing and operating a successful service. Additionally, staff from the Federal Transit Administration's Regional Office in Denver, and Joblinks staff provided insight into how the program was administered at the federal level, and the overall intent behind the innovative source of investment.

Presenters from the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, the Capital District Transit Authority in Albany, New York, the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City, Missouri, and the KiBois Area Transit System in Stigler, Oklahoma shared the knowledge they gained through their JARC programs, which ranged from the challenges of providing service in a large rural region to the smallest geographical state in the nation, and cities and small urban areas in between. Not only did the presenters represent diverse demographic perspectives, but also offered numerous ways in which a job access program could be designed, and sources from which the required 50 percent matching funds could be attained. Their projects focused on improving options for persons with disabilities, leveraging job placement campaigns, and utilizing mobility management strategies, while finding matching funds through the Temporary Assistance to Needy

Families program, local and regional partnerships, or state investment streams.

"It was refreshing to have an opportunity to share the understanding and approaches we built in our respective JARC services, and help our friends in Colorado design programs that will be similarly successful," said Luis Acosta of the Capital District Transit Authority.

All told, the 40-plus representatives from transit providers and human service agencies from across the Rocky Mountain State that gathered at Denver's Regional Transit District offices were able to access the experience and perspective of their peers from across the country, and learn of the theory and practice of the program.

"The workshop provided some great background on what JARC is about, and also some proven strategies so we could hit the ground running," said Darlene Thorndyke of the Northeast Colorado Council of Governments in Fort Morgan, Colorado.

With the opportunity to influence a large number of new or enhanced transit services, it was important to ensure that the attendees received accurate information along with broad perspectives, so that systems from communities of all sizes and styles could quickly develop job access programs that responded to their needs.

"Joblinks really culled together a great group of experts knowledgeable about JARC's structure, and peers who know firsthand about how it is executed," says Jeanne Erickson.

Merging Jobs and Mobility in Upstate New York

In rural and small-town Herkimer, Madison and Oneida counties in central upstate New York, providers of the region's transportation and workforce development

services have long known that linking people to jobs and transit services are interrelated. Armed with that understanding, The Workforce Development Board of Herkimer, Madison and Oneida Counties has worked with area transit providers for nearly two decades to coordinate information on their services and ensure improvements to the transit network would benefit job seekers.

However, despite the strong tradition of partnership between these two vital aspects of the region's community services, many parts of the tri-county area saw limited or no transit service, particularly effecting Herkimer County, and especially impacting people with disabilities. Alice Savino, Executive Director of the Workforce Investment Board describes the problem as "the tri-county region's transit disconnect is a barrier to thousands of talented individuals who are unable to make a contribution to the economy due to the lack of accessible, affordable transportation that will get them to and from work."

To help connect these job seekers with employers, the Workforce Investment Board, in cooperation with transit providers in the area, applied for technical assistance through the Community Transportation Association. The project aimed to develop a long-term plan to improve options for job seekers outside the existing transit service area, with a special emphasis on persons with disabilities, and ultimately to secure sources of ongoing investment to make these improvements possible. In order to accomplish these goals, the

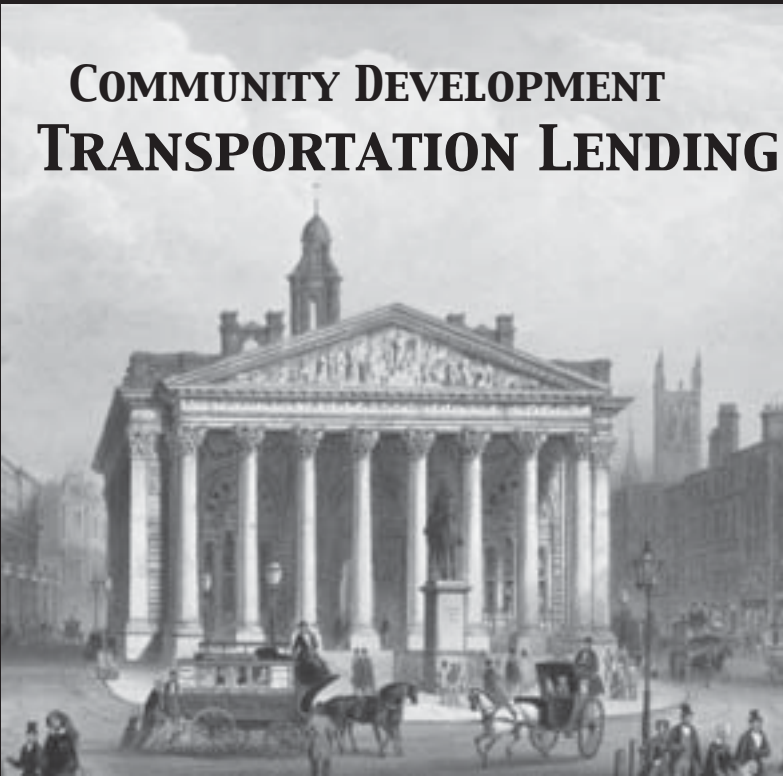
assistance project would help the region conduct a mobility study to make clear what the exact unmet needs are, and incorporate best practices from similar communities on strategies to develop and enhance service.

In responding to the first task of conducting a needs assessment, the Association worked with the Workforce Investment Board to design a four-part process of data collection to tabulate the existing gaps in service, an outreach effort to compile issues limiting access to transportation, developing recommendations of potential changes and improvements that could close the previously identified gaps, and working with community partners and local governmental officials to identify potential funding streams.

As that approach got underway in the summer of 2005, the Association also assisted the Workforce Investment Board in assembling a community meeting to allow other communities to share their best practices and participants to consider how those models might best be adapted in the region.

On June 20, 2005, Assistant Director Charles Rutkowski was joined by Mark Whitmore of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board in Salem, Massachusetts, and June O'Dell of the Southeast Missouri Workforce Investment Board, who shared the activities their organizations are utilizing to improve mobility options for job seekers in their communities. Whitmore described their use of Transportation Options Managers to help job seekers navigate the myriad of transportation services in northeastern Massachusetts, while

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Birmingham's ClasTran partners with Project Safe Place to provide service to youths.

O'Dell offered details on their support of services that link workers with job sites across a 13-county region. Through their presentations, the two communities demonstrated that the workforce and transportation communities could actively collaborate to enhance travel options.

"I think we were able to show to a region very similar to ours, particularly in their needs for improved service in rural areas and for people with disabilities, that there are some strategies they could replicate and achieve some definite improvements for job seekers," said Mark Whitmore.

Buoyed by the exchange of concepts and community discussion of next steps, the Workforce Investment Board and its partners from transit and human service providers in their region now sense greater impetus and focus to produce

a needs assessment that can contribute to improved options and services in central New York. But for Alice Savino and her colleagues in the region, having some empirical data and models for comparison allowed for a translation of past efforts into a solid direction for the future.

"Having some background knowledge from other communities like ours, and guidance on conducting a thorough needs assessment was just what we needed to finally address the challenges we've faced for so long."

Bringing Momentum to Birmingham

As the community of Birmingham, Alabama prepared to undertake a year-long study of the mobility needs of jobseekers, leaders of community organizations and local officials wanted to maximize their study efforts, they first needed to know what community and public transportation was needed in the entire region and a plan to accomplish improvements. Although Birmingham leaders had a broad notion of what they intended to achieve, the group also knew they needed to access the knowledge and experience of other transit leaders who had experienced challenges similar to theirs.

As the group of representatives from service providers, human service agencies, governmental bodies and community organizations, which had been organized through the United Way of Central Alabama, had recently been awarded a demonstration grant through the Community Transportation Association to undertake a study of employment transportation resources and needs, it found a prime opportunity to leverage the grant efforts to begin affecting larger improvements to its transportation options. Working with the Association's Charles Dickson, the United Way, along with a partnership of governmental agencies and community-based organizations worked to put together a series of meetings and tasks designed to refresh their understanding of community mobility.

The team recognized a crucial aspect necessary to build a stronger transportation network was compiling an accurate description of the challenges and needs facing the region. As a result, a regional transportation conference was organized for November 14, 2003 to begin crafting a vision for mobility in the region. Drawing together local transportation providers, planners and, most importantly, transit riders and those who could benefit from improved transportation services, the meeting identified trends and issues with existing transit services and demographic and environmental issues affecting transportation needs, such as service hours and locations, accessibility, funding and relationships with governmental leaders.

A total of 55 participants representing 42 different organizations and agencies, ranging from health care providers to workforce development to faith-based organizations took part in the meeting. Leaders in public and community transportation, including Dan Dirks of SMART Suburban Transportation Service in Detroit, Michigan, Jo Ann Hutchinson, the

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former Executive Director of the Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged, and Julie Wilcke of Ride Connection in Portland, Oregon shared their know-how and experiences in crafting responsive and successful services in their communities. The participants then translated that knowledge and the trends and needs identified earlier into a vision for the future for what services could be provided and how those improvements could be achieved.

The day-long conference built momentum around a shared concept for expanding mobility options in the region. According to Shirley Worthington, Vice President of Community Initiatives for the United Way of Central Alabama, “the meeting brought important segments of the community together in one room to really start grasping the situation, and what we could do about it.”

Jim Byram of the Bessemer Department of Community Development agreed, saying, “it really allowed us to consider the big picture, and conceptualize what service could look like.”

Constructing the Way Forward

With the ideas and momentum built from the Visioning Conference, group leaders from the United Way of Central Alabama pressed forward in November, 2003, working with key partners such as the Alabama Department of Transportation, Jefferson County ClasTran, and the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority to begin developing strategies for taking action on the objectives raised during the conference. Charles Dickson, along with Donna Smith of Easter Seals Project ACTION assisted the group in engaging these community partners and undertaking a more focused needs and resources assessment process.

Building on the increased collaboration between community organizations and agencies, another conference was convened on May 25, 2004 to solidify the next steps from the action plans developed at the November conference. One of those steps was the formation of a coordinating committee which would manage the day-to-day tasks, such as identifying funding, capitalizing on existing human and physical resources, as well as assessing what infrastructural and technological assets were available or needed. Additionally, the group also devised strategies to undertake fiscal, planning and political campaigns to achieve the long-term goals defined in the meetings.

This process set the foundation for a series of specific and implementable objectives, according to the United Way’s



ClasTran and its drivers provide shared-ride and curb-to-curb transit throughout Jefferson County.

Worthington. She says that “by setting up working groups that target actual issues, we found ourselves with a plan to deliver some real changes.”

Some of these goals included offering fully accessible transportation throughout the region, developing strategic transportation plans for 5, 10 and 20-year horizons, building a public outreach and education campaign, and working with elected officials to establish a dedicated source of investment to support service. Now, nearly two years after the Birmingham community came together to strategize on improving their mobility options, tangible results are emerging.



The Spark for Momentum

Working with the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, the community partners have provided input into the 5 and 10 year transportation plans produced by the commission to officially designate many of the changes ranged in the initial visioning meeting.

Meanwhile, working with Easter Seals Project ACTION, the community team has engaged both transportation providers in the area, the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority and the regional demand-response provider ClasTran to ensure that existing services would ultimately be fully compliant. Additionally, with the help of the Association’s Charles Dickson, the group was able to integrate their efforts with Alabama’s statewide coordination activities under the national United We Ride effort.

These steps, along with ongoing communication and in-

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put with the community's organizations and agencies who first assembled in November 2003, has affirmed the need to build community coalitions in order to affect positive changes in the mobility of a region. For the United Way and its community partners, the involvement of the Association's technical assistance program provided the spark that ignited momentum in Birmingham to confront its challenges and respond with solutions to make lasting improvements in transportation options.

"Community Transportation Association's contribution was absolutely essential to helping us get organized and really identify what we needed to accomplish," says Shirley Worthington.

Beyond Storytelling

When professionals and leaders in transportation and human services interact with their counterparts in other states and regions, they aren't devoting their time to tell stories of their accomplishments. Instead, they reach out to offer concrete strategies, lessons learned and helpful tools that might allow other communities to achieve the same successes they've built in theirs.

Although each community faces unique challenges and conditions that make every area distinct, fundamental concepts and practices always lie at the heart of successful efforts to produce change. In that sense, the work accomplished and still underway in Birmingham, Colorado and upstate New York demonstrates that assistance between peers transcends attending meetings and sharing tales; it makes a difference.

The Community Transportation Association offers ongoing opportunities to connect professionals with each other and help communities improve their mobility options through its technical assistance programs. To access these resources for your community, visit our website at <http://www.ctaa.org/techassist> or email us at sampson@ctaa.org. 

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