

Interview With:

# Connie Garber, CCTM

Connie, who directs transportation at the York County Community Action Agency in Sanford, Maine is one of community transportation's true pioneers.

**CT:** *You've been an active and important force in the community and public transportation field. How did you first arrive at the York County Community Action Corporation? What path brought you into the world of mobility issues?*

**Connie:** As with most of the people that are in the community transportation field, I didn't grow up as a child thinking that this was what I wanted to do when I grew up. I got my undergraduate degree in political science, took a break after graduating, and got very interested in regional planning. I got accepted into a Master's program at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and determined quickly that in order to help cover tuition costs, I needed to get a research assistant position. And the one that was available involved work in a study of a new field that hadn't received much play at that point — the field of paratransit.

So anyway, there I was, in graduate school, working on a project on paratransit services, which at that point meant taxis. It was taxi services taking the place of fixed-route vehicles when it didn't make sense to operate fixed route. And I became very interested in all the issues associated with transportation. I had never thought about that component. My original interest in regional planning had been more along urban development and housing. So the research assistantship is what turned me into a life-long transportation fanatic!

I left Chapel Hill, returned to my native New England, and had a job for a short period of time as a paratransit planner for a regional planning commission, and quickly



parlayed that into a job managing a demonstration project on coordinating human service transportation in a four-county area of western Massachusetts. That was a very interesting project, breaking new ground out there, and I would have stayed there longer except that politics intervened. The governor — Dukakis — was not reelected, and when he left office, all of the people that I worked with and worked for were basically given their walking papers. I had no boss anymore, and the project funding was in jeopardy and I thought, 'Time to move.'

I responded to an ad that was in the newspaper for a transportation directed at a community action agency in southern Maine, and 25 years later I'm still here.

**CT:** *So you arrived in York County ...*

**Connie:** I was hired as the new transportation director. The executive director of the agency was new and he was taking a look at where he felt new blood was needed, and the transportation program was one of them.

The early days, looking back now,

were so simple. All of our records for all of the transportation we were providing under contract were kept on 5x8 index cards, color-coded, with one color for meal sites for seniors, a different color for shopping, another for the adults with mental retardation. And that was about all we did back then. There were seven vans that were operating county-wide, and obviously that didn't buy a whole lot of service because our county was — still is — 1,000 square miles. It was a challenge to have something that we could put out there and provide a level of service to all of the people who were looking for transportation.

**CT:** *Did you have something to guide you when you first arrived? Some sort of model? How did you know where to begin?*

**Connie:** Definitely, once I took the research assistantship, I was also taking other classes in transportation planning, so I took a number of classes that focused on transportation options. As part of the research assistantship, I did some traveling around the country and looked at some early, innovative projects that involved taxi cabs. I traveled to Arkansas, Pennsylvania. I remember at least those two states. So, I had fairly good exposure at that point to options. And then, my experience in western Massachusetts, working with the transportation providers there, and providing technical assistance to them, I got a very clear view of rural options for individuals with special needs and the challenges that they faced.

**CT:** *Were there specific experiences that impacted or individuals who influenced your work with York County CAC?*

**Connie:** I would say that the information that I had before I arrived here in Maine was very ... what am I trying to say? The opposite of Big Picture. Small Picture? Very spe-

cific to where I was. I hadn't had a chance to really get a sense of what things were like on a larger scale. Obviously, making visits around the country on this paratransit grant gave you some indication of what was going on, but it was so limited.

After I arrived in Maine, one of the things that happened was that I linked up with some of the national conferences. One of the early people who impacted my work was a professor from Florida — Bill Bell. Bill was an incredible individual, focused on geriatric issues. He convened a series of conferences on transportation for what then was called the elderly and handicapped. One of the things that Bill did — other than having a passion for bringing people together and promoting the study and the improvement of transportation for seniors — he really believed in the power of networking. That was kind of his life force. He wanted people to get together. He wanted people to enjoy what they were doing. And he wanted people to make a difference. You couldn't be around him and not walk away with that as part of what made you tick as well. And that was the venue from which the first national association — NASTA [National Association for Transportation Alternatives] — grew. There was an announcement at the conference — back in 1982 or 83 — that anybody interested in forming a national association should meet at the bar! From that group that literally sat around the table and brainstormed in the beautiful Florida sunny weather, from that, NASTA was formed in 1984. And it was five years later that it combined with Rural America to become CTAA.

**CT:** *Your organization has effectively improved mobility options for 29 towns in your service area. That's a lot of different elements to deal with. How do you make all those connections happen?*

**Connie:** I had a number of things going for me when I walked in, and one of them was that Maine had passed legislation that mandated statewide coordination, and had established regions, and within each region there was one designated regional provider. And that was the agency I was working for — York County Community Action Corp. What that meant was, as a regional provider, I didn't have to go fight for contracts, or compete with others to get transportation funding. All transportation purchased with state and federal funds would flow through this office.

I walked into this job, and there was no question about the 29 towns. They were part of this area, and we were responsible for providing service. The extent of the service was something that was an issue for me. I took a look at what we were doing with seven vans and knew that we needed to expand. We did shortly thereafter pick up additional funding through the rural transportation funding that became available — the old Section 18 — and we picked up some funding for the Medicaid-eligible individuals. So, we added additional funding streams, and within two years we were up to 12 vans operating.

Our volunteer program was an RFP that I responded to in 1984. It was the state looking at services for children in foster care and protective custody. Across the state, the regional transportation providers had been unable to meet a lot of the trip needs with the vans and buses because they were very specific, and didn't work well in a regional route. So they asked us for proposals, and we put a proposal together, and started our volunteer program in 1984. In FY05, we had about 85 active volunteers. Our volunteers provided about 55,000 trips for the year, and drove over 2.5 million miles. We still average about 250 trips a day done by our volunteer drivers.

The things that were difficult were not so much finding funding, but negotiating rates for reimburse-

ment, and looking for new partners, and looking for ways that you could create networks that would help you with short- and long-term plans ... The Maine Transit Association didn't exist when I moved to Maine. A group of the human service transportation providers would get together informally, and we would talk about what we were doing about specific problem areas, and we decided that we would be much better off if we invited everybody who was involved in public transportation to the table — the rural people, the folks who were providing urban services. We all sat down and got better information, and looked at ways that we could work collaboratively. So, 1981 was when the Maine Transit Association was formed. It has been, and continues to be, a critical mechanism to help get information out, share information, to affectively advocate at the state level when change needs to happen, in rates of reimbursement or additional training or technical assistance. Those kinds of things. Those relationships continue today to be critical.

On the local level, getting out, getting to meet various elected officials, people associated with fraternal organizations, chambers of commerce, people who have at some level an interest in transportation — even though they may not realize that they're interested in transportation, they do realize the benefit that they get from a transportation system.

**CT:** *Is York County CAC, under your tutelage, guided by a particular philosophy?*

**Connie:** As I was interviewing someone this morning as a prospective employee, one of the things I said was that we're a strong believer here in the team approach to problem solving. People need to be able to be flexible. We actually have a phrase for it — we call it the Gumby Principle. It's the underpinning of how we operate here because there's always something that happens that challenges your normal way of doing business. Because we work with

people, and people are not square pegs. Every situation demands our ability to be flexible and to think how we might be able to help one person get where they need to go. We talk about the jigsaw puzzle that we have, and how to fit all the pieces together. A person with a certain transport need who lives in a certain place needs to get to a different place, has a funding stream that will only allow us to do transportation by a certain mode, and how do we get them there if that mode is not available. Or if they don't have a funding source that would typically cover their trip, how do we make it happen.

So, team approach, flexibility and the other thing that I remind staff of on a regular basis is that we do make a difference. That despite all of the challenges we face daily — people who we can't serve or people who want something more than what we can provide — for every situation like that that we have to deal with, there are dozens of people who we have been able to serve, who appreciate what it is we do for them. And we really help to make a difference for them in their lives.

**CT:** *For somebody just starting out in the community transportation field, do you have some words of wisdom?*

**Connie:** Always maintain a sense of humor. Reach out to your counterparts in your region, in your state, and also to national groups like CTAA, in particular, so that you get the benefit of others' experience, and you don't have to start from square one. You can be much more affective and bring a lot more to the table if you're willing to listen to what other people have done. and learn from them rather than having a fixed picture in your mind of how you want things to be.

**CT:** *You were a founding force when CTAA was formed, and you've continued to help the Association evolve. Why is that involvement important to you?*

**Connie:** CTAA to me is the best thing since sliced bread. When the

original group of us formed NASTA, and I was one of the original board members, we started looking at how we needed to enhance that organization. That came to involve combining an existing professional entity — Rural America — which had the staffing and the expertise and the motivation — the same motivation we had, which was wanting to see something happen in Washington that would reflect what we were seeing out in the field. When that came together, when CTAA was born in 1989 from the combining of those two distinct groups, I felt this sense of joy that has not diminished. In fact, one of the things that I am most proud of in my career is my involvement and whatever part I played in the success of CTAA as a national association. There are so many things that are taken for granted right now, probably by me as well as others, that never would have existed without the formation of a national association like CTAA. I can tick off a couple of things: CT Magazine and the volumes of information that that gets out to people; the annual EXPO and the opportunity to have both the workshops and the tradeshow, and all of the information that that provides to people, as well as the incredible networking opportunities — annually — focused on these needs. Then on the advocacy side, all of the work that CTAA has been able to do to enhance training. RTAP! How RTAP came to be! "Sure, RTAP. Yeah, Yeah. That's fine." Well, RTAP wasn't around. It didn't exist. And it's one of those things that we should be taking some credit for. The advocacy in terms of funding, the legislative initiatives, the ... oh, my goodness, I could go on. CTAA to me is something that has grown beyond my best dreams. It feels so good to me to see the caliber of people that are staffing the association, and the quality of the products and services that are provided by the association. I feel like one of those proud parents or grandparents. You know, after a while you say, sure, sure, sure, Tired of hearing it. But a grandparent never gets tired of saying it!

**CT:** *In 2000, you were awarded the Dr. Aaron E. Henry Leadership Award. What did such an achievement mean to you?*

**Connie:** It's something that I take a lot of pride in. When I think of the individuals who really had an impact on me, Aaron Henry was one of them. Absolutely incredible individual who I had the pleasure of serving on the new CTAA board with. He had been on the board of Rural America, and when the two organizations combined, he came on to that board, as I did. And I was, well, let's say I was in awe of him. He was an individual who had national recognition for his incredible role in the Civil Rights Movement. Someone who always put that goal ahead of everything else — his own personal needs, the business that he ran. It was critical to him, and yet he saw the need to move in the direction of a major change for the Rural America organization, moving it into this focus on transportation. So he was open to new things, but he still held very dear to his heart the concern for people. He was well-known in those board meetings — and I was the initial president of CTAA, which was a difficult position for me to start, looking up at all of these illustrious people sitting around the table — but he would make a comment as we were getting bogged down in discussions about the intricacies of how things might work and what kind of policies the organization should have, and he said that we needed to “Beware of the paralysis of analysis.” And I remember him saying that more than once. It's a reminder that I still keep close in my thinking about how we're moving forward, how we're continuing to make progress, whether it's on the local level, the state or the national level. If you get too bogged down in the details, in analyzing what this means, what that means, then you lose the momentum that's critical to really make a difference and change things.

**CT:** *What lies ahead for public and community transportation, and how are you steering York County CAC?*



*Connie (l.) with Maine State Senator Tom Allen (c.) and Claudette Dupee of the YCCAC Board.*

**Connie:** I would just reiterate that from my perspective things have come so far in the last 25 years. It's amazing to me to see the changes, to see the caliber of people that are involved in the field, that are attracted to the field of community transportation. Moving forward, I think we just need to continually remind ourselves that standing still is not good enough. Because the world keeps moving. Each of us needs to look for what we can do differently tomorrow. What we can do that will have a positive impact on the people that we're trying to serve.

**CT:** *Is there a particular personal story since you've been at York County CAC that really sticks with you, that you return to in your mind as you work to provide service.*

**Connie:** I'm not sure I could come up with one. I could come up with about a dozen.

Every year there's a different family story that catches my attention. I do think about one family, a family that received service on our Job Access vehicles, on the WAVE. It was a situation — mother, father, two sons. One family car. The dad was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and one in which he was in considerable pain, and couldn't be left alone. Both of the sons moved back home to help. The mother and the two sons found jobs that would allow one of them to be home at all times of the day.

However, they couldn't accomplish that with one car. And they couldn't afford more than one car. And when our WAVE service started, and they found out about it, the mom came in to pay for the monthly pass for one of her sons, so that he could get to a higher paying job that he would never have been able to get to because there wouldn't have been enough time if he had to wait at home until his mom came home with the car. We were able to connect him with that job, and take that small piece of pressure off the family. And the mom actually came in and gave me a hug, and said, “You don't have any idea what this means to my family, but I want you to know. We couldn't have done it without you.” And for that they were very grateful.

Those kinds of stories — we hear them ALL THE TIME. And we just kind of get teary, and we thank them for letting us know. And then we go on to the next disaster that we're dealing with! But it is good to remind ourselves, and that's why I try to get that message to all of the people who are dealing with the day-to-day hassles. The reality is when you're providing a rural transportation service, every day has got something that blows up. A vehicle breaks down or it starts snowing or freezing rain here in Maine, or somebody isn't where they said they would be when you're there to pick them up. And all of the many, many things that we deal with. But in the end, it's all worth it. 🚗