

Florida's Transportation Disadvantaged Commission: A Model for Changing Times

With a long history of coordination efforts reaching back some 20 years, Florida's Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged is making great headway in helping to coordinate human service transportation and providing models of service delivery.

by Barbara Rasin Price

When Florida's human service agencies began to tackle the issue of coordination in the mid 1970s, little did they know that their efforts would one day result in a Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged (CTD) and more than \$157 million in coordinated transportation funds. Last year the collaborative funding ensured 28 million transportation trips to more than a half million different Floridians, or about 10 percent of the state's estimated transportation disadvantaged population.

That's about \$315 a year per person for transportation that keeps individuals independent, often working and paying taxes. Florida, where the annual cost of a nursing home is about \$36,000, has the third largest population of elderly people in the country.

"For every dollar we spend on transportation," says CTD Commission Executive Director Jo Ann Hutchinson, "Eight dollars are estimated to be returned to the state."

In Florida, coordination means arranging for the provision of cost-effective, non-duplicative transportation to people with disabilities, the elderly, low-income individuals and children-at-risk. The trips that the Commission sponsors are referred to as non-sponsored trips, meaning those that are not sponsored by another agency such as the Agency for Health Care Administration or the Department of Elder Affairs.

The problem, according to Hutchinson, is that not everybody's a client of a program. Add to that the fact that sometimes an agency will pay for one needed service but not another. For example, Medicaid can be used to pay for a trip to the doctor, but not for a trip to the pharmacy. That's how people can fall through the cracks.

In the Commission's 1995 Annual Performance Report, the three largest categories of trip purpose are medical, education/training and work trips.

"Work trips are increasing, and that's good for welfare reform," says Hutchinson. "People are wanting to go to work and that's what we want them to do. But without child care and transportation, welfare reform will not work."

Structure of the Commission

An independent agency located within the State Department of Transportation, the Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged is overseen by 17 members, six of whom are appointed by the Governor. Appointees with term limits represent children, the elderly, people with disabilities, citizen advocates and community transportation coordinators and private operators. Constant members are representatives of the Association for Community Action and the Florida Transit Association and seven state Secretaries or their designees.

A staff of 12, headed by the executive director, is responsible for administration of the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund. In addition, staff members provide training and technical assistance to boards, coordinators, transportation providers, purchasers and consumers.

While an important function of the Commission is accountability, it can only be accountable for those providers within the coordinated system. For example, In Palm Beach County last year, there were more than 40 indictments in a \$12.5 million Medicaid fraud case, which is still being investigated. None of the private providers involved were part of the coordinated system.

Involvement at Many Levels

This seemingly complex structure ensures grass roots involvement and investment. The Commission contracts with either the Metropolitan Planning Organization or a designated planning agency which, in turn, appoints a local coordinating board and recommends a community transportation coordinator (CTC). The Commission then contracts with the CTC. With members appointed by the planning agency, each coordinating board serves as an advisory body in its service area. To ensure local interest and investment, the chair must be an elected official.

CTCs range from nonprofit aging and retarded citizens' agencies to transit authorities or for-profit management companies. A CTC can actually provide the services, contract for services or broker services.

All of Florida's 67 counties -- half urban, half rural -- have a local coordinator. They contract with 342 transportation operators using a collective fleet of nearly 5,000 vehicles and employing 6,754 people.

Funding

Last year the Commission's revenue totaled nearly \$22 million. Two-thirds of this revenue came from a \$1.50 license tag fee with the rest from the Florida Department of Transportation's Transit Block Grant and temporary disabled parking fees. With less than three percent of total funding going for administration of programs, the rest is made available to local CTCs to pay for trips, equipment and planning. Of the \$157 million available in 1995 for coordinated transportation disadvantaged trips, Medicaid made up the largest share. The chart below shows funding sources by percent of total contributed.

Breakdown of Total Funding by Agency and Percent

- Agency for Health Care Administration (Medicaid) 42.7
- Local (government and non-government) 29.2
- Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged 11.4
- Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services 5.0
- Department of Transportation 4.9
- Department of Elder Affairs 3.8
- Other: Department of Community Affairs, ACTION Program, Departments of Labor and Employment Security, Department of Education, other federal programs 3.0

Service Delivery

The 28 million trips last year reported by local coordinators include trips by fixed route, paratransit and school bus. Fixed-route trips increased by 41 percent from the previous year. Much of this increase is due to a highly successful Medicaid bus pass program (for more on Medicaid Metropass, see page 44), particularly in Dade County, where the Metro-Dade Transit Agency serves as the coordinator.

In 1995, the average cost of a passenger trip (all modes) for the Commission was \$5.27, compared with \$8.79 for paratransit trips only. Operating expense per passenger trip ranged from a low of \$2.30 to a high of \$28.83. The high represents a very rural area, where most trips are to medical facilities outside the providers' service area. Since 1991, the operating expense per passenger trip has decreased by 31 percent while the number of trips has increased by 271 percent.

An Urban Coordinator

COMSIS Mobility Services, Inc. is a coordinator and/or broker in seven areas in the state and has just become the broker for Leon County, an urban area with a population of more than 200,000. Louis Holman, COMSIS' General Manager for Leon County says, "Transit and coordination, it's a great marriage!" He believes that, particularly for the larger systems, the Commission's non-sponsored trips have really helped in implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Through a request for qualifications process, Holman selects transportation providers. He now contracts with five operators, including two minority firms. As the broker, COMSIS' responsibility includes: agreements with carriers, system safety, planning, taking calls, determining eligibility and scheduling trips.

Andrew DeCandis, COMSIS' Vice President and Southeastern Regional Manager, is a former Medicaid administrator and transit operator from Pennsylvania. He believes that brokerages promote accountability. The broker, he claims, has no interest in who gets the service, and most of the carriers really like it. DeCandis cautions, however, that brokerages work best if you're providing at least 700 trips a day.

COMSIS also serves as the Community Transportation Coordinator (CTC) and broker in Duval County, where it contracts with six private for-profit operators and one nonprofit. Ed Outler of Buggs Transportation is one of those contractors.

"When it wasn't a coordinated system there was waste, without a doubt," Outler says. When COMSIS came in, he adds, they really made it work. A minority firm, Buggs Transportation has grown from one to 28 vehicles in recent years.

A Rural Coordinator

In rural Wakulla County the CTC is a provider and partial broker. Wakulla County Transportation, a private nonprofit, contracts with two for-profit operators to provide some service. As many as one-third of the county's 16,000 residents are estimated to be transportation disadvantaged.

The system was recently computerized, and Transportation Coordinator Nell Rozar says, "I was scared to death of computers. Now I couldn't live without them."

Wakulla is the fastest growing rural county in the state, yet it still has 700 miles of unpaved roads. And despite its growth, funding to the county through the Older Americans Act is diminishing -- it took a 17 percent hit for FY '95.

Rozar says the agency has looked at all kinds of ways to cut costs. And they've been successful, increasing the number of transportation disadvantaged served by 50 percent and decreasing their operating expenses per vehicle mile and per passenger trip by 13 percent and 12 percent, respectively, in FY '95. They try many ways to keep up with demand.

"You have to kinda educate your people, you multi-load everybody. Sometimes we tell em, pack a lunch; it's going to be a long day," says Rozar.