

Job Access Programs are More than Just Turning Keys in the Ignition

"The transportation element of a job access strategy must also focus on the supply of routes and schedules."

by Mark Alan Hughes

In May 1995, the GAO issued a study of employment outcomes for participants in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, the generation of work-oriented welfare reform that immediately preceded today's TANF program. In a national survey, county welfare administrators were asked to identify the reasons job-ready participants do not get jobs.

Administrators identified five reasons as particularly important. One of the top barriers — in fact the second most frequently cited major reason for not becoming employed — was the lack of transportation to jobs. Yet transportation was never discussed as a serious category of program support, even in the presence of the report's own survey results!

My, how times have changed. From this year's State of the Union Address to the \$600 million proposal in the Clinton Administration's proposed transportation bill, transportation assistance for those moving from welfare to work has taken on enormous rhetorical and programmatic momentum.

For the past few years, I've played a minor role in getting job access on the antipoverty agenda. But at the risk of spinning a few heads, I'd like to offer four cautions about the current transportation bandwagon.

First, it is important to remember that the antipoverty programs referred to as reverse commuting and worker mobility are about job access, not just transportation. Thinking about transportation as a distinct program support misses the connection between job placement and job transportation. A true job access strategy combines a trip with a destination. Either one without the other is useless.

Second, it is unlikely that the transportation element of a job access strategy can simply be modeled on other subsidies, like child care assistance or housing assistance. In these two cases, allowances or vouchers can increase family purchasing power for child care and housing and help match them to the supply of individual units of child care and housing.

But unless we're talking about increasing the ability of low-income workers to purchase a car, then a transportation subsidy alone is unlikely to create the new

service needed to access suburban jobs from inner city neighborhoods. The transportation element of a job access strategy must also focus on the supply of routes and schedules.

Third, the job access strategy was conceived as a broad antipoverty strategy that would connect inner-city residents to opportunities by reducing barriers and improving metropolitan labor market performance. It was not designed as a welfare to work initiative. There seems to be growing recognition that there won't be enough jobs around the corner for welfare recipients, and that many will have to look over the suburban horizon.

Fourth and finally, even if the preceding concerns were fully addressed, it is important to remember that job access strategies are not self-implementing and require sustained collaboration. This is the clearest lesson from our two years of planning Bridges to Work in five metropolitan areas. One reason we have the job access problems we do is that neither the problem nor the solution resides within any one categorical programming or funding area. The strategy necessarily involves suburban employers, community organizers, placement intermediaries, transportation providers and human service providers.

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