

# Giving People the Tools

Senator Carol Moseley-Braun (D-III.) took the lead on welfare-to-work transportation last summer as she sponsored the Access to Jobs ammendment in the Senate Banking Committee which passed in September (see Sept./Oct. Community Transportation , p. 13). The ammendment adds \$100 million to ISTEAs reauthorization for welfare transportation and includes innovative coordination and eligibility language.

Community Transportation Editor Scott Bogren had the opportunity to speak with the Senator in December.

**Q:** Illinois has always been a leader in transportation, both in the Chicago area and in rural areas and small towns. Please share your views on the vital role public and community transportation plays throughout the state.

**A:** You are right that Illinois has always been a leader in transportation. Illinois' economy developed around transportation, and Illinois is now the crossroads of the nation's freight and passenger traffic. Illinois' highways bear the largest share of any state of our nation's commerce. Chicago is the freight and passenger rail hub of the nation. Chicago's O'Hare International Airport is the world's busiest airport. Our ports are among the busiest in the nation. We have what is arguably the most extensive transportation system in the nation.

Mass transit has always been an important part of our transportation network. The Chicago Transit Authority operates the nation's second largest transit system, and METRA operates the country's second largest commuter rail system. We have a dozen or so other systems of some size, and countless other community transit providers who shuttle people to and from work, doctor's appointments and other events all over the state.

Public transportation helps to make Chicago and other cities nice places to live. Can you imagine what life would be like in Chicago if there were no mass transit? Traffic would increase by at least 20 percent. While the statistics are not so dramatic in other communities, public transportation really adds to the quality of life in any number of small and medium-sized communities across Illinois. I really believe that transit is indispensable.

**Q:** Transportation cuts across many issues. For virtually every American, effective mobility is necessary in maintaining any quality of life. Do you see public and community transportation bridging the racial gap that exists in many areas of this country? Or does it exacerbate the problem?

**A :**To the extent that public and community transportation increases the mobility of minorities, it helps them get to places they might otherwise not be able to go. Improving mobility helps everyone get to jobs and activities in a wider area, which can help bring people closer together.

**Q:** Why did you take the leadership on the Access to Jobs Amendment?

**A:** I feel very strongly that it is the responsibility of government to give people the tools they need to improve their lot. We try to provide everyone with a quality education because we believe that with an education, anyone can make the most of their talents and skills and become contributing members of our society.

In the same vein, it is important that we provide the support necessary to give low-income individuals the opportunity to make the most of their talents and skills. That means we need to give them transitional health care benefits, because the entry-level jobs through which they often enter the workforce do not typically offer benefits. We need to provide transitional child care assistance, because child care is expensive, and without it many single parents and low-wage earners cannot keep steady jobs. We need to provide job training opportunities to people who need additional skills in order to find jobs. Finally, we need to ensure that everyone who wants to work can get to work — literally.

Too often, in communities with high concentrations of low-income individuals who do not own cars, there is no public transportation. Ninety-four percent of welfare recipients do not own cars, so they are utterly dependent on public transit to get to the jobs they seek. This problem exists in inner cities and rural areas alike. The proposal I offered will help to bridge the gap that exists in the availability of transit services. It has to be a part of our overall strategy to provide people with the supports they need to work their way off of welfare or out of poverty.

**Q:** The passing of the amendment was seen as an upset. Why do you think it passed and who helped support it? Also, do you see any future challenges to the amendment?

**A:** The short answer to your question is that it passed because it is a good idea. The longer answer is that I reached out to a few of my Republican colleagues who I thought would be supportive, and they were. All of the Democrats were supporters from day one, so I just needed to find a few Republicans who thought it was a good idea. I spoke with Senator Bennett (R-UT) before the committee markup. I think he was really the catalyst who made it possible to pass the amendment. The Chairman of the committee, of course, Senator D'Amato (R-NY), was always supportive, and Senator Enzi (R-WY) was also helpful. The amendment ultimately passed the committee on a vote of 11 to 7.

I have heard rumors that someone may try to strike the provision when the bill comes to the full Senate, but I think we would have the votes to win. Also, I think the bigger fight could be in the House-Senate conference committee, when the size and scope of the program will ultimately be decided.

**Q:** How do you feel about the fact that welfare recipients have been “on the clock” — in terms of time limits on benefits — for a number of months now, yet direct federal transit assistance is still at least a year away?

**A:** I’ll be quite frank with you: I thought the so-called welfare reform bill the Congress passed was an awful piece of legislation. There was no question that our welfare system was ailing, that we could have made it more efficient and effective. Instead, we killed it. It was a terribly short-sighted and cynical law that requires everyone to go to work but does not provide them with the tools to do so — the child care, health care, job training or transportation they need to get to the low-wage jobs for which they are qualified.

Welfare recipients and low-income individuals often live where there are no jobs. Two-thirds of all new jobs are created in the suburbs, yet three-quarters of welfare recipients live in inner cities or rural areas. My proposal attempts to connect the people with the jobs. People cannot move from welfare to work if the people on welfare can’t get to the work. I just hope Congress approves this access to jobs proposal and funds it quickly, because as you said, the clock is ticking.

**Q:** Being from the Chicago area, you obviously have urban roots. Yet the amendment supports welfare-to-work transportation in rural areas as well. Why?

**A:** When I became a Senator, I took on a responsibility of solving problems from a national perspective. The inability of welfare recipients and low-income individuals to get to jobs is not a Chicago problem or a big city problem. It is a national problem affecting people in every size community. Forty-four million Americans live in areas with no public transit of any kind. In many small towns and rural areas where transit is present, it does not operate at night or on weekends, times when many low-wage or entry-level jobs are performed.

Historically, job creation has been focused in cities and close-in suburbs. Two-thirds of all jobs in America are in only 163 counties. Our transportation and transit systems are set up to shuttle people to and from these areas. But since 1990, only one-fifth of all net job creation has been in these same counties. That means that many of our transit infrastructures are not set up to get people to four-fifths of the new jobs that are being created. People are more dependent on their cars now to get to these jobs, but if you do not have enough income to buy a car, you can end up in a sort of Catch-22. You can’t get to a job because you don’t own a car, but you can’t buy a car unless you have a job.

**Q:** What is your prognosis on ISTEA reauthorization? What is your best guess as to when we'll have a new law?

**A:** The Senate is scheduled to take up ISTEA reauthorization in late January. It is the first item on the agenda when we come back from recess. I expect there will be a healthy debate on a variety of issues ranging from attempts to dismantle federal affirmative action and labor protection laws to formula battles over highway and mass transit funding. The House, on the other hand, is not scheduled to take up their ISTEA bill until next summer, which means — wait a minute while I rub my crystal ball — that we probably will not have a new ISTEA law until late summer, 1998.

**Q:** Currently, the Medicare program only pays for emergency transportation, generally ambulances. There have been numerous efforts to control Medicare costs. Doesn't it stand to reason that community and public transportation operators, through regular check-up trips, could significantly lower Medicare expenses? What are your thoughts?

**A:** One of the things that we tried to do in my amendment and in the Banking Committee's transit bill is improve the coordination of transportation services. Medicare and Medicaid pay for certain health-related transportation costs. The Department of Housing and Urban Development and Department of Transportation have separate, small pilot programs that have tested some job access concepts. (As a matter of fact, we have a very successful model in Chicago, funded under this program, called the Suburban Job Links program.) Better coordination of these programs by state and local planning officials should help make transit more efficient.

Medicare has some real long-term funding issues that have to do more with the meteoric rise in health care costs than with the cost of transportation. Whether there is enough friction in the Medicare transit process now to see big savings from improved coordination and access to community transit is something we will have to watch for after we've passed this bill.