

## **Inclusive Coordinated Transportation Planning**

### AAA 1-B

#### **Goals and Objectives**

The Mobility Outreach Project, led by the Area Agency on Aging 1-B in Southfield, Michigan, and the Regional Elder Mobility Alliance (REMA) launched an education, awareness and engagement campaign in hopes of garnering support for legislation to fund a coordinated regional transportation system. Southeast Michigan has three public transit providers (DDOT, SMART, and AAATA). As it stands, there is no regional, coordinated transportation system to assure seniors and people with disabilities can get to the services they need. The current providers do not cross county lines (except for a few fixed routes), and in Oakland county, some communities have “opted out” of the SMART system. AAA 1-B project activities educated participants on current and future transportation plans and empowered them to advocate for their needs and wants within the framework of an emerging regional transportation system. The ultimate goal of the AAA 1-B work is for its advocacy efforts, through the engagement of people with disabilities and older adults, to lead to improvements in transportation service delivery.

National data indicates that older adults outlive their ability to drive by 7-10 years, and thus need transportation options. However, older adults are resistant to considering alternate transportation options for many reasons including; loss of independence, need affordable options that cross county lines, need evening, weekend service or door-through-door service, and safety concerns. Under the newly formed Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), municipalities will not have the option to opt out of public transit, and it hopes to build more transit options for an overall seamless integration of metropolitan transit services.

#### **Project Management**

The AAA 1-B has historically reached out to older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers in its management plans and activities. The organization’s management structure, including a director and project coordinator, reflect the population of older adults that is the focus of grant activities. The project team reported regular communications with REMA partners, Harriet Tubman Center, AAA 1-B management, grant liaison and seniors facilitated project activities. The AAA 1-B is trusted by older adults and provides continuous outreach to identify community needs that may influence project activities.

When questioned, AAA 1-B project team was surprised that although many of the older adults they talked to understood the need for and supported transportation in general, few were willing to actively do something about it. This factor influenced an important change in the project’s plans. Originally, the AAA 1-B recommended using a speaker’s bureau to educate and inform audiences about coordinated transportation systems. However, when the team was not able to garner the support of older adults and people with disabilities to the degree expected,

alternatives to a speaker's bureau were put into place, including a peer-to-peer travel training program. These officials also were surprised by the length of time that it took to get the oft-proposed RTA up and running. Although the RTA start up was delayed, the project team continued to focus on activities such as outreach events to education public on transit issues and would provide information to the RTA.

Internally, the AAA 1-B used a variety of technology to support its work. The project team monitors web hits through *Google Analytics* and uses call center software to track the demographics and the nature of those individuals who call the organization. For external communications and outreach, project leaders found outreach events particularly useful in garnering older adults' support and interest. The project team also purchased radio advertisements as a means of outreach.

The AAA 1-B attributed its ability to engage external audiences to its long-standing relationship in the community, utilizing the REMA coalition partner's relationships as well, including the local Center for Independent living. The organization has extensive existing audiences through its other programs serving older adults. The project's ability to leverage other projects and resources, such as their Senior Advocacy Network and local senior centers, has proven helpful in supporting project activities such as distributing the program's rack cards, 4x9 double sided cards with information about REMA and transit, including website address and phone number.

In recognizing the need to broaden its outreach, the AAA 1-B developed relationships with community organizations that serve diverse populations including people with disabilities, individuals who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, the Harriet Tubman Center, the Metro Coalition of Congregations, and other faith-based groups who had developed a transportation taskforce enabled the project to focus on the needs of the community, including an emphasis on transportation and mobility. Project Manager and Project Coordinator were asked to join their leadership team, to plan and hold a large scale outreach event - *Build Transit - Build Business Summit*. The event highlighted the importance of transportation to economic prosperity and afforded AAA 1-B the opportunity to build partnerships with organizations that support its activities regarding inclusive coordinated transportation planning, such as local hospitals, businesses, universities, and the Public Senior Housing Administration, ecology and economic groups Michael Ford, CEO of the RTA, RTA Board members, university leaders and faith leaders spoke at the event as well as Jason Jordan from the Center for Transportation Excellence.

The bulk of the AAA 1-B project's fiscal resources support its outreach and marketing activities, with additional resources allocated to labor for staff, including the project manager and coordinator. The project provides many of its own resources including the time of their CEO and resources for management, printing, and dissemination. Officials suggested that the project work has benefited from this in-kind support, and suggested that taking advantage of other funding opportunities to further its work about inclusive coordinated transportation planning is important. For instance, because of its networking and outreach on the project, the AAA 1-B received an \$8,000 award from the Michigan Fitness Foundation (originating from the Kresge

Foundation and provided through the Metropolitan Planning Organization). Through this grant, six groups — including AAA 1-B — were awarded funds to target access to core services for seniors, people with disabilities and others. The grant entailed the AAA 1-B working closely with the CIL and other community organizations to procure a vehicle to take participants to the Detroit Institute of Arts and a county metro park for a picnic. These activities allowed AAA 1-B to conduct more direct interviews with the constituents which directly impacts their ACL project. The results of these events have been presented to the MPO, who will in turn, share with the RTA.

### **Inclusive Planning**

Older adults and people with disabilities are involved in all AAA 1-B project activities, including developing branding and marketing materials, suggesting targeted marketing strategies, participating on the RTA's Citizen's Advisory Committee/Senior/ADA Subcommittee, attending outreach events, participating in electronic and phone communications with external audiences, and developing the peer-to-peer travel training program. To ensure representation of seniors and PWD on the CAC, AAA1-B project leaders facilitated 17 applications and 11 of those were chosen to sit on the Committee. Many of these stakeholders have remained active in these forums, including the CAC Committee, because of their interest and passion. The personal touch to assure that these volunteers remain active was also noted as an important contributor to engagement. The participation in the CAC committee shows that the group remains committed to this work and continues to inform not only the coordination processes implemented by the RTA, but, is important to ICT activities.

The AAA 1-B provides services to older adults and people with disabilities. To strengthen external partnerships, project staff reached out to the senior centers and the CIL through its advocacy activities. As described above, the AAA 1-B used a personal touch to engage various stakeholders – ensuring that messages are understandable by broad audiences and having older adults and people with disabilities send the message.

Relationships with the Harriet Tubman Center facilitated the participation of low-income individuals. These relationships enabled project staff to work more closely with organizations in Detroit. To assure that non-English speakers were engaged, the AAA 1-B worked closely with another organization, the Chaldean American Ladies of Charity, to translate materials, which affirmed the importance of partnerships with non-traditional organizations.

The most successful strategy that the project discovered for engaging older adults and people with disabilities was its relationship with the Harriet Tubman Center and the events and forums that this relationship provided. Project officials described the *Build Transit-Build Business* summit at Ford Field, the home of the Detroit Lions, at which 300 people attended. The new CEO of the RTA was active in the forum, which provided AAA1-B an opportunity to share information about the project, and about the importance of the participation of people with disabilities and older adults in coordinated transportation planning. By then, Michael Ford, had been hired as the CEO of the RTA, and the summit provided a comprehensive way to learn

about the issues and people associated with the topic of inclusive coordinated transportation planning. Data, such as the fact that approximately 33 percent of people in the Detroit metro area don't own a car or don't drive, provided even more impetus to focus on coordinated planning. Sign language interpreters were utilized during the event providing an opportunity for hearing impaired individuals to participate.

When asked about how these activities and the tenets of sustainable, inclusive coordinated transportation planning, AAA 1-B officials suggested the CAC, with its goal of informing the newly created RTA, will be vital to sustaining the project's objective. With the insight of the CAC, the RTA is conducting listening tours to hear about participants' needs and wants. Project activities such as the peer-to-peer travel training program, will be embedded in the community and will continue to provide an educational forum to participants. The project's activities, combined with the participation of the CAC, have raised awareness about the important topic of inclusive coordinated transportation planning. The new RTA leadership is committed to inclusiveness as the system is developing, and seeks the input from the community and the AAA 1-B about particular issues affecting people with disabilities and older adults. The community has seen an increased focus on making public input meetings accessible, and on expanding access to transportation through innovations like uniform fare cards. Even local businesses are more aware of issues related to the Americans with Disabilities Act and are asking for resources regarding transit. These are topics that were not considered. These activities have created passion and interest – interest that is not likely to wane in the future.

### **Outcomes, Successes, and Challenges**

The biggest success described by the AAA 1-B program leadership was in pulling a diverse group of sectors together. They didn't think that the RTA would be as advanced as it is, especially related to the participation of people with disabilities and older adults in its planning. The project's support of the CAC's development and the Senior/ADA subcommittee was critical since it continues to provide tremendous insight to the RTA and others.

Project officials advised that any community seeking to increase inclusive coordinated transportation planning reach out to non-traditional organizations, such as those this project developed with the Harriet Tubman Center and the Metro Coalition of Congregations. These partnerships will likely yield positive benefits for years to come. The project team learned from the input of the community, and was flexible in their activities. And although unanimously the team expressed they have a long way to go, in some ways, they felt that their progress was more than what they expected, especially the responsiveness of the newly formed RTA. AAA 1-B leaders know that seniors and people with disabilities have powerful voices – they vote – and their voices can influence policy and practice. And although the prolonged RTA launch has been a challenge, the project team persevered, altering activities as needed, but, never forgetting the importance of community voices.

### **Lessons Learned**

The AAA1-B team learned the value of tapping into unconventional resources, including the Harriet Tubman Center and the Metro Coalition of Congregations. These partnerships brought unanticipated opportunities that contributed to the project's goals. The Project Director learned not to just focus on the obvious or typical resources. An additional learning suggested by project officials related to evaluation. The team learned that it is important to collect continuous feedback from stakeholders, including people with disabilities and older adults, rather than just collect feedback at particular time periods. This ongoing and sustained feedback is important to be able to make quick project and activity adjustments.

The AAA 1-B team understands that their work would not have been possible without the funding and support available through the Strengthening Inclusive Coordinated Transportation grant. The funding from ACL was a catalyst to put tangible activities in place to address this topic. The learning that has transpired has enabled the AAA 1-B to think about inclusive coordinated transportation and build in activities from the ground-up as new organizational projects are launched.