

Getting All Around the County

JCA Case Study

Goals and Objectives

The overarching goal of the Jewish Council on Aging's (JCA) *Getting All Around the County* project is to increase understanding of the transportation and mobility needs of older adults and people with disabilities within Montgomery County, Maryland. At the beginning of the project, emphasis was placed on engaging older people and people with disabilities through participation in focus groups and surveys and the formation of an Advisory Panel. The information gathered through these activities created a clearer picture of the county's transportation needs, identified service gaps and crystalized recommendations, such as the need to provide sensitivity training to bus drivers and address pedestrian safety issues in the county. The recommendations were prioritized and will soon be presented to county officials by the Advisory Panel members. The Advisory Panel has emerged as a voice for the community and is committed to ensuring inclusivity in all of the county's transportation activities.

A unique aspect of this project is the effort to raise the awareness and sensitivity of younger people to the mobility needs of older adults and people with disabilities. Originally conceived to facilitate conversations about mobility between students and the older people in their lives (e.g., grandparents/older relatives), JCA's intergenerational work evolved over time. Its current focus is to engage the artistic and technological skills of young people to develop information and build support for transportation that serves the needs of older and disabled adults.

Project Management

The focus of this project – to improve awareness and understanding of both transportation needs and transportation resources available to seniors and people with disabilities – resulted directly from previous work conducted under the auspices of the Montgomery County Council to identify gaps in the transportation system and the need for improvements. The project included several activities designed to explore how transportation is utilized and perceived by seniors and people with disabilities through focus groups, surveys and community meetings. Analysis of the collected data led to the identification of specific action steps for increasing public awareness of transportation options available to county residents. Specifically, this project focused on raising awareness of existing services, including: *Connect-A-Ride*, which provides free information and referral to help older adults and people with disabilities find transportation to medical services, grocery shopping, errands, social activities and other needs; *Call'N'Ride* which provides alternative taxicab services to low income seniors and people with

disabilities; and *Ride On*, the county public transportation bus system, which offer seniors and people with disabilities free or discounted rides.

An Advisory Panel, consisting of seniors, people with disabilities and including representatives of prominent stakeholder organizations such as The Arc, the Muslim Community, the Chinese American Senior Services Association, Independence Now and local “Villages” (voluntary community membership organizations that support aging in place through member supports, service referrals and opportunities for consumer engagement¹), has been involved, from the beginning, in planning activities and deciding priorities.

Project staff includes a project coordinator, consultants and management oversight. Approximately 70 percent of staffing costs were covered by the grant. Managing the work of the Advisory Panel — including planning and convening meetings, organizing and conducting focus groups and outreach events — has required about half of the project coordinator’s time.

An unexpected, though gratifying, result of the project has been the willingness of Advisory Panel members to do more work than expected in their original scope of responsibilities. Members took the initiative to spread the word about transportation options in the county to their neighbors, friends and professional contacts. Individual members’ standing in the community opened doors, broadened the project’s visibility and enhanced its legitimacy.

Arranging transportation for Advisory Panel members to attend meetings led to the identification of additional transportation challenges in the community. It was surprising to find that some Advisory Panel members were less knowledgeable than expected about the county’s transportation options; others had had bad experiences using one of the services and were reluctant to try again or were unable to arrange transportation on their own. Thus, planning for these meetings became a teachable moment, underscoring the need for education at all levels and reminding project staff that assumptions about participants’ knowledge may prove untrue.

The project deployed a variety of approaches for reaching seniors and people with disabilities. Surveys, focus groups, open community meetings, and question and answer sessions were held at senior centers and low-income housing sites. The project worked to reach non-English speaking audiences and other groups within the target audiences. For example, the *Transportation Options Tip Sheet* was translated into nine languages and focus groups were held in Spanish, Mandarin and Korean. One focus group was held with people with low vision. Transportation flyers were disseminated by Meals on Wheels volunteers to isolated and home-bound individuals.

¹ Andrew Scharlach, Ph.D, et al., “The ‘Village’ Model: A Consumer-Driven Approach for Aging in Place,” the Gerontological Advance Access (August 25, 2011), p. 1.

In addition to the organizations engaged via the Advisory Panel, home health agencies, rehabilitation providers, doctors' offices and the faith community were targeted to receive information. While more typical media outlets, such as the Senior Beacon newspaper, were used to encourage seniors and people with disabilities to participate in one or more outreach events sponsored by the project, the county Public Information Office's inclusion of transportation information in county residents' tax bills proved to be more effective, resulting in a spike in calls to *Connect-A-Ride*.

It took longer than anticipated to get the intergenerational aspect of the project off the ground. The timing of the first round of funding, launched in the spring of 2013, proved to be too late to engage high school students in meeting their service learning requirements (mandated in Montgomery County), since most students had already selected their projects for the year. An Advisory Panel member connected project staff to the local library media center which lent its space, staff expertise and equipment, and encouraged middle school students to participate in an art project to design posters promoting transportation for seniors and people with disabilities. The project also engaged a consultant with a background and training in social media to teach the younger students involved in the poster project how to use social media more effectively. The posters developed by the students became a traveling art show that visited county senior centers and other locations where seniors and people with disabilities gathered. Information about the transportation options and the project was also sent home with students as one avenue for reaching grandparents and possibly those who do not speak English. The latest intergenerational initiative – the *Save the Seat* campaign – has the full support of the Montgomery County Board of Education and will engage high school students to educate their peers to respect the seats reserved at the front of the bus for seniors and people with disabilities.

Inclusive Planning

Approximately 120 older adults and people with disabilities participated in the 11 focus groups, held in different parts of the county to reach as representative an audience as possible. The project convened focus groups where participants either lived or congregated, at senior centers, low-income housing sites, disabilities support groups and senior living facilities. Advisory Panel members suggested specific locations for focus groups and outreach events, and some members reached out to specific groups by administering surveys or convening/hosting focus groups. The panel member who represents the Chinese American Association conducted a focus group in Mandarin; another member held a focus group in the Muslim community, providing translation for participants. To reach the low-income population, Advisory Panel members from low-income housing conducted focus groups there.

The Advisory Panel's membership has been critical to the success of this project. When the project began, staff reached out to colleagues from county government and community based organizations to identify potential participants. Organizations such as the Commission on Persons with Disabilities, the Chinese American Senior Services Association (CASSA), The Arc of Montgomery County, and Independence Now were approached to ensure that the Advisory Panel was diverse and included a balance of older adults and people with disabilities as active participants. Some Advisory Panel members are seniors who also have disabilities, including older individuals who are wheelchair users, hearing impaired and blind. Other members include representatives of the county Department of Transportation, Villages and the Senior Business Center.

The Advisory Panel meets quarterly, but many of the members are engaged in the project between meetings. Seniors and people with disabilities who serve on the Panel guided every aspect of project implementation, evaluated the findings of the surveys and focus groups and developed priority recommendations to be forwarded to the county. Advisory Panel members were actual, involved players in planning and convening the focus groups, conducting surveys, reviewing print materials, engaging in outreach activities and disseminating surveys. Thanks to the Advisory Panel, this project has embarked on its latest initiative, the *Save the Seat* campaign. Members report that project staff listen to them and they feel valued, engaged and consider their involvement in this project to be meaningful.

A variety of communication channels facilitate engagement and ensure that all Advisory Panel members are kept informed, including face-to-face meetings, electronic communications, and telephone calls. The project even engaged a graphic artist to illustrate the discussion at a community meeting. A continuous feedback loop solicits input from Advisory Panel members. More importantly, the project has responded to the feedback and ideas generated by participants. One member of the Advisory Panel has a visual impairment, so the project uses the Speech Screen Reader function to share information with all Advisory Panel members prior to meetings. The project's *Facebook* page, created primarily for participants in the intergenerational project, did not prove to be an effective a means of communication, given the low number of hits on the page.

Throughout the project, Advisory Panel membership has been fluid, as some members decided to step down, while others rotated off the group to enable new members to come on. Some members suggested additional individuals and organizations that should be approached to participate. As the Advisory Panel evolves, the project is considering the possibility of further engagement of members who are willing to develop small projects or get more actively involved in outreach and communication activities.

Advisory Panel members' commitment resulted in the development of relationships with specific private stakeholder groups. These groups, including the Chinese American Senior Services Association, the Muslim Community, Independence Now and The Arc, enabling connections between the project and groups of seniors and persons with disabilities who might otherwise have been left out.

Stakeholder relationships have been critical to the project's overall success. Strong relationships were developed with county government, including the Departments of Transportation, Recreation (employs Senior Center Directors) and Health and Human Services (employs the Mobility Manager), the Public Information Office and Public Schools. The Public Information Office enthusiastically embraced the goals of the project and arranged to include information about transportation options in the annual taxpayer assessment mailing.

Inform, Educate, Gather and Outreach – A New Approach to Transportation Planning

The project has reinforced the value of including seniors and people with disabilities in planning. There is now more widespread recognition of the fact that only when there is a real partnership between decision-makers and participants can effective change be made. The active, engaged Advisory Panel is ready to participate in transportation planning and to help guide development of transportation services in the county, both now and in the future.

Public awareness activities such as focus groups, surveys and other outreach events have resulted in the identification of transportation issues and problems that need to be addressed. Importantly, these events have also underscored the value of accurate, easy to understand information to counter misinformation and unrealistic expectations about services. Without broad input, this project would not have reached the level of understanding and support it has now attained. The involvement of gatekeepers to transportation, including case managers and those who arrange rides for others, ensures that all potential riders have access to accurate and timely information about available transportation choices.

The project's experience with the county's Call 'n' Ride program illustrates both the value of listening and responding to riders and the reputation the project has for openness and fairness. When participants identified several concerns, including the limited number of wheelchair accessible vehicles, a meeting was held with transportation providers. The providers, in turn, had concerns of their own, especially the failure of some riders to show up for rides. The resulting tip sheet about the Call 'n' Ride program helps both riders and providers understand the challenges each face and ensure that all involved have a good experience.

The future of the Advisory Panel is assured in that once this project has ended, the panel will become the official advisory group for the county Mobility Management program, which is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services. This project is moving forward

to raise public awareness and increase participant involvement in the county's transportation system. Two issues in particular will be addressed: 1) Using the tip sheet to change perceptions about the taxi program, and 2) the *Save the Seat* Campaign.

Stakeholders

The project has engaged numerous stakeholder groups, which strengthened the community's commitment to the project's goals. Project staff has embraced opportunities to attend events and meetings convened by various groups throughout the county, and used those meetings to spread the word about the project and invite input. Members of the Advisory Panel, while they are older adults or people with disabilities, are often affiliated (e.g., as employees, retirees, volunteers) with specific organizations, including county government, advocacy organizations and community groups. Stakeholders have been as involved as they wanted to be in project activities, as illustrated below:

- The Mobility Manager helped find participants for the Advisory Panel and will assume administrative responsibility for the Panel at project end;
- The Department of Transportation helped to create the Call 'n' Ride tip sheet and is now a member of the Advisory Panel;
- The county Public Information Office created posters, bus panels, the Transportation Options Tip Sheet, and the flyer for property tax bills. In addition, they provided the services of their graphic designer to the project to create advertisements for two local newspapers;
- The County Library Department assisted with finding students to participate in the intergenerational project and provided access to media labs;
- The County Recreational Directors at the five county Senior Centers helped to organize focus groups and outreach efforts to complete pre and post surveys
- Many Advisory Panel members helped to find focus group and public awareness event locations; some also set up focus groups and events and chaired the meetings;
- Disability groups, including The Arc and Independence Now, became active partners in the project;
- Community organizations representing diverse populations, such as the Chinese American Association and the Muslim Community, became partners, and helped with convening focus groups and administering surveys. In some cases, they also provided translation of materials and presentations.
- County government (Transportation, Library, Recreation and Parks, Health and Human Services Departments; Office of Public Information) assured the project sustained success, a higher level of importance as perceived by participants and other stakeholders, and legitimacy.

Outcomes

This project was able to document the low level of awareness of transportation options among seniors and people with disabilities. Post-project surveys and the increase in Connect-A-Ride

requests indicate the success of a multi-faceted awareness effort in which the project engaged. While Montgomery County has a history of providing transportation services, the mobility challenges experienced by seniors and people with disabilities that emerged from this project's extensive outreach efforts paint a much clearer picture of what needs to be done. The project identified these challenges and helped generate specific recommendations for improvement. These recommendations are considered authentic by county decision-makers and other stakeholders because of the involvement of seniors and people with disabilities on the Advisory Panel and in the project's outreach activities. Advisory Panel members have now prioritized the recommendations into action steps and members are leading the effort to present them to the Montgomery County Council and other decision-makers. Several improvements have already been made: a Mobility Manager was hired in January 2014; Senior Shuttle options now include shopping trips for low-income housing residents; the Ride On (Montgomery County's public transit system) program has added trips to and from key locations in response to participants' requests (such as adding trips to senior centers later in the evening to accommodate social events) and provided an increased number of sensitivity training sessions for drivers and staff during the past two years; and awareness of Connect-A-Ride and other county transportation options has increased. Since pedestrian safety was identified by the Advisory Panel as a major concern for older adults and people with disabilities, the project is currently working with the county Pedestrian Safety Coordinator and traffic engineering, and the Mobility Manager is pursuing solutions through the county's Pedestrian, Bicycle and Traffic Safety Advisory Committee.

Stakeholder relationships, particularly with county government agencies, have lent support and encouragement throughout the project. For instance, since she came on board in 2014, the county's Mobility Manager has been an active participant in Advisory Panel meetings and outreach events. The key to success, however, is the Advisory Panel. The Panel's members – seniors and people with disabilities – are committed to working to improve transportation services and see themselves as an important part of the decision-making process going forward.

Challenges

An initial project challenge was getting people to attend the first two focus groups. This was overcome by holding 11 traveling focus groups in locations already frequented by seniors and people with disabilities and inviting older people and people with disabilities to help recruit participants for each group. Another early challenge was the difficulty some Advisory Panel members encountered with getting to the meetings. In response, the project made transportation arrangements for members with disabilities.

The primary challenge facing the intergenerational aspect of the project was student recruitment. This challenge was overcome, thanks to the involvement of a middle school

teacher and an Advisory Panel member's connection to a local library. While the original intent of using students to inform older family members about transportation options was dropped, the project was eventually able to connect with more than 100 students and developed the successful Traveling Art Show described above. Currently, the project has connected with the county Board of Education and Deputy Superintendent to create a public awareness campaign on priority seating on public transit.

Lessons Learned

Building the membership of the Advisory Panel took time and extensive stakeholder involvement. The reputation of the lead agency, Jewish Council for the Aging (JCA), and the earlier work on transportation led by the county in which JCA was involved laid the groundwork for the project's success. New partnerships with disability organizations and community organizations ensured a balance between seniors and people with disabilities and the diversity of Panel membership.

Project funding was pivotal to the project's success, providing time and resources to support dedicated staff and outreach activities (traveling focus groups, surveys, open meetings, the formation of the Advisory Panel). It took staff time and resources to create an atmosphere of collaboration and commitment among stakeholders and to put in place an engaged citizen group.

In retrospect, targeting the more urban parts of the county which have higher transportation needs would have been more appropriate than the area selected at the beginning of the project (Gaithersburg and Germantown) due to limited time and funding in round 1. However, following the initial round of funding, the project has been county-wide in its reach.

Based on JCA's experience, the following are the most critical components for coordinated transportation planning:

- Know your community and which organizations are most critical for moving issues forward;
- Build strong relationships with key stakeholders, especially the local government agencies;
- Plan and be open to attending as many outreach events as possible to learn from participants directly what their needs are.