

ONE CALL-ONE CLICK Profiles

LOWER SAVANNAH COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS, AIKEN, SC

BACKGROUND

The Lower Savannah Council of Governments' (LSCOG) one-call service originated as part of an initiative to coordinate human service agency transportation resources and develop public transportation in areas where none existed. The LSCOG began developing its coordinated services program 10 years ago and by 2006 was able to apply for the Mobility Services for All Americans demonstration grant. It is now a Transportation Management Coordination Center (TMCC).

This program provides several important examples:

- It is a program operated by a rural council of governments;
- The COG has merged its Aging and Disability Resource Center with its transportation, mobility management, and coordination functions;
- It has a strong human service agency perspective. (Initial coordination efforts were among human service agency transportation services); and
- LSCOG is not a direct transportation provider, but rather coordinates the services of several human service and public transit providers.

Rural council of governments is the lead agency.

Six-county region

Population = 300,000

Area = almost 4,000 sq. miles

Primary Cities:

Augusta, GA is located across the state line and a portion of the urban area is in Aiken County.

DEVELOPMENT OF ONE-CALL SERVICES

The region has six counties, and most of the population is rural. Aiken County is near Augusta, GA, so parts are within a large urban area. However, the rest of Aiken County and all the other five counties are quite rural. Poverty is high, and many jobs are located some distance from where people live. Five of the six counties also have a shortage of medical staff.

In 2000, the South Carolina DOT designated LSCOG as the state's first regional coordination lead agency. The COG received ongoing funding to coordinate and develop transportation services.

LSCOG formed a Regional Transportation Management Association (RTMA) that includes local elected officials and agencies providing human services or public transit services. Bringing these key stakeholders together facilitated planning, building trust, and beginning to think as a team by working together.

Assessments have been prepared as part of the Aging Services planning process and also in the TMCC planning process.

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VISION

The vision of developing a one-call service with a coordinated regional network of transportation providers was created early in the process. The vision recognized the importance of having elected officials and legislative support.

“In Lower Savannah RTMA, our transit system allows riders to travel seamlessly throughout our region, across our state and to neighboring states. Our infrastructure of compatible equipment, short client wait times, AVL systems, employer participation and regional computerized scheduling provides for designated transfer stations throughout the region and ties into rail and air travel. Information is accessible at a touch in transportation centers as well as related web sites. RMTA provides oversight and assists in securing sufficient funding for our operations. Our legislators understand and support our goal. We are the model for South Carolina.”

– Lower Savannah RTMA Partners, 2003

INFORMATION, REFERRAL, AND ASSISTANCE

Becoming an Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) helped LSCOG obtain part of the one-call service infrastructure. A Systems Transformation Grant from CMS provided early-planning funds and matching funds for the project. By providing reliable information and assistance, LSCOG earned a reputation as a credible source.

Establishing this foundation of information, referral, and assistance services also created opportunities to develop the management capacity to deliver quality services. The Alliance for Information and Referral Services (AIRS) taxonomy is the basis for the software that is used. Most staff members are AIRS-certified, and there is a focus on cross-training.

Sustainability is an important part of the ADRC structure and transportation coordination. For LSCOG, the key to sustainability is using benefits-management funds as a Federal Transit Administration match.

COORDINATION SUCCESSES

By working closely with stakeholders, LSCOG was able to build trust and achieve success, resulting in improved services and lower costs for services. This success and the teamwork that developed allowed the RTMA to tackle many difficult issues in the early years. Continued successes kept the partners at the table as they moved toward increasing coordination and realizing their vision.

Accomplishments include the following:

- Human service agencies in Allendale County agreed to open available seats on existing demand-response services to the general public. Agencies worked out a fair reimbursement rate, and riders pay \$0.20 per mile. LSCOG obtained additional funding to offset extra operating costs.

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- Discouraged a silo approach through policies. Agencies were no longer allowed to purchase vehicles for programs that were not coordinated.
- Procured services from transit providers to operate routes for programs for the developmentally disabled.

DESIGNATING A LEADER

After LSCOG (a planning and development agency) decided to “step up to the plate” and facilitate transportation coordination in the region, it was designated by SCDOT to take on this management role for the region.

One of the conclusions is that an organization needs to take the lead in facilitation and progress toward common goals. These tasks include setting up meetings, developing agendas, taking notes, tracking attendance, and disseminating information. Effective stakeholder meetings will result in “action steps,” and the lead agency must do the necessary follow-up to make sure those action steps are completed before the next scheduled meeting, or the process soon loses credibility and busy participants drop out. The lead agency should be seen as a neutral, or “honest broker” and must be prepared to devote an adequate amount of time and resources to the cooperative effort.

As an RTMA, LSCOG is not a direct provider of transportation services but does contract for the operation of a small, three-route public transit and ADA complementary paratransit system known as the Best Friend Express/Dial A Ride (Aiken County Transit). In 2009, LSCOG also began contracting for the operation of another two-county demand-response and fixed-route transit system serving Orangeburg and Calhoun counties.

South Carolina DOT designated LSCOG with regional planning and administration of the FTA Section 5310 funds for services to older adults and people with disabilities. LSCOG has gradually converted the use of those funds primarily for purchase of services rather than adding vehicles, in support of regional transit coordination.

FUNCTIONALITY AND TECHNOLOGY

The Transportation Management Coordination Center opened in August 2010. The new integrated center is known as the Lower Savannah Aging, Disability and Transportation Resource Center (ADTRC).

The Systems Engineering approach was used in the extensive planning process. All issues and concerns were identified and addressed. Effective teamwork, the result of years of coordination planning, was helpful in this process, as was the infrastructure and capacity the team developed for the ADRC.

LSCOG is using RouteMatch software and has worked closely with the vendor throughout the planning

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process.

Some of the key stakeholder needs, and actions to resolve them, are listed in the text box on the next page. This illustrates the process the stakeholders used and the planned functions for the system. Note that many of the items require management policies and protocols, and some require technology.

The design is a “hybrid,” using both a centralized TMCC/ADRC call center with all the functions available, and also smaller, decentralized and linked, “virtual” centers in local communities. LSCOG will leverage existing regional ITS technologies, linking these systems together and then expanding and/or updating the technology to create efficiency and improve transportation coordination services, as well as human service information and referral. The region’s ITS technologies include:

SCAccess: This database application is used by ADRC staff for providing human services programs and information and referral services. It is also used to track and report on services provided.

RouteMatch Software: This application database is used to provide, track and report on demand-response transportation services in the region. There is a transportation web portal, IVR integration, and a coordination module. Additionally, Computer-Aided Dispatch / Automatic Vehicle Locators will provide real-time tracking and schedule adherence for the fixed-route service in Aiken County.

Telephone System and IVR: The new telephone system enables the TMCC to serve as the one-call service for consumers to access transportation and human service information and referral services. This VoIP technology reports call center statistical data and has the capacity to connect among partner agencies in the region in the future. It also supports the Interactive Voice Response System in making outbound calls for appointment reminders the day before, same day (“Your bus will arrive in ten minutes.”) or weather emergency information. Customers will also have the option to cancel or confirm scheduled trips during the reminder calls. This is expected to enhance customer service and reduce costly no-shows for providers.

Human Service Information and Referral: Consumers contacting the ADTRC will be able to access information and get assistance with transportation and a vast array of human services topics, from an agent. The ADTRC will also provide 24/7 Internet access to I&R resources through its custom website.

Vehicle Communications: Automated Vehicle Location (AVL) and Mobile Data Computers (MDC) are installed in both the demand-response and fixed-route vehicles providing services for the TMCC. This allows the TMCC to view in “real time” the status and location of the vehicles, and dispatchers can communicate trip information electronically to the driver. The driver will use the devices installed in the vehicle to electronically submit reports of when trips are performed, cancelled at the scene, and when the consumer does not show up for the trip. This technology will allow opportunities for expanded same-day service and utilization of the closest, most appropriate, vehicle, thereby further increasing efficiency and decreasing costs.

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Medicaid Brokerage Integration: The Department of Human Services currently has contracted with a regional Medicaid broker. The TMCC will establish an electronic interface between the RouteMatch system and the Medicaid Broker's technology. This integration will provide the Medicaid Broker the ability to electronically transmit demand-response (next day) and standing-order (recurring) trips to the TMCC provider network.

STAKEHOLDER NEEDS AND RESOLUTION

Lack of consumer knowledge of transportation resources and how to access them.

- Provide a single regional telephone number that consumers can use to reach the TMCC center. Consumers may still reach their individual local transportation providers.

Limited areas of service.

- Uniform agreements among providers will help promote coordination across county boundaries and territories of services.

Limited hours of service.

- Provide additional 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week consumer access to transportation resources via the Internet.
- Provide customer service representatives and dispatchers to answer phones after hours, with the goal of providing 24-hour live customer service as demand increases and more services become available.

Limited service for some trip purposes or target groups

- Provide the opportunity for all consumers to access empty seats in the region.
- Address, with technology, the barriers that prohibit agencies from scheduling rides and services in a timely manner.
- Provide opportunities for next-day and same-day transportation.
- Provide access to all ADTRC services and resources, empowering consumers to access these services in a timely and efficient manner.

Inefficiencies in coordination trips throughout the region.

- Transportation providers requiring assistance for intra- or inter-regional transportation will have options to view, request and utilize each other's vehicles for transportation services and request individualized assistance from additional mobility managers.
- The proposed technology will permit the ability to view and reserve open seats for these types of trips.
- Uniform cost-sharing, billing, and reimbursement policies will be developed among providers.

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Less-than-optimal automation of data, ridership, scheduling and reporting.

- All agencies reserving, scheduling, and providing services agree to document and report their unfulfilled and unmet transit requests, knowing TMCC staff will research and identify solutions to mitigate unmet needs.

LESSONS LEARNED

- The importance of stakeholder involvement cannot be over-emphasized.
 - Sub-groups and committees were formed, creating opportunities to meet and work in between large stakeholder events.
 - Keeping up with changes in personnel assigned to attend meetings and bringing each “new” person up to speed is important.
- Having the LSCOG champion the project was another key to success. LSCOG worked at the local, regional, state, and federal levels to build support and obtain funding throughout this process.
- Everything takes longer than you think. The staff time required is extensive to arrive at a consensus among people from different agencies. Once a decision is made, protocols and processes need to be worked out. A simple example was the time it took to set up the auto-attendant feature on the new telephone system. A work team was formed to write the messages and identify “How does it feel to the consumer?” “How does it function for the consumer and for the organization?”
- Get started. No matter where you are in the process, anticipate that it will take steady work to coordinate services. LSCOG worked very hard to obtain resources, but also feels that it was fortunate. LSCOG advocates that organizations wanting to enhance coordination and/or start a one-call center, work with whatever resources they have to get in a position where there are more opportunities.
- State support has been very important. When work first began, agency staff did not realize how much potential this had since it was a relatively new and untested concept. As LSCOG strengthened its partnerships and built credibility, the South Carolina DOT and the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the state unit on aging began to understand the possibilities. These agencies provided policy and funding support that was critical to success.

This case study material was drawn from an interview with Lynnda Bassham and two documents that are available online. Please see the following reports:

Final Report, United We Ride/Mobility Services for All Americans Joint Demonstration Phase One – System Planning and Design, Report No. FTA-SC-26-7002-2008.1; Available online: www.fta.dot.gov/research

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Presentation at National Rural ITS Conference: “Linking to Resources and Rides – It’s All about Access”; Lynnda Bassham, Lower Savannah Council of Governments, Aiken, SC, August 26, 2009; Available online at http://www.nritsconference.org/downloads/Presentations09/HST_Bassham.pdf

For more information about the Lower Savannah Council of Governments’ (LSCOG) one-call service, contact Lynnda Bassham, Director, Human Services, Lower Savannah Council of Governments, lbassham@lscog.org, 803 649-7981.

The Community Transportation Association of America is a national non-profit, membership organization working to ensure that our nation’s residents have reliable, accessible, affordable, convenient and safe transportation services. The Association is involved in several projects to provide information and technical assistance to communities, transportation providers, human services agencies and other groups to increase mobility through effective public and community transportation.

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