

## **Leadership Project: Regionalized Scheduling for Rural Councils on Aging**

The Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA) provides fixed route and demand response transportation services in twenty-eight Massachusetts communities. In the towns where there is little or no fixed route transportation GATRA contracts with local Councils on Aging (COA) to provide demand response services. As with traditional contractors, GATRA provides the vehicles and the operating funds as well as technical support services to comply with regulations. However, they tend to operate much like a Council on Aging transportation service, offering more group centered trips and focusing primarily on their own senior population. For many years GATRA has sought to better utilize these vehicles using more efficient scheduling practices and has met with several of the communities to discuss a regionalized dispatch for their operations. This has not been received well in the past due to the fear of losing the one-on-one approach with their customers. Due to funding issues and an increase in demand GATRA now feels that it is important to revisit the regionalized approach to scheduling so that its vehicles can be more efficient.

The goal of my leadership project was to implement a regionalized scheduling system for four of our eastern communities and develop a model for implementation of the same system in other areas of our region. By regionally scheduling, communities should be able to share like trips in order to provide more efficient use of the vehicles. After meeting with the four initial communities in the fall it was decided we would start with the Towns of Kingston and Duxbury. These two Towns have some ADA level service and are already utilizing the scheduling operator, Professional Transit Management of Attleboro (PTM), to provide some of these trips that are outside the COA service hours/area. The other two communities, Pembroke and Marshfield, will be reevaluated after the initial project is underway.

GATRA and the COAs decided on a phased approach to the regionalized service, starting with PTM scheduling their daily van service. The COA dispatchers would continue to take the calls and put trips into a Google Drive file that is shared with PTM staff. This would allow all parties to get used to the process and to get a better sense of what trips could be shared. After the initial phase we would review the manifests to see where efficiencies in the daily scheduling had been achieved and if they were now able to provide more service which would be advertised to the public. The second phase will start with sharing group out of Town shopping trips, for example both COAs go to Walmart in Plymouth once every two weeks, each only carrying less than a van full. These trips will be combined to test the shared trip.

We held regular meetings that included the scheduler, GATRA, and personnel from both COAs. In these meetings we discussed current operations, procedures for the outsourced scheduling, and customer concerns. These meetings have proved to be very useful with getting everyone on board. By engaging the front line staff early in the process most have been taking ownership of the project and adding valuable ideas like sharing the group shopping trips to start.

I developed an online portal for each Town to share their trip information with the scheduler. A few test schedules were conducted in late April and it was decided to move forward with full

scheduling starting on May 6<sup>th</sup>. As of this report there have been very few issues and all trips have been completed.

#### Challenges:

1. Both properties were operating uniquely and this has caused some issues with integration. At this time we are working on slowly bringing both operations more in line with GATRA service standards along with instituting the new scheduling process. Going forward we will conduct a thorough review of the operations and make sure we move toward GATRA service standards prior to the start of scheduling.
2. Misinformation has been a problem as well. There are two front line employees, one at each COA, that are not happy with the changes and have been giving out misleading information to customers and the drivers. I attended a meeting with the drivers from one COA and attempted to clear up any confusion, but I believe until we are in operation they will not see the benefits. Unfortunately there isn't a lot that can be done about this going forward. The goal has always to be transparent about what we are doing and I will continue with that.
3. The Town of Kingston's Town Administrator and Council on Aging Director are in favor of the program, however the Board of Selectmen are hesitant. We will continue to have meetings with the Board and hopefully will be able to convince them it is worthwhile to try. In the future we will make sure all decision makers are aware in the beginning stages.
4. During this time GATRA also had its first fare increase in fifteen years. The roll out on this was not perfect which caused confusion throughout our operations. I held back on the start of the scheduling project to allow for time to get used to the new fare structure. Better planning internally would have avoided this situation.

#### Next Steps:

Over the next few months we will continue with the scheduling by PTM for each Town so that everyone is comfortable with the process. During this time we will meet with the Town of Kingston to get approval for sharing trips. By August we aim to start shared group trips and eventually move to individual trips in and out of Plymouth. The Towns as well as PTM will be put on the same radio system and we will eventually utilize all vehicles for will calls.

As we go I will continue to update the procedures so we can use these when adding in other communities.

The most important things I learned during this process are that all stakeholders should be included in the development, be positive at all times, and openly communicate.

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