

Hello, I'm Jeanne Kern, Director of Community Services at Central Vermont Council on Aging (CVCOA). CVCOA is one of five area agencies on aging supporting older Vermonters to age with dignity and choice. Our service area covers Lamoille, Washington and Orange counties as well as a catchment of towns in northern Windsor and Addison counties. We help our older neighbors access services and supports to enable them to remain living in and contributing to their communities in the setting of their choice. These services and supports include Meals on Wheels, community meals & wellness programs; family caregiver support and dementia respite grants; case management, information & referral services and health insurance counseling; opportunities to volunteer as well as assistance from our Senior Companion and Good Neighbor volunteers. And the critical service we are here to discuss – transportation.

Transportation continues to be identified as one of the top concerns for older Vermonters. We are all well aware of the challenges to accessing transportation in our rural communities. We are fortunate that Vermont has long recognized the need to help fund and support transportation for older adults and people with disabilities through the Elders and People with Disabilities (E&D) program. Participation in the E&D program enabled CVCOA to help provide over 18,000 one-way trips – to dialysis and other medical appoints, meal sites, shopping, and personal trip – to over 700 riders in FY2019.

Here in Central Vermont we participate in three different E&D partner committees with three different transportation providers: Rural Community Transportation (RCT) in Lamoille County, Green Mountain Transit (GMT) in Washington County, and Tri-Valley/ Stagecoach in Orange County. While each group is unique, they face the same challenges: an increasing demand for services for a growing aging population; meeting the gaps in services, be it number and type of ride or underserved towns; rising transportation costs; a need for more volunteer drivers; and the challenge for non-profit partners to increase cash match.

The number of rides for medical, shopping and social/personal trips are generally capped by the number of trips/month or an annual dollar allocation. Since the beginning of the FY2020 grant year, over 60 people have been on the waiting list for a Ticket to Ride (TTR) slot in Orange County. We are well aware that some towns, generally those on the outer edges of the service area, are underserved. There is uncounted unmet need.

CVCOA supports several buses that began years ago as dedicated mealsite transportation, but with support of Stagecoach transitioned to Circulator buses open to public, which now provide access to the grocery store, pharmacy, and health clinic as well as the senior center for the meal. However, the hourly cost of those buses increased by \$4/hour this year, resulting in an increased cost of \$9600 over the course of the year. In Washington County we saw dialysis transportation increase by \$1700/month in FY2019; it jumped to \$7500/month in July of FY2020 before settling back to \$5000/month.

For a small non-profit like CVCOA, it is a challenge to increase the amount of cash match we can bring to the table. Currently we spend about \$50,000/year across our three E&D partner groups. There is no dedicated funding line for transportation in the Older Americans Act, our major source of our

federal funding. Our match comes from general funds. We are grateful that in-kind volunteer hours can be used as the local match but doing so limits the amount of E&D funds to be spent. We continue to work with our transit providers to review services we do support, especially the costly buses. We look for ways to reduce the hours of service, yet still provide the needed service; we review ridership to see if it warrants to cost of service.

CVCOA has working with the E&D partner groups to gather more data from the transit providers to identify gaps, usage and efficiencies. It is our intention to work with our partners to move toward a client-directed approach, enabling the client to determine the purpose of the trip. There is more to life than going to the doctor, so the rider should determine how they want to spend their allocation of trips. We want to move away from an annual dollar allocation to a monthly number of trips. We want to explore whether this allows for more people to come onto the program rather than remain on a waiting list and if it provides more equity for those in towns farther out, as their funding can be used up quicker due to the distance traveled. We want to work closely with our transit providers to get more Ticket to Ride clients on public transportation where possible rather than using volunteer drivers; this should enable them to receive more trips. We want to work with transit providers on a Rider Bill of Rights. Some people have been reluctant to ride public transportation, either because it is unfamiliar (so we appreciate the Ambassador program outlined in the Public Transit Policy Plan (PTPP)) or they have experienced instances where the drivers have been rude, inattentive, or reluctant to assist riders or use the lift.

We would welcome increased E&D funding, but we are appreciative of the funding we do receive and for Vermont's commitment to older adults in community and to transportation. We support many of the initiatives outlined by VTrans in the PTPP. We do want to see local community transportation initiatives like Free Wheelin' in Waitsfield and Microtransit in Montpelier supported; our concern is how that might impact our overall E&D funding. We acknowledge that local initiatives can help underserved communities and may be able to lower the cost per ride. However, we are trying to balance the needs of the entire service area, not just one or two towns. We would encourage VTrans to access additional funding to help pilot these new initiatives.

We want to encourage the use of private-pay accounts for riders. But many of the E&D riders will be shocked to learn that an average one-way trip provided by a volunteer driver could cost \$24.00 and are unable to pay \$48.00 for a round trip to the doctor, the grocery store or to visit a friend. Together we need to find ways to reduce the price of some of those local trips, either through community initiatives or more local volunteers. So, we support the VTrans initiative around the volunteer driver programs: a volunteer checkbox on VT vehicle registration; personal mobility accounts for volunteer drivers, the non-monetary incentive to help meet their future transport needs; increased marketing for volunteer drivers; and streamlined background checks.

VTrans, the local transportation providers, and the regional planning commissions and the State of Vermont are committed to supporting the transportation needs of older Vermonters and those with disabilities. For that, we thank you.

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