

Coordinated Transportation Serves Veterans in Western Montana

The Challenge

IDENTIFYING FLEXIBLE, cost-effective ways to meet the transportation needs of America's military veterans has been a source of debate, discussion, and federal legislation for well over a decade.

In rural Western Montana, where aging Vietnam veterans comprise roughly 40 percent and the most recent Gulf War veterans nearly 12 percent of the two largest counties' populations, meeting the wide-ranging mobility needs of geographically dispersed veterans and their families (including those living on Tribal lands), has been particularly challenging.



Addressing the Coordination Challenge

OVER THE LAST DECADE, the Montana Transit Association (MTA), led by Executive Director Lyn Hellegaard, has been developing and implementing solutions to improve mobility for veterans in Missoula and Ravalli counties. To this end, Hellegaard and the MTA are tapping into the practical

information contained in TCRP Report 164: *Community Tools to Improve Transportation Options for Veterans, Military Service Members, and Their Families.*

For communities that want to improve and expand their local transportation resources, this report provides guidance, with an

TCRP Report 164:

Community Tools to Improve Transportation Options for Veterans, Military Service Members, and Their Families

TCRP Report 164 finds that high levels of coordination—especially at the local level—increase the overall level of mobility services available to military veterans.



organized process to identify unmet and under-met transportation needs, as well options to better meet those needs.

The MTA is tackling three crucial challenges addressed in the report: (1) coordination among service providers; (2) strategic leadership; and (3) data-informed decision making.

With respect to coordination, **TCRP Report 164** notes: "Time spent developing support, resources, and a framework for coordination will pay off in the long run, in terms of future growth and stability of the effort."

One approach, reflected in the report and adopted by the MTA, is the use of an Emergency Transportation Assistance voucher.

If the federal Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) based in Helena can't get a veteran to where he or she needs to go, but a local MTA provider member can, then that member transit provider can be reimbursed for providing that ride through the voucher program. This approach eliminates requiring the

VA to directly approve each local transportation vendor. Today, the voucher program successfully serves more than veterans—including, for example, battered women, who obtain rides through the voucher-approved crime victim's advocate in the county attorney's office.

On MTA's "punch list," says Hellegaard, is another coordination strategy recommended by **TCRP Report 164**—providing feeder service to existing VTS and Disabled Veterans of America (DAV) pick-up locations. For Montana veterans, strategically arranged bus feeder service could significantly shorten overnight commutes many veterans now endure when traveling from their rural county homes to Helena for morning medical appointments.

Leadership is Key to Mobility Solutions

A S TCRP REPORT 164 notes, "Like almost every other community effort, strong local leadership is essential for successful implementation of improved and coordinated community transportation." Hellegaard adds that a well-coordinated mobility strategy requires "somebody passionate about this area of transportation, who will keep coming back to the table, despite frustrations."

The MTA puts this into practice by bringing many different stakeholders to the table, including the VTS' mobility manager; managers at

small rural transit systems; Tribal transit managers; county senior centers; volunteer DAV drivers; and others. Working together, these providers are able to deliver rides that take veterans where they really need to go, when they need to, whether it is to get to school, get a haircut, or shop for groceries.

Data Guides Service

DATA-INFORMED DECISION making is highlighted in **TCRP Report 164** as a foundational component of a sound mobility strategy. As the report notes, "data can illuminate issues raised by partner organizations...help document the location and characteristics of need [and] help target resources to areas of greatest...need."

The MTA has put this into practice by acting on the "denial" reports it receives from dispatchers at all the transit operators serving Missoula and Ravalli counties. Specifically, when a transit operator denies service to a veteran requesting a ride to a particular destination, MTA uses that data to determine where service gaps need to be addressed. The upshot is that mobility service to two dialysis centers has been expanded to meet demand. Using state funds, Saturday service has been added to reach some of these clinics. This ensures that rural dialysis patients have transportation access to a clinic. ●

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