Regional Transportation Coordinating Council Phase 2 Implementation Meeting

April 1st, 2021
10:00am via GoToMeeting

In attendance:

David Barrett  Swift County VSO
Carrie Bendix  SW MN Private Industry Council
Patrick Bruflat  Chippewa County Family Services
Emily Castaneda  Prairie Five CAC
Paul Coyour  Prairie Five RIDES
Audrey Fuller  Upper Sioux Community
Donna Hermanson  Lac qui Parle County Family Services
Kris Holien  Yellow Medicine County VSO
Gail Jerve  Prairie Five CAC
Gary Johnson  P5 Board/RDC Board/Yellow Medicine County Commissioner
Rae Ann Keeler-Aus  Yellow Medicine Family Services
Chad Kingstrom  UMVRDC
Tim Kolhei  Chippewa County VSO
Michelle Lichtig  MN DOT
Ted Nelson  Prairie Five CAC
Mark Reisen  Living at Home - Block Nurse Program
Jan Roer  People's Express
Sue Siemers  MN DOT
Kelly Van Klompenburg  Living at Home - Block Nurse Program
Rob Wolfington  City of Benson
Robert Wolfington  City of Montevideo

1. Introductions
   Everyone in attendance introduced themselves and stated which organization they represented.

2. Review of RTCC tasks and projects identified in grant application
   Emily reviewed the Phase 2 tasks and projects outlined in the RTCC grant. Each of these objectives were identified as needs during Phase 1 and will be put into implementation during Phase 2. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss different options in how these objectives could be met and also establish a plan of action.

3. Overview of transit providers in Region 6W
   Emily Castaneda joined the RTCC in January as the Regional Transportation Coordinator and during February and March was in contact with many transportation providers operating in Region 6W. Providers were very helpful in sharing information about their service; each of which is operating a
unique system to the benefit of their clientele. A brief overview of this information was illustrated on Slide 3 and providers present were asked to share any additional information.

Audrey Fuller stated that the Upper Sioux Community meets their community’s transportation needs internally, but is available to answer any questions regarding transit operations.

Kelly Van Klompenburg with Living at Home-Block Nurse Program stated that they operate a pool of volunteers which primarily provide in-town rides. In-town rides are provided at no cost, but there is a charge for rides out-of-town which have been provided minimally during COVID. Volunteers are reimbursed at $0.55 per mile. Passenger must be age 65 and older. All rides are private pay unless contracted through family services.

Swift County VSO, David Barrett, stated that the VSO provides rides for vets to appointments in St Cloud, Minneapolis, and minimally to Montevideo.

Chippewa County VSO, Tim Kolhei stated that their office follows the same policy.

Emily explained Slide 4 which breaks down area transit services into four basic groups: Region (town-to-town), In-town (city bus, taxi, volunteer), Volunteer Driver Programs (currently helping to fill gaps but are less specialized), and Veteran’s Service Offices (regularly provide vets with rides to St Cloud and Minneapolis VAs). Between these groups, there are common gaps which include a lack in transit drivers, a lack in volunteer drivers, few services available outside normal business hours, and fewer options available for passengers paying cash or with non-medical appointments. Additionally, passengers with travel benefits through insurance may have more options, but scheduling and billing for these rides is cumbersome for both passengers and providers. Rides scheduled through insurance companies but denied by providers must be turned back to the insurance company to be reassigned and this limits referral ability. In-town services can accommodate more short-notice rides, but service hours are limited and not available in smaller cities.

4. Discussion of implementation ideas and options
Slide 5 was explained as a possible model for a Transportation Management Coordination Center. This model could be run as an extension of the RTCC and built to encompass all Phase 2 tasks and projects.

The model illustrates the TMCC as two branches: Information, Marketing Hub/Dispatch Center and Volunteer Driver Program. The Hub could potentially exist as a region-wide dispatch center which would coordinate services between providers, negotiate and bill for contracted rides, and handle marketing to include travel training. The volunteer branch could host a shared pool of volunteer drivers and implement new technology to improve volunteer driver experience and also facilitate dispatching. Another branch within the volunteer driver program could potentially be a shared vehicle. This could be offered as an alternative to the use of personal vehicles for volunteer drivers and could also be used by the community to provide additional rides under the right circumstances.

Paul Coyour questioned whether the shared vehicle would be stationed in a specific community and how/if volunteer drivers would be reimbursed for using it. Emily stated that the RTCC would need to identify where the need is and station the vehicle appropriately. Additionally, it would be up to
the RTCC to determine whether the volunteers would be reimbursed a per mile rate or receive a stipend.

Ted clarified that this model represented options based on needs identified in Phase 1, the 2017 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plan, as well as the grant with MN DOT. These are general ideas of how we could fill the gaps and execute goals. Volunteer drivers is just one of those resources that can help fill transportation, but how can we make volunteering more appealing? Volunteers are currently struggling with the reimbursement rates, how they are defined by IRS (for hire or not for hire), and how this also affects their insurance rates. The RTCC will need to set up committees to decide how to strategically fill gaps, but this is not limited to volunteer drivers. We have great providers in this area, but how do we streamline service and work together?

Paul stated that Prairie Five RIDES had approximately 45 drivers 10 years ago and now 7 to 8 regular drivers. Many were lost with IRS interpretation and COVID had a relatively small effect on retention.

Rae Ann Keeler-Aus question whether the volunteer driver age cap has had a great effect on how many drivers have been lost. Paul stated that Prairie Five RIDES has age cap of 76 for both hired and volunteer drivers. This was a Prairie Five Board decision. Kelly stated that the Living at Home-Block Nurse Program does not have an age restriction.

Emily asked what the group’s thoughts were on a shared volunteer driver pool. Mark stated that the Living at Home-Block Nurse Program’s pool is more specifically for the Granite Falls community and in most cases volunteers know their passengers personally. However, their model could be exported to other towns. Their volunteer pool relies heavily on community investment (their volunteers would probably not be interested in going to another community). LAHBNP volunteers also have other volunteer roles besides driving.

The group was not aware of any other volunteer driver pools in the region, but it was suggested that churches be contacted as a possible partner.

David Barrett stated that dispatchers/volunteer coordinators are key to positive driver experiences and retention. Dispatch needs to know when too much is too much. Many are retirees and don’t want to drive every day. VSO is currently doing this by regulating hours worked and showing appreciation for their volunteers. Gail added that we need to have a filtration system to ensure that the right passenger is going with the right driver. Drivers can be quickly lost when faced with uncomfortable situations. Gary stated that the age cap offends drivers and this can also effect recruitment and retention.

Ted stated that Emily has been doing a lot of research on other possibilities such as shared vehicles (Spin-Zone), tablets for volunteers, and new software that would allow partners to book rides. He questioned whether this would assist partners (health services, family services, etc.) in scheduling and paying for rides.

Kris Holien questioned how tablets would incentivize volunteer drivers. Emily stated that volunteers do not currently have tablets, so instead of receiving ride information verbally they could accept and view it by tablet. Additionally, GPS features would be helpful. Tablets would present less error and therefore a better customer experience as well. Perhaps partners could also dispatch rides to volunteers for short notice rides outside normal business hours.
Tablets may not be necessary for all volunteer drivers as the software would most likely be app based and accessible by smart phone. Ted added that volunteers don’t want to say no when asked if they can do a ride; having software that allows them to either accept or deny the ride may allow volunteers to feel more comfortable. David stated that we need to make it easier to become and be a volunteer to build the pool.

It was discussed whether the central dispatch hub should be responsible for coordinating volunteers and negotiating collaborations between transit providers. David stated that often times passengers are willing to schedule appointments that accommodate the schedule. Routes could be implemented and passengers could be trained to book accordingly to reduce duplication.

Rae Ann asked whether the purpose of the RTCC is to eventually have one dispatch center for transportation statewide. Tim stated that we are not ready to go that far but something between a liaison and central dispatch is necessary as we are running out of drivers and funds, but not out of need. Sue stated that as the TMCC matures it may evolve into one which is functioning on a larger scale.

5. **Identify action items**
   Emily requested from the group action items on which we would move forward. Paul suggested the RTCC prioritize the implementation of the dispatching hub. It was agreed that a subcommittee would be created to begin work by coordinating rides to specific locations such as St Cloud or Minneapolis.
   Emily will be emailing options for subcommittees on which RTCC members may elect to participate.

6. **Select a name for the RTCC**
   A survey will be emailed out Tuesday, April 6th to vote on an official name for the RTCC. Attendees were encouraged to email Emily with any suggestions which could be added to the survey.

The meeting came to an unexpected close due to a power outage at approximately 11:10am.