

Transportation

Overview:

The Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities has funded two transportation projects since 2000 with the Texas Citizen's Fund – Just Transportation Alliance - Community Transportation Advocacy Networks (6/2000 – 7/2003) and the Texas Citizen's Fund – Just Transportation Alliance - Local Transportation & Mobility Initiatives (12/03 – to current date).

The Just Transportation Alliance (JTA) - Community Transportation Advocacy Network project built a state advocacy team as well as local teams in up to eight sites in Texas. This project created a collaborative network to voice the need for affordable, accessible and reliable transportation. In addition to recruiting people from the community and training local advocates, the JTA assisted in determining effective advocacy strategies, preparing presentations, and linking the local alliances in a statewide network. JTA built on previous Council projects through strategic partnerships and by assisting the alliances with fundraising to ensure the long-term self-sufficiency of each alliance. Local alliances were developed in Bexar County, El Paso, Houston, the Rio Grande Valley, Tarrant County, Tyler, Webb County/Laredo and San Angelo.

The current project, the JTA - Local Transportation & Mobility Initiative builds on the previous three-year project and is designed to increase reliable and accessible local transportation and mobility by supporting the meaningful participation of self-advocates, advocates, their families, and allies in on-going Regional Service Planning efforts in East Texas (14 counties) Houston-Galveston (16 counties) and the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. The project will also develop an Action Agenda in partnership with Local JTA participants, Statewide Partners, and other allies to resolve barriers and to maximize further increases in high-quality transportation services in preparation for post December 2006 opportunities through the Texas Department of Transportation and Legislature.

In May 2003, the Texas Legislature passed HB 3588 which transformed public transportation by consolidating general public transit, Para transit (special transit services), and health and human services transportation (such as Medicaid) into a single entity. HB 3588 further requires that regions develop regional service plans to integrate these services and their funding, both to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of "public transportation" and to expand the quantity and quality of services available to the estimated one in five Texas who cannot or do not drive. Organized by the boundaries of the state's 25 Council of Governments (COGs), regional service planning is underway with person with disabilities participating as constituents and as decision-makers. The Regional plans will outline the integration and coordination of services that increasingly meet the needs of those who cannot or do not drive and close gaps in transportation services within communities. The JTA project continues to work diligently with the transportation alliances to increase the number, diversity, skills, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in self-advocacy, as well as that of their families and allies with the public input and decision-making process mandated by law.

The Council will address transportation through a future funding proposal for a Para transit Services Quality Improvement Initiative (PSQII). The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires transit agencies to provide Para transit services to people with disabilities who cannot use the fixed route bus or rail service. The ADA further requires that Para transit rides be provided to all eligible riders if requested any time the previous day, within an hour of the requested time. (*Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund*) This initiative would address the issue by building and maintaining a statewide Para transit tracking system that provides individuals with disabilities, family members, and advocacy organizations the tools necessary for improving transit services for people with disabilities both individually and systematically. This proposed initiative is intended to assist in the development of reliable and responsive Para transit services for individuals with developmental disabilities at the local, regional and state level.

Accomplishments:

The Just Transportation Alliance project has trained 1762 individuals in transportation and collaborated with more than 75 organizational partnerships. Two self advocates are serving on the Mayor's Strategic Task Force Public Transportation Board in Lubbock and one parent appointed to the Statewide Advisory Board and several individuals/partners throughout Texas are involved in the Regional Service/Coordination Planning Teams. JTA members, often in collaboration with statewide partners, were catalyst for regional planning, particularly in Houston, East Texas, and El Paso with strategic involvement in ongoing activities in Lubbock and Fort Worth.

The *East Texas Just Transportation Alliance (ETJTA)* has been instrumental in the initiation of several important initiatives to improve transportation for people in East Texas. ETJTA secured \$234,000 in federal funds, for a Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC, a federal fund primarily designed to meet the needs of welfare recipients in obtaining and maintaining employment) project in the region and that extend service hours to several centers hiring workers with disabilities. ETJTA also helped in the formation and ongoing work of the Greater East Texas Transportation Association (GETTA) taskforce, which works with the Tyler District Office of the Texas Department of Transportation to improve transportation coordination. The same taskforce, in partnership with the East Texas Center for Independent Living, received TxDOT Funding for Transportation Coordination to increase the visibility of transportation issues for persons with disabilities in a five-county region of East Texas. The East Texas Regional Planning team is lead by the East Texas Council of Governments, the Texas Department of Transportation, and GETTA, the only consumer coalition service as a lead entity in a regional planning effort in the state.

The *San Antonio Just Transportation Alliance* was instrumental in addressing their concerns about route elimination and through their prepared testimony and participation in the board meeting got 9 routes restored to operational plan (if not passed elimination of routes would have dropped Para transit-eligible individuals affected from 300 to 12)

Barriers:

This summary of transportation barriers are identified by the JTA and TxDOT Regional Service Planning teams across the state, which disability constituents are heavily involved. The TxDOT Regional Service plans with barriers may be found at http://www.regionalserviceplanning.org/study_group/. It is estimated that one in five Texans are without reliable access to transportation because they cannot or do not drive. Persons with disabilities, seniors, and low-income are disproportionately represented among these individuals. JTA noted transportation barriers, include insufficient or inconvenient service, dangerous or missing bus stops/shelters and/or inadequate Para transit service. The common barriers across majority of the regions include coordination in transportation, eligibility, compatibility/differences of transportation systems, accessibility, turf war, funding restrictions and internal/external policies.

In the *Panhandle Regional Service Plan*, there is a certain amount of coordination between city and rural transit and still considerable gaps in transportation service. These gaps affect the general public, elderly and people with disabilities. Some of these gaps are due to policy or contractual issues, but many are due to agency funding limitations. As noted in the service plan, with service gaps as the target, there are several constraints within the entire transportation system that prevent coordination or service improvement. There are many city residents in east Amarillo that are not able to access these services. In addition, designated bus stops in other areas of Amarillo are often miles from the consumer's home. Taxis and many hotel shuttles do not have accessible vehicles but remain the only transportation providers available to make trips to the airport or for urgent needs during public transit off-hours. Individuals who have significant difficulty in walking but are not certified mobility-impaired (not qualified to ride Spec-Trans) have great difficulty in getting to Amarillo City Transit designated bus stop. Agency or program rules and policies prevent providers from providing trips to needed destinations for many of the elderly and persons with disabilities.

The *Capital Area Council of Government Regional Service Plan* identified as barriers e.g., different eligibility requirements, funding restrictions associated with client type and/or type, and cross-agency concerns.

The *Concho Valley Regional Service Plan* identified as barriers e.g., inadequate funding to provide improved services (longer hours, additional drivers, and additional vehicles), intense training required in order to provide improved and additional services, lack of coordination between transportation programs on a state level in order to provide for locals to provide coordinated services. (Example: Medicaid transportation and 5311 rural transportation program – Medicaid client not able to purchase groceries at local Wal-Mart while waiting for prescription to be filled).

The *Gulf Coast Planning Regions* identified as barriers, most agencies are reluctant to mix different vulnerable populations in one coordinated system due to stigma that might be attached to use, lack of financial incentives. In small communities, transportation-disadvantaged populations may have no or partial access to specialized transportation services, and coordination of these limited services provides little or no benefit, reluctance to share vehicles and resources. Programs that provide specialized human service transportation have distinct requirements, such as eligibility standards, vehicle needs and insurance, differing eligibility criteria, American with Disabilities Act (ADA)

compliance is needed relative to access to public transportation, (sidewalks, bus stops, shelters), lack of understanding about DHHS vs. TxDOT roles in transportation.

The *West Texas Central Area*, identified obstacles and constraints in funding limitations as a major obstacle in the region's ability to develop to successfully coordinate project, ability of transit authorities to supply adequate manpower to handle increases services on behalf of HHS agencies, overcoming barriers created by different regulations and requirements of transportation funding agencies will be a constraint to coordination that may require actions ranging from cross-training to legislative change to address, eligibility/Reporting/Data Requirements, vehicles purchased with federal or state funds must meet the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, clients served by one agency will have to be entrusted to another, lack of information available to the public regarding types of transportation services available and service areas covered will require-region wide marketing efforts for meaningful coordination to be realized.

The *Houston-Galveston Area*, identified barriers to coordination in the region to include differing eligibility, inability to integrate information system across programs, lack of state leadership, local support and participation, absence of centralized structure, service not open to the public –incompatibility of clients needs and characteristics, large geographic to cover, Job Access and non-work opportunities need to be expanded, no single reliable source of information about all programs are available, demand is high for non-emergency medical trips, training needed for those transporting ADA clients, Uncertainty of customer eligibility/intake process, lack of understanding about DHHS vs. TxDOT roles in transportation.

Conclusion:

Addressing the diversity of transportation issues across the state of Texas is a challenge and a complex process.

However under HB 3588, the Texas Department of Transportation continues to coordinate with regions to develop regional service plans to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of "public transportation," and to expand the quantity and quality of services available to the estimated one in five Texas. Through these efforts TxDOT will report recommendations and findings to the 80th Legislative session. As the regions continue to actively develop regional plans, it is imperative that across the state, self-advocates, family members, disability advocacy organizations and other stakeholders have meaningful and active involvement in the regional service planning process to address the constraints and barriers and the mobility needs of those who require reliable access to transportation.