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The Need for Transportation Choices

Transportation's Vital Role in the Lives of Older Americans

Tim's 79-year-old mother sometimes stays at home, even when she would prefer to go out to shop or visit friends. "She had some bad experiences with public transportation," Tim explains, "who weren't sensitive to her needs." And while the Massachusetts resident could take the bus, simply getting out to the bus stop and waiting in cold weather can be problematic.

Luckily, there are other options—such as a program offered through a local aging services organization that pairs up volunteers who pick up and drive elderly neighbors. According to Anne Proli of Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley, Inc., the local agencies in her area that provide services to older citizens offer a variety of transportation services. However, the services and options differ in the 23 towns and cities in the region.

Transportation is one of the most important issues for elder citizens in the valley. Proli explains that in annual needs assessments conducted by her agency, transportation routinely comes out as the first or second most frequently identified need.

Transportation: A Key Part of Living Well

Just as it is for the rest of our society, transportation is vital to older Americans for shopping, socializing, and recreational activities. For example, they need transportation to and from medical appointments and, for a growing number, to and from employment or volunteer activities.

The transportation needs and concerns of today's older adults are just the beginning of a trend that will become increasingly significant over the next few decades. By the year 2030, the older population will more than double to about 70 million—and will likely have all the transportation needs of today's elders, if not more.

The range of transportation needs among elders is wide, and depends not only on one's lifestyle, but on where one lives. For instance, some older persons are frail and have special transportation needs. Others need access to services in the community but do not drive or own a car. Still others live in suburban and rural areas and need transportation over longer distances. According to the Community Transportation Association of America, 40 percent of rural residents live in areas without public transportation, while 28 percent have negligible access. Yet without transportation, older adults are isolated and unable to access community-based services.

Exploring Transportation Options

Locating transportation solutions can be a trying experience, even for the most capable. Fortunately, older persons have an easy resource to turn to: their local area agency on aging (AAA). Across the country, these organizations help by coordinating and facilitating transportation services that provide access to a variety of home- and community-based services for older adults. These services may include everything from nutrition programs that provide meals to older adults in group settings and through home delivery, to legal assistance, respite care, and more.

These programs and services are all made possible by the Older Americans Act, passed in 1965. The Act provides for a range of services through the National Aging Services Network, comprised of state and local AAAs, tribal and native organizations, and thousands of service providers and volunteers. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging (AoA) plays a lead role by coordinating and supporting the Network. AoA works to meet its mission of protecting the rights and well-being of the nation's older Americans in a broad range of areas. In the area of transportation,

AoA helps by:

- Encouraging federal, state, and local governments to prepare for the growing aging population by implementing solutions that focus on coordinating transportation services;
- Pressing for more community transportation options for older persons, provided locally through AAAs; and
- Assisting older adults and families in locating driver education programs, operated by state and local organizations, that address their unique needs.

Working Together

AoA and the U.S. Federal Transit Administration (FTA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2003 to assist their respective networks in the coordination of transportation services for older adults and to facilitate access to these services by older adults. In 2003 the two organizations held strategy sessions that culminated in an action plan.

In 2004, AoA and FTA continue to implement the MOU with a special focus on helping states and communities assess their level of coordination and develop action plans to move forward in this area, issuing a road map for coordinated planning across programs, and providing up-to-date research to inform program development. The action plan includes:

- Leveraging available resources at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Conducting regional workshops and providing technical assistance to help state and local agencies increase collaboration and partnerships.
- Implementing technologies that can provide opportunities to coordinate services, scheduling, and billing processes.
- Helping older adults and their families understand how to use and access their transportation options.

As the nation celebrates Older Americans Month this May, you can learn more about transportation options and other programs by visiting www.aoa.gov. The theme of Older Americans Month, "Aging Well, Living Well," highlights the goal of organizations throughout the Aging Network to help older Americans live their lives to the fullest. For information about what resources are available locally, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or visit www.eldercare.gov.

