Adapting to challenge: Examining older adult transportation in rural communities

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ABSTRACT

Rural and small communities in the United States are home to a higher proportion of older adults (those aged 65 and older) than urban or suburban areas. This proportion is expected to grow over the next decade. Public transportation can play an important role in meeting the mobility needs of older adults, but transportation providers face significant challenges serving older adults in these settings. Using a set of case studies, the authors explore strategies that providers use to try to address these challenges and increase older adult transit use. These strategies include the use of flexible services, partnerships, and individualized outreach. Local context is important to service provision in small communities. Providers report generally positive results, yet most assessment rests on anecdotal evidence. There is a need for better data to determine whether older adult mobility needs are being effectively served.

1. Introduction

Transportation providers face significant challenges serving older adults in rural and small communities. Such communities typically have fewer fiscal or technical resources to provide services than their urban and suburban counterparts (The White House, 2010). The lower population densities and longer distances between destinations further increase the challenge of providing transportation (Kerschner, 2006; National Rural Health Association, 2013). Older adults in rural and small communities may be unwilling to give up driving, due to a desire to remain independently mobile and/or a belief that other types of transportation services either do not exist or cannot adequately meet their mobility needs (Kerschner, 2006; Suen and Sen, 2004). There is a need for more information about how providers are addressing these challenges in order to serve the mobility needs of older adults.

This paper employs a multiple case study investigation to examine how providers are addressing the challenges to providing transportation services to older adults in rural and small communities. The findings highlight a service environment in which providers rely on flexible services, partnerships, and individualized outreach to meet the mobility needs of older adults.

2. Literature review

The challenges of providing transportation in rural and small communities are well-documented in the transportation literature, with studies noting sparsely populated service areas (Nutley, 2003), funding difficulties, shortages of suitable staff and equipment (Velaga et al., 2012; Safe Mobility for Life Coalition, 2011), and a demand for transportation that generally exceeds supply (Rosenbloom, 2004). In response to these challenges, providers have adopted a variety of strategies, most of which focus on issues of operations or management (KFH Group, 2001; 2004; Koffman, 2004), and not on the specific preferences of older riders who, because of their age and physical state, often have unique needs, perceptions of transit, and levels of mobility (Suen and Sen, 2004; Coughlin, 2009). Documentation of older adult-specific service adaptations, where they exist, is often lacking in detail. At the same time, there exists robust literature on older adult issues in community planning (Rosenbloom, 2004; Silverstein, 2012), and while transportation is a prominent part of that literature, few studies have explored transportation in rural and small communities. Much of the literature on the transportation needs of older adults focuses instead on transit usage in large cities (Cevallos et al., 2010; Hess, 2009), or on older adults’ driving habits (generally urban- or suburban-residing) (Kostyniuk and Shope, 2003; Alsnih and Hensher, 2003), overlooking the fact that circumstances in rural and small communities present unique mobility challenges to older residents. There is a need for studies that bridge these two disparate literatures, in order to better understand how transportation providers can meet the needs of older adults living in rural and small communities.

One asset that may guide transportation providers to better serve older adults in this service environment is a culture of flexibility.
Evidence suggests that, out of necessity, providers have responded to the operational challenges of serving a generally smaller and more rural population by providing flexible, client-oriented services rather than traditional, fixed-route services. Flexible Transport Services (FTS) are a range of formal or informal transportation networks that exist in rural areas and address the mobility gap facing disadvantaged populations (Velaga et al., 2012). FTS offerings typically include ride-sharing, paratransit, and volunteer driver programs. Despite variations in application, the social impetus for these programs (to transport vulnerable populations by whatever means are feasible/available) remains consistent across North America, Australia, and Great Britain. FTS programs have grown in recent years, but providers must still resolve most financial or operational hardships on their own, without direct guidance from funders or authorities (Mulley et al., 2012). Therefore, providers tend to act as “entrepreneurs” of transportation innovations, due to a widespread culture of experimentation and flexibility in meeting the demands of both sparse geography and the clients themselves (KFH Group, 2004). One study found dozens of strategies that providers had created to meet the needs of their clients, ranging from creative funding sources to special staff training, and marketing innovations (KFH Group, 2001). This culture of flexibility and innovation demonstrates a willingness on the part of providers to adapt their services to support and grow their ridership while also being aware of local needs.

Despite the growing evidence that providers in rural and small communities are capable of adapting services to this specific context, few studies focused on the mobility needs and transportation preferences of older adults who reside there. Much of what has been published thus far has focused on the importance of driving (for rural-dwelling older adults) or on ways to better market transit to older adults (in urban areas) (AARP, 2012; Hess, 2009; Cevallos et al., 2010). These themes provide sound general insights for transportation providers, but neither of them addresses how providers in rural and small communities can design and market appealing transportation services to that age group in rural and small communities. By exploring the nexus of aging, transportation, and rural and small community life, this study seeks to better understand how rural and small community transportation providers are trying to serve older adults in a very challenging service environment.

3. Methodology and case selection

This study examines strategies that transportation providers in rural and small communities have implemented to overcome three significant challenges associated with serving older adults in these settings: low densities and long travel distances, the needs and preferences of older adults who reside in these communities, and the limited fiscal resources possessed by many rural and small community transportation providers. The authors used responses to a national survey of rural and small community providers to identify seven cases for this investigation (Wood et al., 2016). The authors purposefully selected these cases based on: the array of services provided (those providing a more diverse array of services were rated more highly than those that perform one type of service); the level of detail provided about marketing and outreach strategies (those that outlined their policies in greater detail were ranked more highly than those that gave a vague response); geographic location of the respondents and their service areas (to provide a wide geographic distribution if possible); and individuals’ willingness to participate in the study.

The authors conducted fourteen semi-structured, telephone-based interviews. For each case, the authors interviewed transportation provider staff, followed by a separate interview with a representative of an older adult-serving partner organization in the provider’s service area. Participants for the provider interviews were selected based upon their ability to speak about agency goals, objectives, services, and outreach to older adult riders. These participants were also asked to identify older adult-serving partner organizations. The authors identified persons in leadership positions in these social service or community organizations or through provider-side referrals using a snowball sampling technique. The snowball technique allowed the authors to better understand partnerships through inter-agency contacts and connections to get a finer picture of the relationships between partners (Cresswell, 2014).

Each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions. For providers, these questions covered: organization history, structure, and service area; funding sources; and types of services provided, their means of delivery, and their use by older adults. For the user-side participants, questions focused primarily on how their older adult clients use transit and their assessment as to whether the transit agency is meeting these individuals’ mobility needs. The authors coded the responses to identify important themes related to the strategies that providers use to address the three challenges noted above. The findings form the basis of the following discussion.

The seven selected cases are located in geographically diverse locations with service areas that range from one county to eleven counties (Fig. 1). Population density in these counties ranged from 9 persons per square mile to 162 persons per square mile (Table 1). Two providers limit service to residents within a single county (Atomic City Transit, ACT, and Tillamook County Transportation District, TCTD), two provide services that connect county residents to locations within their home county and adjacent counties (Alleghany in Motion, AIM, and Sunset Empire Transportation District, SETD), two provide services that cover multiple counties in a single state (River Cities Public Transit, RCPT, and Rural Community Transportation, RCT), and one provides...
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