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Home and Community-Based Services for Older Adults: Transportation

Transportation is the vital link between home and community. It connects individuals of all ages to the places where they can fulfill their most basic needs — the grocery store for food, the worksite for employment, friends' homes and recreational sites for social interaction, and houses of worship for spiritual sustenance. But, these resources in the community are only beneficial to the extent that transportation can make them accessible to those who need them.

Issue Background

The core values of Americans, autonomy and independence, are reflected in the fact that most prefer and rely on the convenience of their own automobile to access the outside world. However, as individuals age, they eventually lose the physical or financial ability to maintain a car. When they stop driving, older adults can experience a drastic decline in mobility.

In suburban and rural areas, home to nearly 80 percent of the older adult population, destinations are often too far to walk, public transit is poor or unavailable, taxis are costly, and special services are limited. In particular, distance from public transportation presents a major barrier as less than half of households in urban and suburban areas are within a half-mile of a transportation stop or station. In rural areas, the situation is more difficult, with only one in eight households being within a half-mile of public transportation.

Transportation problems are closely correlated with poor income, self-care problems, isolation and loneliness. Reduced mobility puts an older person at higher risk of poor health, as the ability to obtain the goods and services necessary for good health and welfare is reduced. In addition, independence is stifled and loss of self-sufficiency can fuel depression.

Policy Issues

Older adults who drive their own car experience few transportation problems. However, the picture is vastly different for non-drivers. Those who stop driving usually rely on family and friends, but asking for and accepting rides can be difficult, particularly for those raised in a tradition of self-sufficiency. As a result, non-drivers take fewer and shorter trips, and rides are taken around the schedules and convenience of others. Older non-drivers take only two trips per week compared with six trips per week of older drivers.

For some older adults who have relied on an automobile, learning to use public transportation, if available in their community, can be very difficult. Routes may be geared to commuters and not to the places where seniors frequent. Walking to and from pick-up points can be tiring and dangerous as roads and walkways are not always pedestrian-friendly. It has been reported that more than one-fifth of individuals age 50 and older see the lack of sidewalks and resting places as a major barrier to walking.

Access to public transit, both fixed-route and paratransit systems, needs to be enhanced for older adults with cognitive disabilities. Some older adults with cognitive disabilities may need the additional assistance of “through the door” services to reach their destinations safely. Sensitivity awareness training also should be provided for drivers in how to interact with passengers with dementia and other special needs.

The number of older adults will continue to grow. While many of these older Americans will be healthy and mobile, many others, particularly the “old-old,” will need to utilize alternative modes of transportation. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, availability of paratransit

services to older adults has been declining as operators adhere more tightly to ADA criteria in the face of financial constraints. As a result, transportation options for some older adults have declined.

Policy Recommendations

Mobility is essential for an individual to live at home and in the community, yet policymakers have focused little attention on how to help older adults retain their mobility. Efforts are needed to help older adults keep their licenses and cars as long as possible, as well as to provide safe, reliable and convenient alternative means of transportation for those for whom driving is no longer an option.

n4a urges policymakers to:

- **Enhance, coordinate and adequately fund the vast array of federal and state financed transportation services to provide viable and affordable options for the growing population of older adults who need services;**
- **Support increased funding for the Federal Transit Agency's *Section 5310* program, which funds transportation programs for older adults and persons with disabilities in the reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 2003;**
- **Examine and expand existing public transit systems to improve accessibility and availability to older adults especially in suburban and rural communities where fixed route services are less accessible;**
- **Promote the provision of non-emergency medical transportation as an allowable expense under Medicare;**
- **Provide training to ensure public transit drivers are sensitive to the special needs of older adults;**
- **Encourage greater coordination and communication between community transportation providers and social service providers; and**
- **Promote a pedestrian and transit user friendly environment and develop standards to be incorporated into local building and zoning regulations.**