Learning to ride mass transit equals independence for older people

Eleven older people boarded a Fairfax County Connector bus for a run-through of something that seems, on the face of it, so simple: how to get from Point A to Point B using the region’s network of buses and Metrorail.

But as Jeanna Muhor, an official with Fairfax County’s community outreach services, explained bus schedules, peak fares, how to transfer, and how to manage SmarTrip card accounts, it became apparent that navigating a mass transit system is anything but simple. That’s especially true for people who have spent most of their lives driving.

“It’s a blizzard of information,” said Gail Pitches, 66, a hairdresser from Reston, Va.
Muhoro, an outreach coordinator with Fairfax County’s Human Services Transportation in the county’s Department of Neighborhood and Community Services, was running a three-hour, hands-on training course for older people on the ins and outs of using buses and Metro.

Advocates and government officials who assist older people say the training is especially critical as demographics shift the United States’ median age upward.

Reston resident Karen Wilson studies the Fairfax Connector schedule aboard the MATT bus (Mobile Accessible Travel Training) during a hands-on learning session. (Kate Patterson for the Washington Post)

“It’s a very important intervention that can help older people stay connected to their communities,” said Virginia Dize, co-director of the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center, which is funded by the federal government and administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

‘A high-priority area’

“Transportation comes up as a high-priority area because if you want older people to live and thrive in their communities, they must have good transportation,” Dize said.

Mary Carter, 72, a retired network administrator who lives in Centreville, said she decided to take the Fairfax course after she climbed aboard the wrong Metro train during Pope Francis’s visit to Washington last month.
“I figured I should know how to get around because I don’t know how long I’ll be driving,” Carter said.

There are about 36 million drivers age 65 or older in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety says that by 2030, 1 in 5 drivers will be 65 or older.

The foundation also argues that age should not be the sole criterion for determining whether a person should get behind the wheel.

But both organizations point out that as people age, they run a higher risk of suffering fatalities when there is a crash. They also note that many senses and skills necessary for driving begin to deteriorate with age.

Seniors board a Metro train at the Wiehle-Reston East Metro station during a hands-on learning session. (Kate Patterson for the Washington Post)

For older people, the need to drive often is tied to their desire to grow old in their own homes, something 90 percent of the population would like to do, surveys say. Take away the ability to drive and you take away their independence and bring them that much closer to having to leave their homes.

Giving up the keys means 15 percent fewer doctor visits, almost 60 percent fewer outings to shop and 65 percent fewer trips for social, family, religious or other reasons, according to a study cited by Dize.
Another widely cited study found that men in their 70s generally gave up their keys about six years before their deaths, while women needed alternative transportation for about 10 years after ceasing to drive. According to the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, older Americans rate transportation as their second-highest concern. Yet, despite the growing population of older people, little has changed in availability over the previous five years.

Outreach

Dize said that’s why the association encourages outreach programs such as the one in Fairfax.

“Does anyone know how to stop a bus?” Muhoro asked the group.

She showed them the pull cord and told them to be sure to alert the driver before the stop. “If you don’t, don’t get scared,” she told them. There will be another stop in one-fifth of a mile.

Muhoro covered the basics. These included how to request a stop (pull the cord to alert the driver in advance) and how to replenish a SmarTrip card (at the fare box, transit hubs, or even Giant groceries and CVS drug stores).

She also offered a lot of minutiae: how many bus stops (4,000), or how much can you put on a SmarTrip card ($300).

She even guided people to the public toilets on Metro’s Silver Line (though only two of the four were working).

The culmination of the expedition was a ride on the Silver Line from the Wiehle-Reston East station to East Falls Church.

‘A lot of data’

Joe Camarda, 85, a retired financial analyst with IBM, decided to become more familiar with mass transit options because he’s tired of trying to get through traffic on Interstate 66. “It’s always a mess,” he said.

Camarda said the training was informative.
“But I’m going to have to go back and look at the things to figure out the parts I want to use. You can’t capture everything. It’s a lot of data,” he said.

Camarda used a car to get around for most of his life, including a commute from Reston to his job in Bethesda, Md., he said. It was a clean shot on many area roads back then.

“You could go up [Interstate] 270 and not see another car,” Camarda said.

His biggest gripe? Traffic improvements always seem like too little, too late.

“I guess my view would be, by the time they got it done, they needed more,” he said.

Mobility and access

Reston resident Caroline Boone, 58, who works at a yoga studio, said she thought the course would be useful because she had encountered problems when she tried to replenish her SmarTrip card.

Next, she wants to learn more about options for biking to Metro, perhaps with a folding bicycle.

Tom Mueller, 73, a retired engineer with the federal government who also lives in Reston, said that he stopped driving years ago after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and having increasing difficulty maneuvering a car.

But Mueller, who moves around with the help of a three-wheel walker, said he relies on mass transit to get into the District a couple times a week to attend lectures at Smithsonian museums.

The Silver Line has already made that easier, he said.

Plus, he said: “I’m glad it’s aboveground. Because it’s pretty to watch all the places as I go.”