Will Uber and Lyft Make Our Parents’ Lives Easier?

What ride-sharing services need to do if they want to drive Mom and Dad

September 11, 2015

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Credit: Courtesy of Uber

When my parents moved last year to a retirement community in suburban Chicago, I wondered-slash-worried how they would get around in a few years.

Dad, 86, still drives, but doesn’t drive long distances or much at night. Mom, 81, stopped driving a few years ago. Public transit is limited where they live, they have to arrange rides a day or more in advance, and a taxi to the airport or the city can run them $75 or more.

Living near Washington, D.C., I use Uber a lot, but I haven’t had much luck finding the car service in Illinois when I visit my folks. Sometimes I see a car available but other times my phone screen shows no tiny black cars crawling nearby. I keep hoping that Uber, Lyft or another company will expand their suburban offerings to make quick, easy and cheaper rides an option for my parents.

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— Diane Kaljian, Sonoma County Adult and Aging Services

Do Seniors Need Uber?

Are ride-sharing services the transportation salvation that will allow our parents to age in place and give us more options as we decide where to live in coming years?
That depends, say the experts I talked to this week.

Virginia Dize, program director and co-director for the National Center on Senior Transportation (NCST), says “I think we have to include Uber and Lyft in the mix if we are talking about improving access for older people and ensuring they have the transportation they need.”

“Technology is going to make a difference,” says Diane Kaljian, division director for Sonoma County (Calif.) Adult and Aging Services. “Isolation is such an issue for seniors and contributes to a lot of negative effects of aging. Being able to be mobile and having a place to go to get your hair done and go shopping, that’s what nourishes people as they live their lives.”

“The transit innovations and advances enabled by the sharing economy have the potential to change cities and lives,” says Paul Irving, chairman of Center for the Future of Aging at the Milken Institute. But, he cautions, it’s “still very early (with) a long way to go.”

To become a transportation mainstay for older riders, ride-sharing services need to clear four speed bumps:

1. **Availability**

Uber, the granddaddy of the services, is available in more than 170 locations in North America from Guadalajara to San Francisco, according to its website. Although it has an occasional presence in smaller towns like Killeen, Texas (population 127,000) many large suburbs are not listed and there are no rural areas. (Uber was not available for comment on its expansion plans.)

Lyft is available in 59 large- to medium-sized cities, according to its website. Lyft spokesperson Mary Caroline Pruitt says, “While many other rural and suburban areas would be a great fit for Lyft, we have not made plans to expand our current coverage areas at this time.” Living close to a large city helps, and she notes that 40 percent of Lyft rides in the New York City area occur in the outer boroughs.

Beyond the big two, there are many other new ride-sharing startups available in cities. Perhaps one of those will find a way to better serve people living outside of cities.

2. **Accessibility**

Even if the private ride-sharing services are available, your parents may need help getting in and out of the car or carrying packages. If they use a wheelchair or a service dog their needs are clearly greater. A driver may or may not be able to help passengers in and out of the car, but there are no guarantees.

Last year Uber and Lyft were sued for alleged failure to accommodate disabled passengers with service dogs or wheelchairs. The courts will need to sort out whether the firms are technology companies or transportation providers subject to the Americans With Disabilities Act. Perhaps in response to these suits or as a function of growth, Uber has rolled out Uber Assist in seven cities allowing riders with special needs to request assistance when they order their car. And it recently clarified other policies regarding disabled passengers. The Lyft app has a feature allowing passengers to request a wheelchair-ready vehicle and lists para-transit options in its market cities.

3. **Technology**

According to a Pew Research Center study, only 27 percent of American adults 65 and older owned a smartphone as of early 2015. Since the most popular ride-sharing services are available mainly by app, this poses a challenge. A family member or retirement community staff with a smartphone can hail a ride for a parent or resident using the apps. And Uber clients can use a mobile website to hail a ride, but it’s
only helpful if you have access to a computer, not in transit. Lyft is only available via the iPhone or smartphones using Android.

Even for those with smartphones, learning to use a ride-sharing app takes time. As my father told me, "If you are talking about people 60 or something like that, they know how to use the iPhone to do something like connect with Uber. The older you are, sometimes, you tend to be not that good at connecting, but once you do it, it’s easy. You just learn how to do it."

4. Affordability

Ride-sharing services can be a bargain compared to owning a car, but for those on fixed incomes with frequent transportation needs, it may be out of reach. Lyft for Good provides some rides for seniors partnering with social service organizations, but these programs are not yet widely available.

Start-ups like Sidecar and Split are pioneering carpool-type services that let you hitch a ride with a fellow passenger or driver heading in the same direction for a smaller fare. This works well if you are in a densely populated city but would be harder to work out in the suburbs.

There are also a number of need-based volunteer driving programs available (with some notice) to take seniors to doctors’ offices and other places, according to Dize. The National Volunteer Transportation Center maintains a state-by-state list of volunteer transportation services.

Dize adds that access to rides whether through Uber or a volunteer program affects all seniors. "Transportation is not a poverty issue," she says. "It impacts people with resources who just don’t know where to get a ride. It’s a convenience, and it’s important to be open to whatever people use."

Don’t Forget Public Transit

Irving hopes that the ride-sharing companies will continue to disrupt the transportation industry and inspire new public transit options.

“I think they are a wonderful development with great potential technology, and private sector solutions are a really important part of the quilt of services that need to come together to serve older adults well. My concern would be we shouldn’t let policymakers off the hook,” he says. “These services do a good job of complementing public transit solutions but they will never fully replace those.”

Let’s hope that quilt doesn’t take too long to stitch together. My parents could use more options when Dad stops driving. And when I think about where I want to be living when I’m in my 80s, I know that I’ll want a range of convenient, affordable options for my post-driving self. Maybe by that time we’ll have full saturation of ride-sharing services, driver-less cars, efficient public transit and even a Jetsons-style hovercraft.