

CHALLENGES: FINDING SOLUTIONS TO BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS TO IMPROVED TRANSPORTATION IN THE ARK-TEX REGION

TRAX service managed by the Ark-Tex Council of Governments (ATCOG) is a highly coordinated network of services. TRAX contracts with colleges, human service agencies and other transit systems to provide a variety of services. The major issues faced by the region revolve around the fragmentation of Medicaid service (and the loss of matching funds it provided) and local funding issues. Most of the other issues are local constraints that will require an extensive dialogue.

There are a variety of barriers and constraints to improved transportation cited by committee members and other interested parties. These categories of barriers and constraints include; institutional barriers, funding barriers, knowledge/communication, and other. The barriers and constraints are prioritized as high, medium and low priority. Along with each barrier and constraint is an estimate of the impact it has on service, and recommendations to make change happen.

Institutional Barriers

- **Medicaid Transportation Is Now Fragmented** – Very significant duplication of services exists due to TxDOT's decision to select a new provider for the region. Previously this service was coordinated through the rural transit district. HIGH Priority.

Estimate of Impact

- This duplication of effort has two sets of operators serving many of the same clients, with little opportunity to coordinate trips as was done previously. There is also duplication of management. The estimate of lost opportunity includes administrative duplication (\$100,000) and lost opportunity to coordinate service (\$250,000). Estimated at 15,900 trip opportunities lost.
- Loss of Credibility – TxDOT loses credibility locally when coordination is stressed at the local level then something else is done at the state level.
- Safety Issue – In the transit industry one often sees problems associated with transitions of service from one provider to another.

Fragmented service delivery makes driver training and other functions much more expensive.

Possible Solutions

- Change the procurement strategy for Medicaid procurement and ensure local participation in the decision-making process. It is recommended that TxDOT follow the recommendations of the Draft PTN strategic plan that calls for awarding Medicaid contracts (through inter-local agreements as is done in other areas) to the willing and able rural transit districts.
- TxDOT should closely monitor service quality of Medicaid providers to ensure a high level of safety. TxDOT should define, monitor and track accidents, incidents, missed trips as well as inspecting vehicles, vehicle files, drivers and driver files on a regular basis. The safety records should be compared to public operators on a 100,000 miles per accident rate measure (is the standard in the industry).
- **Institutional Resistance To Change/Turf Protection** - among both human service agencies and transit systems, there is a reluctance to turn over service to another entity. This is one of the greatest barriers to coordination. A recent Transit Cooperative Synthesis Report (TCRP) on coordinating Medicaid with public transit cites barriers to coordinating transportation. A key barrier is attitudinal and trust. There is a resistance of some human service agencies to work with the transit system, according to public transit operators. Human service representatives do not believe they are getting the benefit of subsidies. This is a local level barrier to the greatest extent. MEDIUM Priority.

Estimate of Impact

- The cost of inaction in coordinating trips is hard to quantify. Where the human service agency believes they are getting a less expensive price using another contractor, they are in actuality reducing their client's options for travel by weakening the coordinated public transit operator. In addition, safety can become an issue as discussed above.

Possible Solutions

- The solution to this constraint is at both the local and the state level. First, local entities need to educate each other on their needs and capabilities. Each human service agency and transit system should work together to gain an understanding of the benefits of a coordinated network. TxDOT should mandate that human service agencies purchase service (where possible) from the transit system in a "fair share" arrangement.

Funding Barriers

- **Local Level Funding Is An Issue** – New service requires proper local funding to match the FTA/State funds available. This will require new approaches to securing local funds. The loss of Medicaid was a double problem because TRAX also lost the Medicaid funds as local match.

Estimate of Impact

- As a whole, the need for local level funding makes it harder for the transit system to match the available federal dollars.
- **Funding for Urban Area** – Limitations on capital funding inhibit the ability of Texarkana to provide additional service and replace aging lightweight vehicles. The TxDOT allocation formula has resulted in a loss of funding to operate the service as well.

Estimate of Impact

- The lack of funding inhibits the ability of the system to operate past 7 pm and the loss of service for persons who have jobs that require them to work late (many of these people would be prime candidates for service). Lost opportunity

Possible Solution

- TxDOT should seek an earmark from the Federal Government for vehicles as is done by many other states. Texas would be in a prime position to receive an earmark, relieving much of the funding burden. The other option is for the transit district to go after its own earmark, but this would be an uncoordinated approach and would have less chance of being funded.
- The development of sponsorship programs to generate revenue from system sponsors through advertising and directed service.

Regulatory Barrier

- **Medicaid - Perception of a Barrier** - In this region there is a perception that (for example) a passenger on Medicaid picking up a prescription cannot conduct other business while waiting for the prescription and their ride, thus inhibiting coordination. LOW Priority

Estimate of Impact

- This perception has constrained service, wasted customer's time and generates unnecessary trips. This inhibits coordination.

Possible Solution

- This perception of a rule should be investigated. It is believed that there is no Federal rule against sharing service. Health and Human Services Commission has no rule either. TxDOT should query the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare at the Federal level to clarify this perception in writing

Understanding Coordination – Knowledge/Communication Constraints

- **Communication** – Communication is the key to success; the transportation providers must work closely with human service agencies to understand each other's issues. HIGH Priority
- **Coordination Activities Must Make Business Sense** – Any attempts to coordinate service must make business sense. A transit system, like any other business, must not and cannot operate at a deficit. HIGH Priority
- **Human Service Agencies Do Not Always See The Value Of Coordination** – Often choosing alternative methods that may be more effective and cost less (from their perspective). Unfortunately often these other services do not have the driver training and quality maintenance practices used by the transit system. Safety records may not be as good either. LOW Priority
- **Human Service Out Of Pocket Expenses** – Adult Day Care is a prime example of a program that does not fund transportation, yet mandates transportation service. These organizations either perform the service themselves by minimizing out of pocket costs or pay the general public fare of a paratransit program, shifting the cost to the transit system. Often these expenses are minimal as costs are often shown as much lower than transit systems due to the hidden costs (e.g. A driver that is also general staff support and would be on the payroll whether or not they were driving). LOW Priority

Estimate of Impact

- Recognizing when coordination can and when it should not occur is a key to making coordination successful. Coordination for coordination sake may result in a poor business decision that could undermine the financial stability of a transit system.
- The time involved in futile coordination efforts can be extensive. This time can be better spent exploring realistic solutions.

- By using alternate low cost transportation vendors, human service agency transportation may operate at a lower level of safety than public transit operators. This safety issue can be quantified by TxDOT by comparing non – public transit Medicaid vendors with public transit vendors.

Possible Solution

- Again for the most part, this is a local level issue that requires communication among all parties. The key is to understand each others abilities and needs. This planning process will go a long way towards making this successful

Other Constraints

- **Medicaid Trip Assignment** – TxDOT is not enforcing the Medicaid regulation that requires MTP clients to be transported to the nearest available service appropriate to their needs. These trips are not being screened by TxDOT. The result is that there are a number of trips that could have been local in nature but instead take people out of town for routine needs. MEDIUM Priority

Estimate of Impact

- This lack of screening significantly raises the cost of service for MTP and for the operators. Information is not available to determine costs (TxDOT has that information). In the future this will drive up the out of county costs even higher.

Possible Solution

- TxDOT can go back to the previous MTP practice of screening these out of town trips for appropriateness. While this would require slightly more effort on TxDOT's part it will reduce the burden for the operators and ultimately reduce the costs for Medicaid.
- In the future, TxDOT should inform operators in the RFP of the out of county trip length to reduce the need to guess in the proposal. This guess required vendors to project a higher price for out of county trips due to the risk of the unknown.
- **Vehicle requirements.** If state funding from TxDOT is involved, the vehicles must also meet state requirements for use of alternative fuels as defined by TxDOT. TxDOT does not recognize the use of other options such as clean fuels approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Estimate of Impact

- The use of certain fuels is inefficient and often it is difficult to find adequate fueling stations. These vehicles have a short range and often need to be refueled multiple times in the day. In addition due to fueling limitations, these vehicles cannot be used for emergencies such as hurricane evacuation – not knowing if fueling will be available.

Possible Solution

- One possible solution would be the relaxing of TxDOT rules regarding the purchase of these vehicles in areas with limited fueling and maintenance capabilities (typically in rural communities).