RideAbout Shuttle Development and Implementation

Summary

Beginning in May 2004, the new RideAbout Shuttle began offering seniors and people with disabilities in north and northeast Portland, Oregon a new and better transportation option by combining services offered by six separate public and non-profit organizations. The free shuttle now provides door-to-door service to groups and individuals within 11 neighborhoods on weekdays, between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

The free shuttle provides for individuals, door-to-door to medical facilities, meal sites, senior services, and TriMet bus stops and MAX light rail stations. Alternatively, customers can travel on scheduled trips to specific locations such as Safeway Food & Drug, the Lloyd Center Mall, and other shopping destinations with an on-board concierge to assist riders.

Description

The North/Northeast RideAbout Shuttle was created by pooling the resources of several agencies providing transportation services to seniors and disabled in the area. Rather than requiring customers to contact six separate organizations to arrange for a ride, now there is one centralized service, making it easier to use and more efficient to operate.

Partners in the venture include: Ride Connection, Safeway Food & Drug, the African American Chamber of Commerce (AMCC), American Red Cross-Oregon Trail Chapter (ARC), The Urban League, Metropolitan Family Services-Project Linkage and TriMet.

The N/NE RideAbout was designed to increase efficiency for the rider and the providers while maintaining the social, recreational and nutritional aspects of the existing transportation programs offered by the Urban League’s Multicultural Center, Oregon Trail Chapter of the Red Cross, Metropolitan Family Services as well as the African American Chamber of Commerce partners through a contract administered by the non-profit regional community transportation non-profit called Ride Connection.

Ride Connection coordinates the scheduling, dispatch, customer service and oversight of ride requests and trip planning at their facility. Merging these elements maximized each provider’s resources, allowing them to concentrate on providing rides. The coordination through Ride Connection also allows each agency to better understand overall client mobility levels, trip needs and ride schedules to ensure improved services. The new arrangement also allows for collection of effective trip data and provides the opportunity over time to track the billing for each ride or trip as appropriate, improving the efficiency of program management.
Table 1 - Service Before RideAbout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Type Of Trip Provided</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Fleet/Drivers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMCC</td>
<td>Shopping-Safeway</td>
<td>Twice a month</td>
<td>Hired RAZ (private transportation company)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural Center</td>
<td>Medical and meals</td>
<td>Demand Responsive</td>
<td>1 Van</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Family Services</td>
<td>Medical and Shopping</td>
<td>Demand Responsive</td>
<td>1 Van</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Red Cross</td>
<td>Medical and Shopping</td>
<td>Demand Responsive and</td>
<td>5 vans for N/NE Portland-Volunteer drivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group Trips</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TriMet LIFT Services</td>
<td>Medical, Shopping</td>
<td>Door-to-door</td>
<td>TriMet Contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Recreational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TriMet Medical</td>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>On-demand</td>
<td>TriMet Contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Presently, the main RideAbout shuttle service is demand responsive Monday through Friday and there are a variety of group rides organized for customers. These allow riders to shop for about 75-90 minutes. There are convenient seating areas at the stores to wait for the shuttle. An on-board concierge is provided to assist customers with bags and parcels and to escort customers to/from the door. At each customer’s destination, the concierge will place the bags just inside the front door of the residence.

Every Tuesday there are group shopping trips to different local area retail stores or shopping malls. Pick up times are determined by where each customer lives within the service area, and customers are given 90 minutes to shop. The on-board concierge also provides service on the group trips.

On Wednesdays there are pre-arranged group grocery shopping trips. The first and third Wednesdays travel to Safeway and the second and fourth take customers to Fred Meyer. Every Friday there are shopping trips to other area stores including Albertsons, Winco Foods, Wal-Mart and Surprise Trips.

Need for Project

Ride Connection, in coordination with TriMet and the Urban League’s Multicultural Center, the Red Cross and the African American Chamber of Commerce, began planning this project by studying transportation patterns for elderly and people with disabilities within 5 zip codes in N/NE Portland. The purpose of the study was to assess transportation use and propose options that would enhance coordination and efficiency for the elderly and disabled population within this area. The study found that:
• Over 5,500 trips are made by the Urban League’s Multicultural Center, TriMet, the Red Cross and the African American Chamber of Commerce to/from the five zip codes each month.
• An estimated additional 2,000 individuals in the area currently have difficulty finding a transportation option for some or all their trips.
• These numbers of transportation disadvantaged are supported by a steady stream of about 30 paratransit service (LIFT) applications that are received by TriMet each month.
• In addition, anecdotal information indicates that new requests for service are received each month by the other four participating agencies.

This information coupled with a detailed analysis of the trip data from the six providers led to 6 key observations:

1. While local trips represented a much smaller portion of all trips (1,650 of the 5,500 made per month) those making local trips did so at a very high trip rate (70% of all of the trips were made were local trips).
2. In addition, local trips were focused on 46 destinations within the study area and often three or more providers were providing service to the same destination on any given day.
3. While addresses of trip origins within the study area tend to be more unique than destinations, active riders making local trips tend to live along two key corridors (N. Lombard and N.E. Martin Luther King). Often three or more of the providers served the same senior housing facilities or local neighborhood area on any given day.
4. Subscription trips represented more than 60% of all the local trips taken on any given day in the study area.
5. Local trips were concentrated in the mid-day, creating a mid-day peak that was relatively short (9:00 am-2:00 pm).
6. While access to fixed-route transit is high within the study area (94.6% of the population live within walking distance of bus or light rail lines), the majority of local trips being made with special transportation services would require a transfer.

With this information the six providers and Ride Connection agreed that focusing on local trips would provide the greatest coordination opportunities and would allow for a more efficient use of vehicles, outreach/marketing, and operations in the study area.

After a further refinement of the local trip data it became clear that the highest concentrations of trip origins/destinations, low income individuals, elderly and the largest number of registered riders could be found in eleven neighborhoods in the study area. These 11 neighborhoods then were chosen to become the initial focus of the RideAbout shuttle.
User Assessment

RideAbout is a product of building relationships (both with riders and providers) to enhance efficiency and increase the overall number of riders into one easy to use system. This has been accomplished by coordinating and combining resources.

Rider Perspective

From the perspective of the riders, the elderly and disabled users were most concerned about losing the relationships that had been created between them and their drivers. This personal service was important, not only because of the human connection it provides, but also because it increases the confidence in the dependability of the service. Riders were introduced to all of the RideAbout operators. The customers wanted to be sure that the new service could maintain personal relationships, provide a level of consistency, so that they would feel safe and that they can depend on the new service. As a result, concierge service is provided on all trips so that users have a person to depend on for help in getting on and off and a general feeling of safety.

Other rider issues are the ease of scheduling, the ability to get home before your ice cream melts (travel time and on-time performance), whether the service is door-to-door and the extent of the service area.

In order to meet the expectations of the riders, TriMet and Ride Connection worked on instilling confidence in the new service through marketing. Ride Connection has created calendars for each community so that each community has an easy to read schedule. And all 300 of the LIFT riders in N/NE Portland were contacted so that they knew and understood the new service that Ride Connection was offering in their area. TriMet is also offering one-on-one individual trip planning as a part of their mobility support services because once someone tries the system, with a good experience, they are more likely to use the system again.

In addition, the RideAbout drivers and concierges have provided on site outreach activities at senior/disabled housing and other major senior and disabled facilities in the area. Now, riders who were only using Red Cross medical transportation have easy access to shopping and recreational trips as well with a higher frequency as the pooling of clients and resources increased the availability of transportation services in the area overall.

TriMet

TriMet initiated the idea of consolidating service and hosted several kick-off meetings to determine whether the agencies were interested in coordinating their services though Ride Connection. TriMet is the municipal corporation providing public transportation for much of the three counties in the Portland, Oregon region. TriMet operates a comprehensive transit network including a 44-mile, 64-station light rail rail system, 93 bus
lines, service for seniors and people with disabilities and enhanced amenities and
information. The population of the Portland region is about 1.8 million.

The TriMet LIFT program is the shared-ride, public transportation service for persons
who are unable to use TriMet buses or MAX light rail because of a disability. LIFT has
served the tri-county area since 1976 with the goal of offering safe and dependable
transportation. The cost of providing this service is ten-fold to fixed-route service
provision on a cost per ride basis and costs are growing at about 10-15% a year.

Ride Connection

In order to increase efficiencies and decrease costs within the LIFT program, TriMet
initiated the discussions with Ride Connection playing a major role in coordination. Ride
Connection is a non-profit, community service organization established to link
accessible, responsive transportation with community needs by serving those without
viable transportation alternative giving priority to elderly and persons with disabilities
and acting as a liaison between funders and community agencies. Today they have a
network of over 30 agencies and senior centers and over 370 volunteers providing
248,000 rides annually.

Ride Connection brought the following strengths in order to be able to coordinate the
community transportation services in N/NE Portland:

- Involvement of volunteers and using collaborative techniques to maximize cost
  savings and community support.
- Availability of funding not available to a public agency, i.e. foundations,
  corporations, businesses, individuals, and fundraising events.
- Reduction of management/administrative responsibilities in working with a large
  network of community agencies.

Non-profit Organization Perspective

From the perspective of the non-profit organizations serving specific needs such as
medical or shopping, none opposed the idea. However, there was apprehension about
their ability to maintain their identity, preserve long-standing client relationships, and
control key operational standards. The combination of all 4 non-profits with the TriMet
LIFT service left two of the long term Ride Connection providers feeling as though the
new providers were more important.

Another issue that arose in the initial discussions was that the American Red Cross was
worried about losing their transportation department altogether which paid for itself. In
the end, the organization moved forward with the coordination effort because it brought
more opportunities for their users as well as met an internal goal to reach out to the
N/NE Portland community where their headquarters are located.
Technology Assessment

Relative Benefits

The greatest benefit from this program is the ease with which customers can use one coordinated system as well as the hope that there will be cost efficiencies from reducing the duplicity of separate staff for scheduling rides. In addition, the services are offered to a wider range of communities.

Observability:

The true measurement of success of the program will not be in the numbers of rides per service hour but in the ability of the seniors and disabled citizens that use and trust the new system. This will need to be measured through the use of one-on-one surveys with customers and the non-profit agency staff.

Ride Connection hopes to provide quarterly reports on the project success. Project reviews will be conducted every three months after service implementation. Key elements to the reports will contain:

- Coordination Elements
  - Agency Satisfaction is measured through a one-page agency survey.
  - Customer Satisfaction measured through number of complaints and follow through on those complaints.
  - Increased access and awareness measured by registered rider database (meet goals of 15% increase in unduplicated riders in 6 months and 30% in one-year)
- Efficiency Elements
  - Ability of service to provide grouping for trips – increase the number of group rides by 50%.
  - Ability of service to improve efficiency from 4 riders/vehicle hour to 7 rider per vehicle hour and decrease cost per ride to $6.50 per ride within 6 months and $5.00 per ride by 1 year.

Complexity

The complexity of this system is determining how best to serve the senior and disabled community in the most efficient manner without losing sight of their needs for a safe, secure, dependable environment.

Cost

Cost of implementation was in staff time. By pooling resources, the hope is to reduce the cost of provision of service, increase the ability to market the service and increase ridership. However, the service has only in been in place a short-time and in-depth comparison of costs before and after has not been completed.
Consequence of Failure

There are several possible outcomes if the system was to fail. At the customer level there could be a loss of trust in the system which would mean that they become isolated or lose their independence by relying on friends and family. At the inter-agency coordination level, it would mean that everyone would go back to the state that they started, meeting isolated transportation needs for medical or shopping.

Implementation Issues

The implementation of the new service went fairly smoothly but there were some issues that arose.

- Marketing was taken very seriously. Special brochures were created by TriMet with input from all the agencies to introduce the service. A “How to Ride” brochure was distributed to all users of the current six agencies as well as all of the current LIFT and medical program riders on the TriMet system. This in concert with the individual trip planning program at TriMet has made the transition go fairly smoothly.
- The change in schedules for the system created some frustration by current users and Ride Connection created calendars for each neighborhood to reduce the information provided. This has reduced the anxiety and difficulty in reading the scheduled events.
- The on-board concierge service for shopping trips is preferred by many clients because of the convenience and opportunities to socialize with old friends and new.
- One van broke down recently and the number of trips served has gone down.

Project Status

Ride Connection staff is in the planning stages of converting two of the three daily vehicle schedules into neighborhood circulator routes serving specific origins and destinations at specific times via a printed schedule. Route deviation time in each neighborhood will be allotted to provide demand response service. The service guide will be revised to include the new circulator service.

Rides averaged 1,000 per month since May 2004, which translates into about 3 riders per vehicle hour versus the goal of 7 by the end of the two-year project. In September 2004, rides per hour increased to 3.75.

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