

Overcoming Obstacles in Operating a Volunteer Driver Program

Approaches from Massachusetts

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BACKGROUND

MassMobility is an initiative of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services with support from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation. Our goal is to assist community transportation coordination and mobility management efforts across the Commonwealth.

Differences in local resources and community conditions result in varied mobility options for residents across Massachusetts. For many older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income individuals in the Commonwealth, this means a lack of regular and reliable transportation. Volunteer driver programs are one way of filling in these gaps and expanding access to transportation for individuals who are either unable to drive themselves or who live in communities with limited public transportation. They operate out of Councils on Aging, regional transit authorities, and nonprofit organizations.

Because of their relatively low cost of operation and ability to offer personalized assistance, volunteer driver programs can effectively supplement existing transportation services or provide an option when no other service exists. However, there are challenges associated with operating a successful volunteer driver program. These barriers include recruiting enough drivers to meet demand, locating funding to cover operational costs, and navigating volunteer insurance and liability concerns. Volunteer driver programs in Massachusetts are overcoming these barriers in creative and effective ways to successfully implement, operate, and sustain their volunteer transportation service.



John DeRocco is the Billerica Council on Aging's volunteer driver of the year. He provided 1, 168 rides to medical appointments in FY2018.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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The Director of Northern Essex Elder Transport (center), a regional volunteer driver program that serves 14 communities in northeastern Massachusetts, stands with a few of her volunteer drivers.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Recruiting and Retaining Drivers - the success of a volunteer driver program is largely dependent on having a pool of reliable drivers who are able to meet ride demands. This makes recruiting and retaining drivers paramount. Some programs operating under a city or town can provide qualified older adult homeowners with a write-off on their property tax bill for volunteering with a municipal agency. This operates as an incentive for recruiting drivers. For retention, programs host yearly volunteer appreciation events or encourage monthly phone calls from organizers to express gratitude to volunteers for hours spent driving.

Marketing Service - while recruiting drivers is key to sustaining a program, marketing the service to draw potential riders is also important. Expanding awareness of volunteer drivers as a transportation option for consumers and care providers can help to create demand. Organizations in Massachusetts do this by marketing their transportation programs at hospitals and local medical facilities, advertising the service to referral agencies, and/or promoting it in a local newspaper or on the local access cable station.

Regulatory Issues – addressing concerns around insurance and liability to both potential drivers and the town or board of an organization can be challenging, but often times the actual risks associated with operating a volunteer transportation program are minimal compared to the perception of risk. These concerns are addressed by programs in a variety of ways. Some volunteer driver programs choose to purchase an umbrella policy covering above and beyond the driver's commercial policy. One Council on Aging has drivers and riders sign an indemnification form when they sign up to participate – waiving their right to sue. Another option for programs operating out of a municipality is to function as a separate non-profit entity distinguishing it from the town/city for any legal issues that may arise.

Scheduling and Dispatch - limited staff capacity to schedule and dispatch drivers, as well as manage any accounting related to mileage reimbursement, can be problematic. Utilizing volunteers for this portion of the programming can help to alleviate strain on resources. Opting for a scheduling software or a model where drivers self-assign trips can also free staff time. For programs with software scheduling, creating a comprehensive training document for new volunteers to be able to understand the software has proven helpful.

Wheelchair Accessible Rides - some riders need a wheelchair-accessible vehicle (WAV). Because most personal vehicles are not wheelchair accessible, it can be challenging to match the individual with a ride. Some Councils on Aging in Massachusetts address this issue by having volunteers use agency-owned WAVs to provide rides to those needing lift access. Others supplement their volunteer transportation with an accessible van service driven by paid staff.



STATEWIDE VOLUNTEER

DRIVER PROGRAM NETWORK

In an effort to help volunteer driver programs in Massachusetts assist one another with overcoming barriers, MassMobility coordinates the statewide Volunteer Driver Program (VDP) Network. This peer-to-peer network helps to facilitate relationships across programs, providing a forum for sharing best practices in volunteer transportation. The network is open to anyone who operates a volunteer driver program and to those interested in starting one.

Activities

- **Email list** – for announcements of upcoming meetings, conferences, and webinars. Volunteer driver programs can also use the list to pose questions to and share resources with one another (volunteer recruitment forms, training tools, etc.).
- **Professional Development** – a meeting is held every few months to allow programs the opportunity to connect with one another in person. Time is allocated for members to update one another on their programs and pose questions to the group, as well as hear a presentation from a relevant topic of interest. Previous topics include a regional volunteer transportation program operating out of New Hampshire, managing a pool of volunteers, and innovative recruitment techniques.
- **Networking** - through the VDP network, members can connect with peers to share successful strategies or brainstorm solutions to challenges. It also provides a connection to resources for individuals interested in starting their own volunteer driver program.



A volunteer driver in western Massachusetts stands with his vehicle before picking up a rider for transportation to a social outing.