

Reducing Social Isolation Among Older Adults
Case Study

**Community & Public Partnership:
Trip Subsidy Program in San Francisco Helps Older Adults
and People with Disabilities Maintain Health and
Connections**

6/30/22

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Submitted to National Center for Mobility Management



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Community & Public Partnership: Trip Subsidy Program in San Francisco Helps Older Adults and People with Disabilities Maintain Health and Connections

The ETC program permitted me to get medical care. [CLC staff] explained much to me & repeatedly if I misunderstood or forget. The CLC is remarkably patient & consistent with info. The paratransit program helps me access healthcare, essential shopping & I had no idea how I was going to do it. I like how SF ParaTransit & CLC work together and enables me to do better self-care.

– Program participant

The Essential Trip Card has enabled me to go places such as physical therapy and doctor's appointments. It has saved me time and has made it very convenient to get around. Also, it has decreased my stress level in HUGE ways. Since I was laid off I am now dependent on unemployment benefits for food, clothing, rent, medical expenses, etc. There is not much left over in my budget for things like taxis. CLC's help makes a huge difference in my life.

– Program participant

Summary

In 2020, Community Living Campaign, a San Francisco nonprofit, launched a first-of-its-kind partnership with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) to fully subsidize taxi rides for seniors and adults with disabilities. By paying the rider contribution of a new low-cost taxi program offered by the SFMTA, Community Living Campaign has been able to leverage the SFMTA's contribution to deliver FREE taxi rides to seniors and people with disabilities, who are often on a fixed income. CLC's Transportation Subsidy Program has grown to include subsidies for Paratransit taxi and van users. Since the program began, CLC has awarded almost 900 subsidies to 165 residents, giving them free rides to medical appointments, grocery stores, and other vital services.

Most participants reported that CLC's Transportation Program has helped them maintain or increase their physical and mental health, made them more independent, and has allowed them more opportunities for social connection.

Community Living Campaign

Since 2007, Community Living Campaign (“CLC”) has been working with San Francisco seniors and adults with disabilities to increase the connections, resources, and support they need to age and thrive in their own homes and neighborhoods. In 2021, CLC staff and 120 volunteers brought practical support and connections to 2,300 neighbors.

CLC’s Community Connector Network program supports neighbors in coordinating local activities for seniors and people with disabilities, from exercise classes and walking groups to volunteer projects. Whatever the activity, neighbors get to know each other – often for the first time despite years of living close by – allowing them to build the friendships and support they need to age in their community. CLC’s Food Delivery Networks bring groceries and human connection to seniors and people with disabilities who can’t get to food pantries on their own. This program coordinates neighbors to call, stop by with groceries, and check in. Other CLC programs include the Neighborhood Tech Connect program, the SF ReServe jobs program, and the Transportation Program.

Creating connections and reducing social isolation is at the heart of CLC’s work. Eighty-four percent (84%) of participants in CLC’s Community Connector Networks report they know one or more neighbors to ask for help. Ninety-three percent (93%) of participants in the Food Delivery Networks report feeling less isolated since being in the program.

CLC’s Transportation Program

Access to reliable and affordable transportation is a critical component of promoting wellness and reducing isolation. According to AARP, nearly 90% of older adults choose to age in place. To thrive in their homes and communities, older adults and people with disabilities need the ability to access jobs, medical care and other services, as well as find opportunities for social interaction.

Transportation can be a challenge for all San Franciscans, but older adults and adults with disabilities face increased barriers to travel. Taking transit can be difficult, due to a lack of seating at bus stops, steep hills between bus stops and destinations, onerous transfers, and inaccessible transit stations and stops. In addition, rising transportation costs can seriously strain the budget of those on a fixed income.

Knowing that transportation was a major challenge for participants in its Community Connector Networks and Food Delivery Program, CLC launched a formal Transportation Program in the spring of 2020. The program has two overarching goals: 1) Connect residents to free and low-cost transportation options, and 2) Teach residents how to advocate for the transportation services they need. This case study focuses on the first program goal.

Connecting Residents to Free and Low-Cost Transportation

CLC's Transportation staff conducts regular outreach within CLC's Networks, both virtually and in person. Staff share information about free and low-cost transportation options in San Francisco, including the Senior Clipper Card, Free Muni for Seniors and People with Disabilities, and San Francisco Paratransit services.

The Essential Trip Card: A New Low-Cost Taxi Program

When the COVID pandemic began in the spring of 2020, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), the city's transit and Paratransit provider, suspended the majority of their transit service. To help fill the gaps for seniors aged 65 and older and people with disabilities, the agency created a new low-cost taxi program called the Essential Trip Card, which was fashioned after their existing Paratransit taxi program. Riders pay only 20% of the fare, through the use of a debit card. Riders can put up to \$12 on the card a month, which the City adds \$48 to, for a total of \$60 of taxi credit each month. Riders can use any taxi company in San Francisco, since the SFMTA regulates the taxi industry. Riders do not have to contribute each month, and any balance remaining on their card at the end of each month rolls over into the next month. For more information about the Essential Trip Card program, visit <http://www.sfmta.com/etc>.

This low-cost program was not only vital to helping seniors and people with disabilities on fixed incomes access medical services and get food when transit was limited, but it allowed these populations to use a transportation option that limited their exposure to others during a pandemic. The residents we serve shared:

[The Essential Trip Card] allows me to not be exposed and around too many people. It's comforting to be in a cab. The plastic barrier helps you not worry. It helps with piece [sic] of mind that I won't be exposed.

The ETC program has been extremely helpful in allowing me to move around more freely and confidently during the pandemic in the past two years in SF and feel safe and less stressed out overall in doing so.

Since the Essential Trip Card program launched, CLC has focused most of its outreach on informing participants about the program and helping them sign up.



CLC Transportation Program staff sharing information about the Essential Trip Card at an outreach event

Launch of CLC's Transportation Subsidy Program: Leveraging an Existing City Program

Many residents in CLC's Community Connector and Food Networks live on fixed incomes and might not be able to afford the \$12 monthly rider contribution for the Essential Trip Card. To help these residents access this new transportation option, CLC launched a first-of-its-kind partnership with the SFMTA in the fall of 2020 to fully subsidize Essential Trip Card taxi rides for CLC participants.

By paying the \$12 rider contribution, CLC has been able to leverage the City's contribution (\$48), allowing the organization to deliver free taxi rides to participants in the Community Connector and Food Network Programs. CLC later expanded the program to include similar subsidies for CLC participants signed up for Paratransit vans and taxis.

Running the Subsidy Program

To set up the partnership with the SFMTA, CLC signed a basic Memorandum of Understanding with SFMTA's Paratransit broker, Transdev. Then, CLC set up an account with Transdev and regularly sends funding. Several times a week, CLC staff emails Transdev staff a request to transfer funding from CLC's account into specific riders' accounts.

CLC offers a monthly subsidy of \$12 for Essential Trip Card and Paratransit taxi users. This gives them \$60 of taxi credit. CLC will subsidize riders each month if they regularly take rides using the program. If a rider's Essential Trip Card or Paratransit taxi card balance gets above \$200, CLC pauses its subsidy until the balance drops below \$200, to keep funds free for other riders.

For CLC participants who use the SFMTA's ADA van service, called SF Access, CLC's pays for free SF Access van tickets each month, as needed. Transdev mails these tickets directly to the rider.

To determine whether the subsidy program participants need additional funding after the first month, CLC staff contacts participants regularly.

To find new participants for the transportation subsidy program, CLC staff continually conducts outreach in its neighborhood networks. In the second year of the subsidy program, word of the program spread so much that many residents proactively reached out to CLC after hearing about it from a friend or neighbor. In this way, ***outreach conducted by CLC's Transportation Program staff has dramatically increased the reach of the SFMTA's Essential Trip Card program.***

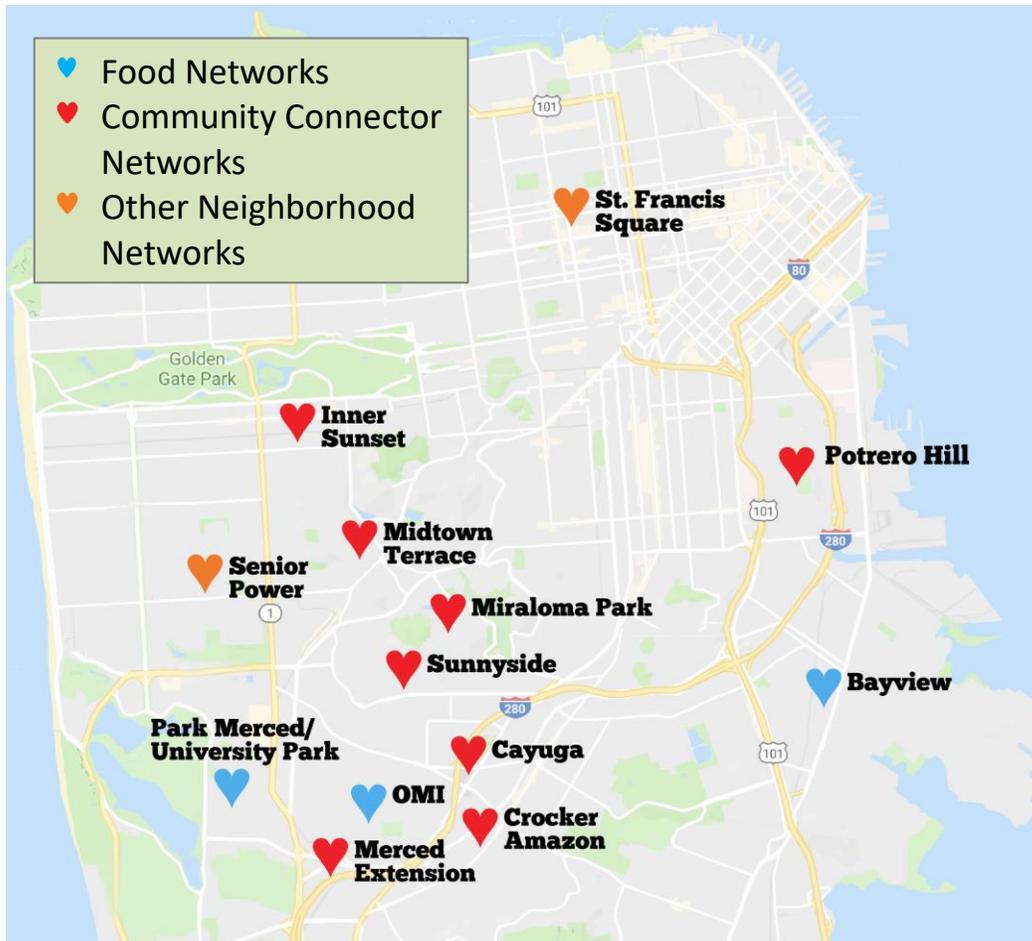


CLC staff telling participants of the Inner Sunset Community Connector Network about the Essential Trip Card and CLC's subsidy program.

Program Reach & Recipient Demographics

CLC began its transportation subsidy program in October 2020 with residents in its Potrero Hill Community Connector Network. This was a new network in a neighborhood that had many steep hills that participants would have to navigate to reach our activities. In early 2021, CLC expanded the program to include residents in all its Connector Networks and Food Network programs. This includes older adults and people with disabilities in the following San Francisco neighborhoods / communities:

- Bayview/Hunters Point
- Cayuga
- Crocker Amazon
- Inner Sunset
- Merced Extension Triangle
- Midtown Terrace
- Miraloma Park
- OMI
- Outer Sunset (through a group called Senior Power)
- Park Merced/University Park
- Potrero Hill
- Saint Francis Square
- Sunnyside



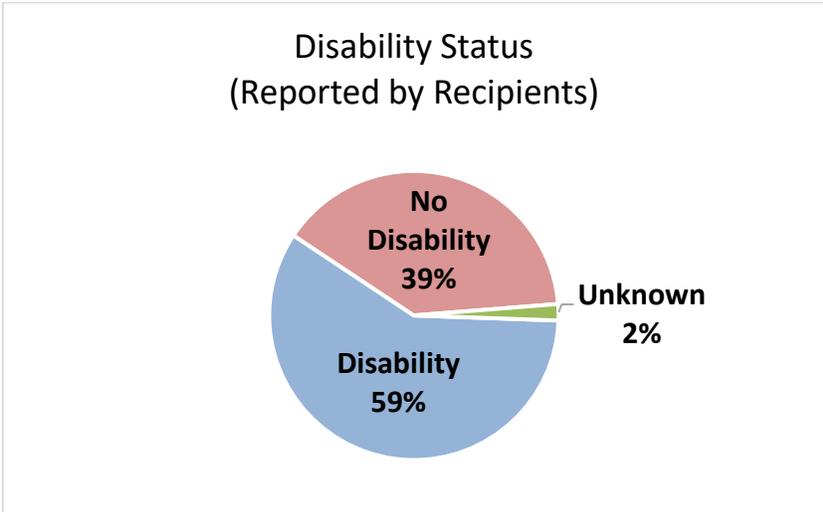
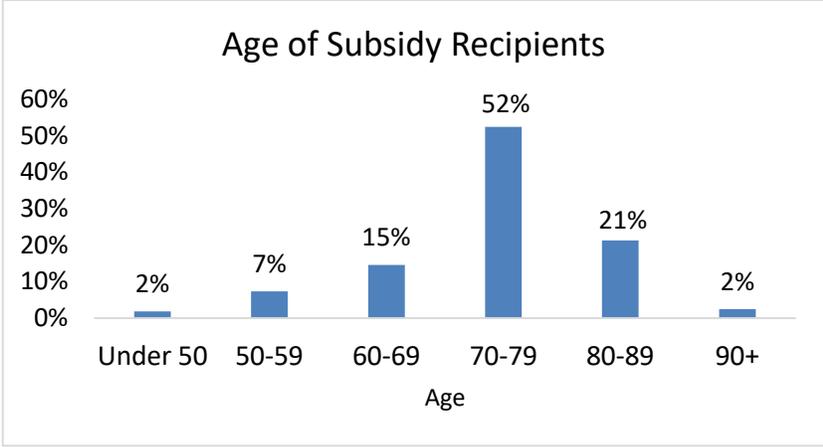
CLC's Neighborhood Networks

Between October 2020 and May 2022, CLC awarded 893 taxi and Paratransit subsidies to 165 residents (most received repeat subsidies). The dollar value of these subsidies to recipients equaled approximately \$55,690.

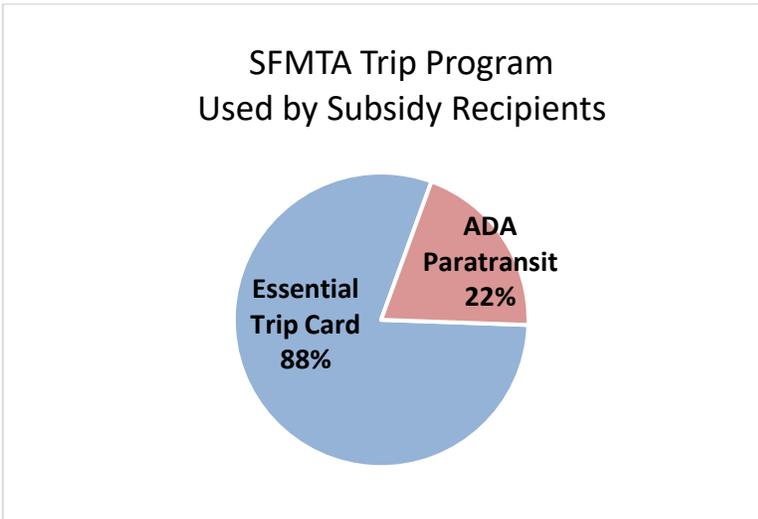
Subsidies Awarded between October 2020 and May 2022

Number of Taxi and Paratransit Subsidies Awarded	893
Number of Residents Awarded Subsidies	165
Dollar Value of Subsidies Awarded	\$55,690

The majority of subsidy recipients (52%) were between 70 and 79 years old. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of subsidy recipients reported having a disability.



The majority of subsidy recipients used the Essential Trip Card.



Program Impact

Throughout this subsidy program, CLC has sent out surveys to get feedback from participants. In April of 2022, CLC sent out an extensive survey to 99 participants to understand how the transportation subsidy impacted their health and feelings of social isolation / connection. Surveys were sent to subsidy recipients who had received a subsidy within the past year and had taken at least one trip after they received the subsidy. CLC offered gift cards to everyone who filled out the survey by the deadline, resulting in a return rate of 75% (75 surveys returned out of 99 sent).

Survey results show that CLC's Transportation Subsidy Program had a positive influence on participants' finances, physical and mental health, social connectedness, and their feelings of independence.



CLC Transportation Subsidy recipient holding her Essential Trip Card

Financial Impact

The \$12 monthly rider contribution for San Francisco's Essential Trip Card program and Paratransit taxi program can be burdensome for residents on a fixed income. When asked how CLC's financial support impacted their lives, subsidy recipients shared:

Since I was laid off I am now dependent on unemployment benefits for food, clothing, rent, medical expenses, etc. There is not much left over in my budget for things like taxis. This help makes a huge difference in my life.

I consider [CLC's support] a wonderful gift. It helps me a great deal, because otherwise I would probably not be able to use the program.

The financial support provides a stable and trusted amount every month. It's one less thing to worry about and the payment makes a difference in my finances.

Impact on Physical and Mental Health

According to the US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, having regular and reliable access to health services can prevent disease and disability and increase life expectancy and quality of life (<https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/leading-health-indicators/2020-lhi-topics/Access-to-Health-Services>).

According to the survey results, CLC's transportation subsidy recipients overwhelmingly used their trips to access health services:

- **100% reported that CLC's transportation program "helps me get to medical appointments and procedures."**
- **58% reported that health care services were their most frequent trip designation.**

Along with regular access to health care, other indicators of health include regular exercise and access to healthy food. CLC's trip subsidy program helped participants with both of these health indicators:

- **100% reported that CLC's transportation program helped them "maintain or increase my physical activity level."**
- **97% reported that CLC's transportation program helped them "get healthy food."**

Finally, when asked directly whether they believed that CLC's Transportation Program benefited their health:

- **100% of subsidy recipients reported that the program helped them maintain or improve their health and their emotional well-being.**

Considering that **51% of subsidy recipients reported that they would take fewer trips without the Essential Trip Card program and CLC's support**, it is likely that their access to health services, exercise, and healthy food – and potentially their health – would decline if they were not participating in the program.

Impact on Social Isolation and Loneliness

According to the National Institute on Aging, older adults are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness, both of which are associated with negative health outcomes, including depression, dementia, and ultimately death

(<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected>).

Fifty percent (50%) of survey respondents reported living alone. For many of these residents, leaving their house is the main way to get social contact. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of survey respondents lived with just one other person.

Subsidy recipients reported that participating in CLC's Transportation Program substantially increased their opportunities for social contact:

- **100% of survey respondents reported that the program “helps me get out of the house.”** As one participant said:

Thank you so much for helping me get the [Essential Trip] card . . . This is really going to be a boon for my claustrophobic life.

- **91% of survey respondents reported that the program “helps me interact with others more often.”**

CLC's Transportation Program also helped participants spend time with family and friends, which is an important component of social connection and well-being.

- **87% of survey respondents stated that the program “helps me see my friends and family more often.”**

- Many survey respondents reported that the card enabled them to visit loved ones who were in facilities:

[The program] helped ease the expense of visiting my husband in a nursing home located across the city from where I live.

Very good program - helped me keep in touch with other friends who were physically unable to leave residence/care facilities, enabling for me to visit them easily.

My wife got sick and had to be admitted to the hospital . . . Because of your system, I could visit my wife every day.

CLC Plays a Major Role in Strengthening Connectedness

In addition to the social connection that the Essential Trip Card enables, the personal contact provided by CLC's Transportation Program staff contributes greatly to the program's impact on social isolation. Transportation Program staff checks in with subsidy recipients every one to two months, asking how they've been, how the transportation service is working for them, and providing general social contact. In addition, staff regularly connects subsidy recipients to other CLC programs, such as our Neighborhood Tech Connect Program and our virtual and in-person activities. Furthermore, when residents have questions about services outside of CLC's scope, Transportation Program staff refer them to outside resources, such as the Department of Disability and Aging Services, Legal Assistance to the Elderly, and In-Home Supportive

Services. All **these actions by CLC's Transportation program staff increase the connection in subsidy recipients' lives beyond the impact of a simple financial subsidy.**

Program participants reported:

I'm very thankful for the phone calls I receive from [CLC staff].

[CLC staff] has been wonderful for keeping things going! Checks in to see if anything else is needed.

Staff helped me to reach out to best agencies to find caregiver for my husband.

Impact on Independence

For older adults and people with disabilities, traveling independently can be a challenge. Transit can be hard to navigate, with limited bus stop seating, limited seating on the bus, multiple transfers, and inaccessible transit stations and stops. Maintaining a car can be difficult on a fixed income, and parking and night driving are regular concerns for older adults. Despite these challenges, maintaining independence is important, since independence is associated with better health and well-being

(<https://web.stanford.edu/~hazelm/publications/2010%20Kitayama%20et%20al%20Independence%20and%20interdependence%20predict%20health%20and%20wellbeing>).

Survey results show that CLC's Transportation Program did help subsidy recipients travel independently:

- **99% of survey respondents stated that since they started participating in CLC's program, they were able to get around San Francisco without relying on family, friends, and neighbors.** As one subsidy recipient shared:

The program is very helpful, makes me feel independent because I don't have to ask for ride from someone in the family.

Another participant summed it up perfectly:

This program supports my independence thereby promoting my emotional and physical health.

Lessons Learned

It cannot be understated how crucial low-cost or free taxi service has been for older adults and people with disabilities during a public health crisis. Even if transit service had not been cut in San Francisco during the pandemic, most of the older adults and people

with disabilities CLC works with would not have felt safe from infection on public transit. Without this new taxi program and CLC's subsidy, many of CLC's subsidy recipients would have rarely left their homes, leading to increased social isolation and negative health outcomes.

Pandemic aside, the program has also shown that there was an unmet need for transportation options for older adults and people with disabilities in San Francisco. **When asked how they would take the trips if they didn't have the Essential Trip Card and CLC's support, 51% of survey respondents said they would have to take fewer trips.** Subsidy recipients repeatedly shared three needs that the Essential Trip Card taxi program was meeting that other options clearly were not:

1. Personal Safety

Many subsidy recipients mentioned being concerned about their public safety when traveling, especially at night-time, and how the Essential Trip Card gives them the freedom to go out:

This is a very good program that makes it possible to . . . come home if it's dark when I leave my friend's house.

I wouldn't go out or drive at night because of feeling unsafe parking on some neighborhoods. It was/is really freeing to go out at night when I want (because of ETC).

[The program provides] safety during after-hours appointments.

2. Carrying bags / heavy items

Many program participants described how the Essential Trip Card helped them transport heavy and large loads:

[Without the Essential Trip Card] it will be hard for me to get my groceries in one trip.

[I use the Essential Trip Card] when I have heavy packages.

3. Taking Onerous Trips

Many subsidy recipients talked about scenarios in which public transit would have been difficult for them to use, and how grateful they were to have the option of taking a taxi through the Essential Trip Card and CLC's program. (Many of CLC's subsidy recipients would not qualify for ADA Paratransit.) Subsidy recipients described how the program was helpful when they weren't feeling

well, or when travel by transit was burdensome.

If I didn't have trip cards I will have to take Muni [the bus]-- not a good alternative if I am sick or in pain.

On days I felt sick, the card was a life saver.

[I use the Essential Trip Card] when visiting family requires 2 transfers.

Conclusion

When CLC began its Transportation Program, the main goal was to give people ways to navigate hilly neighborhoods so they could attend the organization's activities. Two years later, the program has not only met this initial goal, but it has helped CLC meet its overarching organizational goals: to reduce social isolation and improve health and well-being.

CLC's partnership with the SFMTA on the Essential Trip Card program and the ADA Paratransit program has significantly expanded the impact of these City services. The transportation services themselves allow residents to access health care, social services, food, and visit family and friends, amongst other things. CLC's subsidy program provides much-needed financial support, which allows more residents to utilize this important program. CLC's staff also conducts extensive outreach for the program, provides regular social contact with subsidy recipients, and connects recipients to other resources that support health and social connection. Working together, CLC and the SFMTA are significantly contributing to the health, independence, and social connection of older adults and people with disabilities in San Francisco.

SFMTA's Essential Trip Card program was created as a temporary program to fill in the gaps of decreased bus service during the pandemic. Due to its popularity, the program is still active two years later, even as bus service has slowly been restored. The SFMTA has secured funding for the program through at least June 2023, with plans to continue the program as long as funding allows. Community Living Campaign will work to support the permanent continuation of this vital program and to continue our successful partnership with the SFMTA.