

Trends in Volunteer Transportation

VOLUNTEERING IN AMERICA

Volunteering has been a part of American life since colonial times. For example, as early as the 1600s, colonists formed citizen fire brigades to combat fires in Boston, Philadelphia, and New Amsterdam (later New York). Although volunteerism is not part of the cultural or social fabric in many countries, it is valued in the United States, and is a way of life for many Americans. It also can contribute to the economic well-being of a country. According to the Corporation of National and Community Service in 2017, nearly 63 million Americans volunteered more than 7.8 billion hours. The value of their contribution was estimated to be worth approximately \$192,000,000,000. (Yes, that is 192 billion dollars).*

VOLUNTEERS WHO DRIVE

You might ask why people volunteer to drive older adults. The answer is that they receive personal satisfaction from volunteering to drive. However, what also is important is that they know they are exceptionally important transportation providers because they can provide many of the services and meet many of the needs that traditional transportation services cannot meet.

In 2004 and 2005, the Beverly Foundation's annual STAR Award application collected information from 714 volunteer drivers, all of whom participated in programs that provided transportation to special population groups, especially older adults. The respondents to the inquiry all volunteered in organizations that provided transportation. A small number said they volunteered to drive out of a sense of duty, because they were asked, had time on their hands, or wanted to stay active. However, the majority of respondents (89%) said they volunteered to help others, a large number (52%) said they volunteered to give back, and an even larger number (73%) said they volunteered to do something meaningful. They also said their greatest satisfaction was helping people (89%), feeling needed (89%), donating time rather than money (39%), and appreciation and recognition (21%).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit the numerous fact sheets and exercises in addition to the planning, implementation, and evaluation sections of the TurnKey Kit.

VOLUNTEER DRIVER PROGRAMS

Volunteers have been providing transportation for more than 100 years. Today, they continue to contribute their time (and often their vehicles). For example, in 2018, the National Volunteer Transportation Center (NVTC) included more than 850 volunteer driver programs in its data set. This group as a whole had been in operation an average of 17 years.

ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES

Volunteer driver programs are organized in a variety of ways. Although their organizational characteristics vary considerably, they exhibit several organizational features that set them apart from other transportation services. They also exhibit organizational trends that may be on the horizon for existing volunteer driver programs as well as other transportation services. Below are five examples of organizational trends identified with volunteer driver programs.

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF ORGANIZATIONAL TRENDS

#1 Drivers Volunteers who drive passengers are said to be the key to the success of volunteer driver programs. The majority of programs emphasize volunteers as drivers, although some also hire paid drivers. Today, many traditional transportation services (e.g., non-emergency medical transportation services) are beginning to recruit and train volunteers to support the work of their paid drivers, including driving and providing assistance to passengers.

#2 Vehicles Volunteer Driver programs generally ask their volunteers to use their personal vehicles to provide passengers with rides. However, many programs also own vehicles, some equipped with lifts to accommodate people with disabilities. Some also purchase specialized vans that accommodate wheelchairs. They can be expensive to purchase and operate, however, many volunteers drive them so they can provide necessary support for passengers.

#3 Sponsorship The majority of volunteer driver programs have been sponsored and/or funded by the faith community. However, in the mid 1980s a volunteer transportation program was organized by a public transportation agency with the intent that involving volunteer drivers could reduce the cost of providing paratransit services. Only recently have public and paratransit services begun to explore the planning, initiation, and support of volunteer transportation.

#4 Funding Government grants tend to be a major source of the revenue of volunteer driver programs. Programs also look to personal donations, foundations, and fundraisers for support. Software used by many programs for scheduling and managing data can easily identify the frequency to which they take their passengers to specific destinations. This makes it fairly simple for programs to gather and share convincing data that can encourage high traffic destinations to contribute financial support.

#5 Collaboration Today, groups across the country organize transportation brokerages. These act as intermediaries between regulatory and funding agencies and volunteer driver programs. The broker may own the vehicles, schedule the rides, raise funds, maintain data, and undertake a variety of functions that allow the volunteer driver program to focus on providing rides. What also is important is that an increasing number of small, free-standing volunteer driver programs are working together to raise funds, share vehicles, and schedule and document rides.

SERVICE FEATURES

As was mentioned earlier, volunteer driver programs exhibit a variety of organizational and service features. At the same time, they also exhibit service trends that may be on the horizon for volunteer driver programs and perhaps for other methods of transportation service delivery as well. Below are five examples of volunteer driver program service trends.

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF SERVICE TRENDS

#1 Availability The availability of service delivery often reflects the 9-3 or 9-5 hours of availability of volunteer driver program staff. Thus, transportation service may not be available in the evening and on weekends. Today, programs are discovering methods of expanding service hours to include evenings and weekends, and sometimes even 24/7. Examples include on-call drivers, self-scheduling by drivers, the use of taxi vouchers, and ride hauling services.

#2 Ride Historically, many volunteer driver programs undercounted the number of rides they provide because they identified their rides as round trips. Rides should be calculated by each stop that is made. Thus, if Ms. Jones travels to the doctor and home it results in two rides, and if she stops at the grocery, it counts as three rides. For programs that count rides as round trips rather than as one-way rides (many programs still do today) the result is a higher cost per ride.

#3 Training In the past, programs often were unable to provide training to their passengers or their drivers because they did not have training expertise, were unable to access it, or could not afford to purchase it. Today, an increasing number of volunteer driver programs involve their volunteer drivers as travel ambassadors who provide travel training to help passengers learn how to use the transportation method that will best meet their needs. They also are able to offer in-person and/or online AAA, AARP, or NVTC driver training programs.

#4 Technology Powerful (and costly) ride scheduling and data management software has been available for many years for use by public, community, and large volunteer transportation programs. Small volunteer driver programs unable to afford expensive software have used pencil and note pads to schedule rides and manage data. Others have used Excel spreadsheets or asked local friends or colleagues to develop a computer program for use in scheduling rides and managing their data.

Today, several low cost, web-based and mobil software applications have been developed specifically for volunteer driver programs. Most are simple to learn, easy to use, and inexpensive to purchase and update.

#5 Risk Management In the past, some volunteer driver programs did not provide insurance coverage for their passengers, their drivers, or their program. Although they tend to be low risk transportation providers, good risk management is important for the safety of the passengers, the drivers, and the program. Because prospective drivers sometimes express concern about liability, good risk management (especially understanding insurance coverage) also is important for volunteer driver recruitment. Today, an increasing number of programs offer driver training and purchase insurance. They also development risk management policies that address important issues related to the drivers, the passengers, and the program.

SPECIAL TRENDS

Three features that set volunteer driver programs apart from other transportation services are the passengers they serve, the assistance they provide, and the destinations to which they take their passengers. Below are brief discussions of each of these features.

Passengers

Volunteer driver programs provide transportation to many types of passengers: people with physical or cognitive limitations, ADA eligible passengers, people who cannot afford to pay for transportation, and older adults. They also provide rides to people who no longer want to drive or have outlived their driving expectancy. These passengers often use services for several reasons: they cannot access other services; the volunteer drivers provide assistance, support, and socialization; the rides are low cost or free; and they can use the service to get where they need and want to go. In the past, services tended to function as one-vehicle-one-passenger operations. Today, many car-based programs have instituted “piggyback rides” and “two-for-one deals.” Programs with vans and buses also provide group trips for shopping and for quality-of-life rides. Such multiple-passenger rides are especially useful in rural areas with long distance travel requirements and when more than one passenger is traveling to a single destination.

Assistance

Why do older adults need assistance? When they no longer drive, the same physical and cognitive limitations that made it difficult or impossible for them to drive also can make it difficult or impossible for them to use traditional transportation options. Many services require passengers to get to a bus stop or the curb, or in most instances to travel alone, shop alone, or stay at their destination alone. The door-to-door, door-through-door, and stay-at-the-destination assistance that volunteer driver programs tend to provide makes them what some describe as “the hope of the future.”

Today, an increasing number of volunteer driver programs provide a special type of “stay-at-the-destination assistance.” Sometimes referred to as medical advocacy or patient navigator programs, they generally train volunteer drivers to assist passengers during and after a doctor or clinic visit by taking notes and possibly discussing them with the passenger (and sometimes a family member) after the visit. Such labor-intensive support not only increases the role of the volunteer driver, it also can increase the per ride costs of the volunteer transportation service.

Destinations

Although the majority of rides provided by volunteer driver programs are to life-sustaining destinations, especially to health care destinations, many older adult passengers also want and need to go to life-maintaining destinations (the bank, the post office, and the library) and life-enriching destinations (general shopping, personal errands, social activities, trips to see family and friends, trips to beauty and barber shops, and even trips to the cemetery). Destinations often are related to policy decisions and funding requirements. Today, life-sustaining destinations are still the norm, however, there is increasing movement on the part of volunteer driver programs to meet the needs (and wants) of passengers to get to life-maintaining and life-enriching destinations.