

Bis-Man Transit Making Connections through Information and Training

As marketing manager for Bismarck-Mandan (Bis-Man) Transit (North Dakota), Misty Staiger knew that there were individuals in the community who could use Bis-Man Transit services to get jobs, training, and other destinations but just didn't know how, when, or where to connect to services. She also knew that if she could tap into the local network of workforce development and human service staff to spread the word about transportation among the people they serve, she would go a long way toward expanding those individuals' access to transportation.

To do just that, Staiger developed *Connecting the Community*, a one-on-one series of trainings designed to empower human service providers, employment and training agencies, schools, and local businesses about how to best assist clients, students and employees with understanding and using Capital Area Transit (CAT), Bis-Man's fixed route bus system. The training incorporates components from the Community Transportation Association of America's *Transportation Solutions Coordinator* course Staiger attended in April 2009.

To date, direct-service staff from Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Experience Works, developmental disability services providers, and senior centers have participated in the trainings. These participants shared the common goal of finding reliable and affordable transportation for their clients. Feedback from service providers showed they welcomed the opportunity to increase their knowledge of options available to clients who were able to use public transit.

Participants were trained on assessing their clients' capability to safely ride the bus as well as specific mobility considerations that may impact their access to and use of public transportation. This information is captured on forms taken from the Transportation Solutions training that allow direct-service staff to develop individualized transportation plans with their customers/clients that respond to their specific circumstances. Many of the training materials used (e.g., route maps, worksheets, examples of individualized transportation plans) are available on the Bis-Man Transit website [<http://www.bismantransit.com/?id=83>].

Through classroom and on-hands training, direct-service staff also learned about reading bus timetables, riding the bus, transferring from one bus to another, identifying the correct bus, and paying bus fares, so they could in turn training their customers and clients in these skills. Direct-service staff are also encouraged to develop short and long-term follow-up plans with the individuals they serve to identify a customer or client's comfort with implementing the plan and to ascertain whether an individualized travel plan needs to be adjusted.



In the first 6 months since the development of *Connecting the Community*, trainings were held at job placement services offices, special education classes, a homeless shelter and the domestic violence shelter. Eighteen service providers, representing 12 agencies, have participated. Staiger notes that one of the more rewarding outcomes of *Connecting the Community* is increased communication between the transit agency and various service providers.

Bis-Man Transit encourages training participants to identify and share suggestions for improvement with Bis-Man Transit staff. In response to this feedback, for example, the training is being revised to focus on the specific needs of low-wage workers reliant on CAT to get to work, job training, and other employment-related destinations.

Through the training, television ads, and other media marketing outlets, Staiger is able to promote Bis-Man Transit as a central hub for transportation information in the community. Bis-Man's message encourages new riders to ask the drivers, call the office, or log onto the agency's website for answers to questions about riding the bus.

In addition to using in-house listservs to contact service providers, Staiger markets the no-cost trainings through partnerships with United Way and local community coalitions. Many participants have learned about the trainings through forwarded email messages and flyers from co-workers or other agencies. Thus, the database of agencies that would find the training helpful continues to grow. Outreach is also being directed toward individuals who may have recently lost their licenses, are new to the area or are recently faced with a disability that makes driving difficult.

One of the side benefit of the trainings was that drivers were alerted to watch out for new riders and offer assistance when needed. Bis-Man Transit also offers one-on-one mobility training to individuals interested in riding CAT that include reading bus route maps and developing a rider's schedule based on the individual's most frequently visited places around Bismarck and Mandan.

Connecting the Community is supported with a Federal Transit Administration Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) and New Freedom funding, with the local match provided by United Way. The training is based on the *Transportation Solutions Training* developed by the Community Transportation Association of America and Easter Seals Project ACTION, supported with funding from the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. The training provides organization and agency staff working one-on-one with clients the information and tools needed to better understand and access available community transportation services for their customers.

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