

Helping Seniors Take the Bus

Innovative Transit Travel Training Programs



By Jane Hardin

Mobility is a crucial ingredient in an independent and enjoyable life. Community and public transportation systems around the nation help improve the lives of older Americans every day, connecting them with a myriad of destinations.

Using public transportation is another way of maintaining independence and mobility, but many older people are unaware of what public transportation exists in their community and are unfamiliar with how to use it.

To help older people to learn what services their public transportation system offers and to learn how easy and convenient it can be to use those services, numerous local transit programs employ travel training programs. These travel training programs encompass a variety of approaches: simple introductory descriptions of local service to groups of seniors; peer-to-peer assistance — sometimes called travel ambassador or bus buddy programs; and mobility training, multisession training programs that enable older persons and persons with disabilities to use public transportation independently. And perhaps most importantly, in this new

era of more market-driven transit operations, travel training helps community and public transit systems to expand their market.

Mobility Training

Mobility training programs, which enable persons with serious mental and physical disabilities and older persons to enter the mainstream of public transportation, perform a valuable service for all involved. Persons whose talents would not otherwise be tapped are able to participate in the life of their community — they can do their own shopping, get to medical appointments, visit friends and have fun; many are able to hold jobs because they can get to work.

The Easy Rider Program of Special Transit in Boulder, Colo., implemented in 2003, is a fine example of mobility training. It offers specialized mobility training programs to expand the independent travel options of older persons and persons with disabilities by helping them to learn how to use accessible public transportation safely and confidently.

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Easy Rider has a training certification program that every mobility trainer must take before beginning work. As part of their training, new mobility trainers spend several weeks shadowing experienced trainers. Most of the trainers have backgrounds in social service,

rehabilitation or special education or degrees in therapeutic recreation, orientation and mobility.

Easy Rider offers individualized instruction, teaching in real environments, and a step-by-step lesson sequence — safety is its number one priority. Efforts are made to reduce safety risks and to increase trainees' skills in dealing with emergencies or potentially unsafe situations. The training teaches problem solving and judgment skills so that the trainees will know how to handle unique events or difficult situations, for example, what to do if he/she gets on the wrong bus or gets off at the wrong stop or becomes lost.

Whenever possible, the training takes place at the same time and on the same routes the person would normally travel. This helps the trainer to identify the specific situations that the trainee will have to negotiate. If a person has a low vision problem, the trainer can design a travel pattern for the trainee that minimizes street crossing. Much of their training focuses on helping the trainees to learn how to negotiate on their own and to know what accommodations they can ask for. Persons

with low vision learn that they can let the drivers know they are unable to read stop notices or street signs, and that they can request special stops. Persons with arthritis in their knees or hips — often older people — learn that they can ask the bus driver to lower the

lift because bus lifts are not only for people who use wheelchairs or other assistive devices. Older persons who want to minimize the risk of falling can ask the driver not to start the bus until after they have taken their seat.

Dinah Pollard, Special Transit's Mobility Program Coordinator, says that approximately one-third of their trainees are older persons and that they have no special approach based on age: each training is different because it is based on teaching the essential skills that person needs, and the style of teaching is based on the person's individual capacity and learning style. For instance, training of persons with cognitive impairment or brain injury often emphasizes memorization of trip cards while training of persons without cognitive impairment is more flexible and often involves trainees in decision-making. She has found that older persons often want to make their own judgment calls based on their lifetime of experience.

Group Presentations

Another effective method for training seniors to use transit systems are programs that are based on presentations by transit staff at senior centers, senior housing facilities or local churches. The audiences for these presentations are generally active older people who may want to cut back on their driving or who do not have access to a car.

The presentations typically describe local service and include explanations about transfers, fares including senior discounts and pointers on how to read bus schedules and maps. Often a demonstration bus will be parked nearby

so that older persons can enter to see what it is like to board a bus and find a seat.

Charlotte Area Transit System in Charlotte, North Carolina has gone beyond the staff presentation with a parked demonstration bus to actually provide demonstration trips for older trainees. The system, partnered with local churches, senior centers and

To develop its Easy Rider program, Special Transit received initial grants from the Rose Community Foundation, the Denver Regional Council of Governments and Foothills United Way. Throughout the program, the Denver Regional Transportation District has provided free passes to trainees during their training

community groups, offers seven or eight demonstration rides a year to shopping malls and social events for older residents.

Ann Arbor, Mich. and Palm Beach, Fla. are two communities with strong travel training group education components. Ann Arbor Transportation Authority has a Travel Training Program with staff that regularly conducts group sessions. Palm Tran has two full-time trainers who make presentations throughout their service area to familiarize older residents with how to use their local transportation services.

These trainings, however, are only one part of Palm Tran's Seniors in Motion, a comprehensive public awareness and training program for residents age 85 or older. The objective of Seniors in Motion is to reach older persons in remote areas and gated communities and

expand their mobility alternatives. The innovative program informs them about Palm Tran's free fixed-route service and reduced fares on door-to-door service. Seniors in Motion also offers specialized training for those who may have difficulty traveling on transit vehicles.

Peer Training

We learn best from our peers. In more non-traditional transit communities, seniors often require a little extra training to ease them into riding the bus. Travel ambassadors or bus or travel buddies are some of the most popular travel training programs in use today. Another person — usually also older and who uses public transportation, serves as a travel ambassador or bus or travel buddy. Lane Transit District in Eugene, Oregon partners with local senior centers to match individual older persons one-on-one with Bus Buddies, volunteers recruited from regular bus riders. Bus Buddies describe the available transportation services and teach about how to plan trips and navigate routes. Then each older person takes a bus ride with his or her Bus Buddy. Afterward, they discuss their trip, and the Bus Buddy tries to answer any concerns and questions the older person may have about using the bus.

The travel buddy program in use at the Great Falls Transit District in Great Falls, Mont. uses a group approach. Each group has a leader who is an older experienced bus rider. The group leader accompanies the group on its first trip to answer any questions. The leader also demonstrates the proper way to pay the fare, how to ask for a seat and when one should stand up to exit. The Great Falls program also allows participants to choose the destination for a training trip. This helps to make the training more relaxed and makes the point to the

participants that buses can take them where they want to go.

Today, there are a number of programs transit systems can tap into to help design their senior travel training. The City of Napa, Calif. and the Austin Resource Center for Independent Living in Austin, Texas employ senior volunteers in their travel ambassador programs. In exchange for a year of free transportation service, the volunteer ambassadors work as one-on-one peer trainers.

A Little Help Can Make a Huge Difference

The goal of any transit travel training program is clear: to enable older persons and persons with mental and physical disabilities to enter the mainstream of public transportation. These transit systems and the individuals they use to perform the vital training are making a difference in the quality of life of many of their fellow citizens. 🚌