INTRODUCTION

Advocating for your transit system is one of the most important tasks of a transit manager. Advocacy and lobbying are different. Lobbying involves attempting to influence a specific piece of legislation, whereas advocacy consists of education and public relations. Effective advocacy involves creating coalitions of individuals, entities and organizations that can assist you and your governing board in on-going outreach activities. Building local support for transit is critical. Successful transit providers will be those agencies that build coalitions to coordinate available resources, consolidate service to eliminate duplication, and communicate effectively with their community.

Your agency is providing critical services to the community, but this may not be fully understood in the community. Through advocacy and public relations the larger community (including key decision-makers) will gain a clearer understanding of:

• Who you serve;
• Your agency’s services and strengths;
• The cost of service;
• How your transportation services affect the lives of citizens in need of accessing jobs, medical services, education, shopping, social engagements, and recreation;
• How your services help people live independently; and
• What it would mean to the local community and your customers if your agency were not there.

While transit managers are critical advocates for their systems, their efforts alone cannot generate the powerful coalitions that result when many groups pull together to advocate for transit-related issues. Support from consumers, human services agencies and governmental entities for whom your services are essential, are vital in creating a broad base of support for transit in your community. Historically, community transportation began with grassroots efforts responding to a community’s
perceived needs. Typically, community transit was planned, funded and managed through local coalitions. Advocacy was the heart of the service’s design and operation.

There are two important reasons why advocacy is vital to a community transportation agency. First, an effective advocacy program will enlist the help of individuals and organizations to whom your services are vital. Secondly, as local support broadens, the funding base or available resources for your services may also broaden.

ADVOCACY: IT’S AN ATTITUDE

Advocacy begins with an attitude. An effective advocate of community transportation services knows how important these services are to the community and looks for ways to meet community needs more effectively. This creates a willingness to work with a wide variety of individuals and organizations throughout the community, to listen carefully and be a willing problem-solver in developing new solutions for the community’s transit needs.

Prior to implementing a formal advocacy plan, consider how your service and performance indicators compare with similar systems. If your performance is higher or lower than industry standards, you need to know why. Your state’s department of transportation should have access to standardized performance indicators for systems with operating characteristics similar to yours. Another resource may be your state’s transit association. Selling a quality system that is efficient and well managed is much easier if the agency is perceived as providing a high quality service! BUT, before going to the public for support, be sure that your house is in order.

Making the time to reach out and communicate with others is critical to your advocacy efforts and to your organization’s success. Connections to the community will give you a realistic picture of what the community needs and how and when those needs are changing. Likewise, a manager must be in touch with employees and customers will not have a realistic picture of what is going on within the organization.

How to Advocate

Let’s take a detailed look at the four basic steps to successful advocacy:

1) Create buy-ins

The support for transit that you generate in the community is directly tied to the success of your advocacy efforts. Use the community to shape your transit system through user groups, rider forums and other tools. By encouraging customer groups and the broader community to participate in defining current and future needs for transit, you create buy-ins. When individuals or groups are informed and are genuinely invited to be an integral part of the needs assessment process they become your most powerful advocacy allies.

Start by examining your agency’s mission in light of your current customer groups. These groups are going to be your agency’s key advocates; therefore it is essential that they be included throughout the process and that they be able to articulate your agency’s mission.

The individuals and the target customer groups that will become your strongest advocates can include:

- Members of the agency’s governing board
- Existing riders or users of service
- Former riders or users of service
- “Non” riders (potential future riders)
- Indirect customers (care-givers, families of riders, health care and rehabilitation facilities)
- Funders of services or financial providers
- Agency employees
- Elected officials
- Taxpayers

Meet with your governing board members, staff and drivers to examine and reaffirm (or perhaps restructure) the agency’s mission statement and then take the mission to targeted groups previously listed. Meet with members of these groups informally or hold a series of programs to gather information. Define your agency’s interdependence on all of the groups identified. Once you are clear about how various customer groups can impact your agency, begin asking these questions:

- Is the agency mission relevant to all customer groups? What needs are being met? Where are the service shortfalls? Are there specific service characteristics that are working well? What needs to be changed?

- Does the transit service address larger community concerns? How? If the service was not available how would it affect individuals? The community?

The following short story dramatically illustrates the power of nurturing community advocates for transit services:
A vocal member of the county Aging Services Board decried the high cost of contracting with the local transit provider to provide services for elders. This board member used every public forum available to encourage senior service centers to apply for the Title III transportation funding and provide this service themselves. The local transportation provider invited this board member to become part of its strategic planning process. After several months of meetings she became the agency's strongest advocate. When asked why, she replied that she had no idea how complicated paratransit service was, nor had she realized how time- and resource-intensive it could be.

You don't need to start with outside groups. Listen to the people you serve (your customers, your drivers). How does your agency currently respond to customer complaints? Take every customer comment seriously. A good rule is to respond to any complaint or comment within 24 hours. Even if you are unable to give your customer exactly what is wanted, your honest and forthright approach will be appreciated and will increase your credibility with your customers.

Be aware of how various customer groups can impact your agency. Goals and service objectives defined through a participatory process with customers will provide a strong and realistic base for your agency. No matter how large or small your agency, it is important to have a clear mission with a specific set of quantifiable goals and objectives. When you or your agency representatives speak with groups in your community, a clear statement of purpose will be invaluable. Your governing board will ultimately define the mission statement using feedback and information generated by customer groups.

2) Develop a plan

Using your agency’s mission statement and comments from the community and customer groups, you and your governing board are ready to define an advocacy plan for the short-term (one to two years).

Once you begin to build coalitions you will find that getting help in solving problems and broadening your agency’s financial support will be much easier.

This plan should:

- Tie advocacy efforts to system goals;
- Create an atmosphere of community involvement;
- Identify opportunities to advocate for your system;
- Address strategies for maintaining a community presence;
- Discuss use of local media for gaining visibility and support; and
- Identify how your agency will continue to receive feedback from the community, and include a timeline for accomplishing particular activities.

Let's take these elements and work through a sample plan that reflects an advocacy component as part of the short-term plan. For example, the mission of a community transportation agency might be:

*Trip Transit will provide paratransit service to individuals who are unable to utilize other transportation options because they are unavailable, inaccessible or unaffordable. Transit services will reflect the agency's values of safety, efficiency, accountability and responsiveness.*

One of the goals generated by the mission must specifically address advocacy if you want it to happen:

*Create an awareness in the community of the services Trip Transit provides, the cost of those services, the funding sources and the need for additional services.*

This goal would be your one- to two-year plan. Specific objectives to reach this short-term goal may include:

- Provider will document need by holding five focus groups annually, targeting:
  - seniors
  - persons with disabilities
  - rural, general public users
  - rural, general public non-users, and
  - human services agencies, such as long-term health care facilities

Remember, advocacy is not restricted to holding stakeholder meetings. It also involves attending meetings of other groups (such as town council, aging fairs, health fairs, and others) to gather information and establish relationships.

- Provider will host community forums using customer groups in each municipality within the service area.
  - Prepare presentation boards and other materials by [specific date].

- Agency director, members of the governing board and users will form a speakers bureau and set a goal of 12 annual speaking engagements targeting service clubs, churches, etc.
  - Prepare slides and handouts for presentations.
  - Select and train individuals to make these presentations.

- Use key members of your customer groups to help define the plan and to advocate on behalf of your agency. This group is powerful because it responds to users, community leaders, funders and those who have helped define the need. They
are your best advocates because they have a personal stake in your system’s success.

- Establish reasonable, measurable objectives. For example, “The agency will participate in the annual Labor Day parade and demonstrate the vehicle lift at the picnic following the parade.” As the community becomes more aware of your agency and the important role it plays, the benefits you will receive from each contact will grow.

- Start advocacy efforts with small, homogeneous groups and begin where you live. Reach out to those who are closest to the service you provide. Use drivers, dispatchers, schedulers and passengers - expand to the agencies with clients who depend on your service. Once those networks are set it is easier to target larger community groups who may have little or no understanding of the service you provide and how that service impacts the community.

- Use local media (newspapers, radio, TV, agency newsletters) to get and maintain public support for community transportation.

- If your service covers a large geographic area, you might find it useful to divide it into regions and concentrate on one region at a time. Contact the Chamber of Commerce and town governments in each county or municipality. Chambers of Commerce are a good starting place to develop lists of each community’s major employers, businesses and service clubs. Information generally available includes a current list of owners or CEO’s of major businesses, where and when specific clubs meet, and calendars of activities including who holds holiday parties, community festivals, rodeos, fairs or harvest celebrations.

- For advocacy efforts to be effective, they must be a priority for all employees, from managers to drivers to governing board members. Every member of your staff who represents the agency and who has contact with others needs to be considered while developing your plan. Drivers know how your riders react to the service and hear what they say. If supervisors and managers take the time to listen they will find a wealth of specific information.

### 3) Implement your plan

Once you have developed a strategic plan to advocate for your agency, implementing the plan is the next logical step. Remember, as you define the action plan, it must be driven by your mission and based on your identified needs. Successful implementation of an advocacy plan will depend on your ability to document the steps, develop a timeline and evaluate progress.

There are several ways to document and monitor progress on any general plan:

- List the specific tasks or steps necessary to achieve each stated objective.

- Assign tasks to appropriate staff, board members or volunteers.

- Identify project competition dates for each task.

- Meet regularly with key individuals working on specific tasks to share information, evaluate progress and adjust the scope of tasks or completion dates as appropriate.

- Celebrate successes and progress toward meeting the objectives - even the small ones!

An inexpensive way to document and track the implementation process for your advocacy plan is to use a poster-sized board, listing the identified action items down the left-hand side. A timeline, in weeks or months, can be written across the top of the poster. Using post-it notes write the names of individuals responsible for specific tasks, aligning the post-it under the expected date of completion adjacent to the task. Some tasks will be single events that are easy to schedule and implement. Other tasks may be longer term and include a process of events or actions needed for completion.

Using post-it notes makes it easy to see exactly where your project implementation process is at any one time. It is also easy to move the post-it either forward or backward as the implementation progresses. Leave the poster in a place where drivers, office staff and board members can watch the progress. Remember that advocating for your agency is a process and will likely evolve over a period of time. Using a simple chart of progress can motivate and empower your employees and volunteers, and is a visual reminder of what you are or are not accomplishing.

### 4) Evaluate progress

To keep moving forward, agencies need to periodically evaluate progress in relation to the defined goals and objectives. An annual, formal evaluation is essential; however, informal and observational evaluations should be ongoing:

- Use community resources and leaders to evaluate the progress of specific advocacy activities.

- Schedule evaluation meetings at two or three month intervals in the beginning. This helps you and participants know what is happening; it also holds members accountable for specific advocacy responsibilities. These more formal sessions help the management staff assess the process along with the group.

- Create an “it’s OK to take risks and fail” environment. If a designated course of action was not achieved during the year, don’t assume that the plan was flawed. Get a focus group to analyze the specific elements of the objectives and the scope of work developed to achieve those objectives. Are the objectives valid paths toward achieving the desired goals?
ADVOCACY SKILLS

Advocacy skills don’t just happen - they are developed over time. Consider the following points in analyzing your advocacy skills:

• Ask, ask, listen...and don’t talk.

The single most under-utilized communication skill is listening. Listen carefully to what drivers, passengers and community leaders tell you. Sincere outreach efforts are generally appreciated by all target groups. However, if you ask people for their ideas and then nothing changes or they don’t hear from you again, you will not only lose credibility and future opportunities, you’ll lose valuable advocates for your service.

To find out what your passengers think, ask every transit employee to make two ten-minute telephone calls each week to ask scripted questions about your service and your passengers’ needs. You can find out what your customers think and the cost is spread throughout the budget cycle with little disruption. Periodically, send your governing board members, office and administrative staff on vehicle ride-alongs to listen and ask riders if they are getting the service they need and, if not, what might help.

Place customer comment cards with self-addressed, postage-paid envelopes in every vehicle. Have drivers periodically hand cards to passengers as they disembark. Respond personally to every comment. Conduct a formal passenger survey at least yearly. The feedback generated should be used as tools for systematic improvement of the operation.

• Be clear about what you can and cannot do.

It is tempting to tell people what they want to hear with regard to service parameters or expansion. In order to be knowledgeable about what is possible, every transit manager should know the following key points about their service:

- Fleet/operational capacity limits
- Fare(s)
- Administrative costs
- Cost per mile
- Cost per trip
- Cost per hour
- Cost per route and/or per day for one vehicle
- Area served - demographic characteristics of your community

A one-page service summary fact sheet, based on the above information, would be useful.

• Develop your negotiating skills.

Good negotiators are well prepared with ideas and alternatives. Because they know the associated costs of service, they know when to walk away. Be willing to work with other agencies and businesses to determine how you can help each other. Be a proactive problem-solver and team player. Look for ways to create advantages that attract businesses to support your service.

• Know when to compromise and consolidate.

It is difficult for transit managers to accept that an alternative transportation solution may be the best option for certain individuals or groups. After all, they were hired to provide transportation to target populations. While it can feel like a failure or loss to concede that a different transit option may be a better fit for certain individuals or groups of passengers, the manager must remember that the ultimate goal is to provide the target population with the best possible transportation solution.

For example, referring ambulatory passengers to lower cost taxis will demonstrate sincerity in providing optimal cost alternatives and willingness to coordinate service. Identifying the solution that is to the advantage of the customers and the community at large, and not your particular agency, will show that your agency’s primary concern is in finding the best transportation solution available regardless of the service provider.

• Learn and use team-building skills.

Start with the agency: use the agency’s mission to help define corporate values that can be used with a variety of groups to solve internal problems, streamline procedures and create operational efficiencies.

With a little practice, these same skills can be used to create a community network of advocates. Once the community understands the agency’s service and believes in its value to the community, they become willing partners available to solve specific problems.

For example, an elderly patient needs a return trip from the kidney dialysis center after 6:00 p.m., one hour later than normal transit agency service hours. This will necessitate overtime pay for a driver to pick up this customer and return him to his rural home. A group can be formed to seek alternative solutions for this situation. The group could include the customer, the administrator and social worker from the dialysis center, key staff from the transit agency and the customer’s family. All participants should be made aware that the transit agency places an absolute priority on the customer’s health and life-sustaining need. The agency’s service limitations also need to be detailed. With this information the group can seek a solution that satisfies the needs of all the involved parties.
Bringing a specific need or problem to the larger community and letting that group focus on the problem and possible solutions allows the transit agency to create and define outreach opportunities. In the long term these networks become advocates not only for individual passengers but also for the entire transit agency service.

The transit agency staff is an asset and advocate for its customers but is also in business to serve them and the larger community. The agency’s perspective and leadership are invaluable, but there is no agency without team support internally and no transit program without support in the community.

**IDEAS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION**

In addition to the previously outlined steps, here are some outreach activities and coalition-building ideas that can be implemented immediately with very little effort or cost:

1) At every opportunity invite elected and appointed officials to visit your system. You can create these opportunities - host an “open house” for these officials, and send your vehicles to transport them to the event. New-route ribbon cuttings and vehicle acceptance situations are other good opportunities.

2) If your agency publishes a newsletter, be sure to send copies to local city or county councils, mayors and other elected officials. Send copies to major businesses (human resources managers), Chambers of Commerce and to the secretaries of local service clubs.

3) Post your service days/hours/schedules/fares in churches, libraries and on public bulletin boards. If your agency has a web page, use it to inform the community of all aspects of your service and operation.

4) Ask directors of other human services organizations to write letters in support of your services. Be sure to ask them to state how valuable your service is to their clients, and how not having your service would negatively impact their clients.

5) Never miss or turn down an opportunity to speak on behalf of your service. Remember to thank your supporters and funders publicly - it helps them look good in the community. If you, your board members or customers want basic public speaking training, contact local vocational schools, community colleges or Toast Masters Clubs. Call the local Chamber of Commerce for a resource referral in your area.

6) Create a recognizable presence by developing and using a logo that is consistent and visible on each vehicle. You want everyone in your service area to see your vehicle and know exactly who you are and what the van or bus is for.

7) Keep your vehicles clean!

8) Form coalitions with entities that may also have transportation vehicles (the local hospital, long term care facility, Head Start, private or preschool programs, etc.) to create cost or operational efficiencies. You may not be able to consolidate services, but if, for instance, all agencies are able to purchase less expensive gas by buying it in bulk, then operating costs are lowered.

9) Basic office and maintenance supplies are less costly when purchased in volume. Check with other paratransit providers or transportation agencies about the possibility of discount buying by purchasing as a group. Procurement of vehicles and equipment is also less costly when purchased in volume.

10) Share information with other agencies that provide services to your customers. You may be able to consolidate trips to therapy, the senior center or the grocery store by creating circulator routes for various user groups.

11) If you have an in-house maintenance facility, consider selling maintenance services to other entities with vehicles.

12) Understand that paratransit service in minibuses is the most expensive option. Help isolated communities establish volunteer driver programs to provide non-technical, ambulatory trips when your system is at capacity or a trip request is out of your service area. Your agency can help with driver training and record keeping.

13) Combine your driver training with one or more agencies to take advantage of sharing the cost of a professional trainer.

14) Explore the possibility of using the city or county motor pool for your agency’s maintenance at less than the cost of a local provider.

15) Decorate your bus for a local parade, filling it with your customers who might otherwise never participate in a parade.

16) Use a vehicle for transporting children or your own customers to a community-sponsored event on a holiday or weekend.

17) Offer your vehicles to aid volunteers or the Red Cross during a crisis or community emergency.

18) Offer to transport homeless individuals to the local shelter during cold weather on your last trip before returning to base.

**CONCLUSION**

Advocacy is important to your transit system because it extends the manager’s ability to identify transit issues and community needs, ultimately resulting in improved service. To create the most effective advocacy program, managers need
to enlarge the traditional view of customer groups. The agency’s governing Board, drivers, dispatchers, schedulers, passengers and former and future customers are all groups to consider.

The best place to start is within your own agency. Be sure that your agency is providing a high quality service and is responsive to the needs of customers. At every opportunity, tie your transit service to the community it serves.

Most advocacy objectives can be attained by following four basic steps:

1. Create buy-in by inviting a cross-section of users and non-users, community leaders and benefactors to help define a process.

2. Using the agency's mission, develop a plan that addresses advocacy as a critical need.

3. Implement your plan and track the implementation process.

4. Establish a mechanism for on-going evaluation of progress. Create a supportive environment where participants feel safe taking risks.

And finally...

Your agency is an asset and a resource as well as a necessity to the community supporting it. In addition to the invaluable services you provide for individuals and the greater community, try to give something back to the community supporting you. What you give back may be nothing more than a few hours of driver time and a little gas, but the benefit to your agency is your visible presence at high profile events. Explore creative ideas for system use, consistent with the regulations governing your system. In most cases the goodwill more than offsets the agency’s small donation.

The original Technical Brief was written by Suzanne O’Neill and Linda Diebert; it was revised by APWA staff in 2000.

**Other Resources:**


*Community Empowerment Program: Nurturing Public Involvement in the Transportation Planning Process*<sup>Surface Transportation Policy Project for USDOT/FTA, 1997.</sup>


*Establishing and Maintaining an Effective Advisory Committee: A Model Members’ Handbook and Training Module*<sup>Crain & Associates, Inc. for SunLine Transit Agency and Project ACTION.</sup>


*How to Develop a Rural Transit Marketing Plan*<sup>Montana Department of Transportation, 1993.</sup>

*Lobbying by 501(c)(3) Organizations*<sup>Reno & Cavanaugh, PLLC, undated.</sup>

*Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1992*<sup>Reno & Cavanaugh, PLLC, undated.</sup>

*Lobbying or Advocacy*<sup>Kansas Trans Reporter, July 1998.</sup>

*The Marketing Cookbook: Recipes for Success*<sup>Communique, L.L.P. for Colorado Association of Transit Agencies, undated.</sup>

*MDT’s Guide to Public Involvement*<sup>Montana Department of Transportation, 1996.</sup>

*Promoting Your System through Better Public Relations and Communication*<sup>CTAA, 2000.</sup>

**RESOURCES**

The National Transit Resource Center maintains a peer-to-peer technical assistance network, tapping into a wealth of experience from professionals in the community transportation field. For more information, visit the CTAA website at www.ctaa.org/ntrc/services, or contact the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

The Resource Center has collected sample rider satisfaction surveys from many different transit systems. You can request copies by e-mailing resources@ctaa or by calling 800.527.8279.

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