

Chapter 4

The Guaranteed Ride Home Program: Transportation Services for Welfare-to-Work Participants

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Welfare reform, as set forth in President Clinton's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, includes welfare-to-work policies designed to address barriers to work and propel welfare recipients into sustained employment, through block grants to the states for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). In California, the CalWORKs legislation is a response to federal standards and authorizes the counties to institute welfare-to-work programs. Because transportation is viewed as an important barrier to obtaining and maintaining long-term employment, counties have been encouraged to address transportation issues as an important obstacle to self-sufficiency.

To address the many challenges involved in defining local issues, strengths, needs, and strategies in Silicon Valley, the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA), along with the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), and the state-funded Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) initiated the Santa Clara County Welfare-to-Work Transportation Planning Project. The overall objectives of this project were to assess transportation requirements and identify strategies to increase availability, affordability, and effectiveness of existing services. In addition, the county social services agency hoped to establish agreements with transportation providers and employers to ensure the availability of transportation options. This is a case study of how the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency collaborated with key organizations throughout the county to design and implement the Guaranteed Ride Home Program (GRHP) to address the transportation needs of its CalWORKs participants.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

For the poor, the single largest obstacle to getting and keeping a steady job can be the lack of adequate transportation. Few welfare recipients own cars, and in fact, 26 percent of below-poverty-level households are without a vehicle (Harbaugh, 1998). For those who do own a vehicle, depending on the state, assistance may be reduced or even denied when the cost of the vehicle is calculated as an asset. In addition, many welfare recipients live in areas with no public transportation systems or systems that do not operate during evening hours. Welfare-to-work transportation services such as the Guaranteed Ride Home Program can increase access to employment for those without a car or with limited transit options, as well as for persons with emergencies.

Increasing access to employment, however, is not a simple process. Although jobs in some areas may be plentiful or easy to access, they often do not match the skills or experience of the people attempting to transition from welfare to work. The effect is a gradual separation of low-income workers and the job opportunities for which they are qualified (Hughes, 1995). In addition, employment suburbanization can dramatically reduce job opportunities for those who rely on fixed-route public transportation to reach their work destinations. In a study of low-skilled commuters in ten U.S. cities, Taylor and Ong (1995) found that reduction in access to employment was affected more by dependence on public transit than by any other factor, including residential location.

Although middle- and upper-income workers can often increase their earnings by accepting jobs that demand a longer commute, research has shown that this is not generally possible for low-income workers. In fact, the result is just the opposite. Ong and Blumenberg (1998) found that among welfare recipients in Los Angeles County who were employed in 1995, those who worked within four miles of home had median incomes of \$634 per month. Those who worked between four and ten miles of home earned \$620, and those who commuted more than ten miles to their jobs earned only \$433 per month (in Wachs and Taylor, 1998, p. 15). Because of the nature of the low-skilled jobs and the fact that employers generally do not reimburse workers for travel expenses, workers who accept jobs farther from home must expect to see both their income reduced monetarily and their work days lengthened.

In order to increase access to available jobs for low-skilled workers, states and counties need to create more transportation options by allocating more welfare-to-work dollars to transportation support services. Some of the options include the following (Reichert, 1997):

- Make transportation part of the recipient's responsibility contract. Detail a recipient's obligations and specify services the department will provide.
- Do not penalize workers for owning a car. Many states have raised the asset limit to accommodate the value of a car, while Michigan and Arkansas disregard its entire value.
- Help recipients buy a car.
- Find ways to connect workers with suburban areas.
- Mandate collaboration between human services and transportation departments to reduce barriers and afford better solutions.
- Provide transitional transportation for those leaving welfare.

Recognizing the need for a viable transportation plan, Santa Clara County created transportation options through a collaborative effort called the Welfare-to-Work Transportation Planning Project.

WELFARE-TO-WORK TRANSPORTATION PLANNING PROJECT

To begin the process, Santa Clara SSA, together with VTA and MTC, launched a planning process that brought together social services staff, transportation professionals, and county supervisors. Consultants from Moore Iacofano Goltsman (MIG), Inc., and RIDES for Bay Area Commuters collaborated with an advisory board of agency representatives to design a planning process which included four phases: needs assessment, inventory of county transportation options, strategy/action plan development, and implementation (Moore Iacofano Goltsman, Inc., 1998).

In the Phase 1 needs assessment, the transportation needs of Santa Clara's CalWORKs participants were documented through interviews with both CalWORKs participants and the SSA staff who work with them on a regular basis. In addition, a series of meetings were held with transportation providers, education and job training providers, and employers. Some of the key findings of the assessment reflected issues of coordination, access, and availability.

In terms of *coordination*, some CalWORKs participants must juggle and coordinate many different trips, including drop-off and pickup at child care, education, and job training. For transit-dependent persons, these trips can be costly, time consuming, and require multiple transfers. Transit delays may cause CalWORKs participants to be late for work, which may eventually contribute to loss of employment.

Access to reliable transportation can also be a problem. While many CalWORKs participants live in the eastern part of the county, a large number of jobs being created are in the northern areas. This lack of significant job concentrations in the neighborhoods where participants live can make public transit access and ride sharing difficult. In addition, the costs associated with owning and operating an automobile are prohibitive for many lower-income people, and mechanical breakdowns are a frequent problem for those who do own autos.

In addition, many job opportunities involve swing, night, and weekend shifts when public transit is not readily *available*, and rail and bus services are often located some distance from work and home. CalWORKs participants and support programs have difficulty getting comprehensive information on the range of transport options; much of this transportation service information is available only in English, but only 51 percent of CalWORKs heads of households speak English as their primary language.

Phase 2 included the development of an inventory of existing programs and services, which could be used for improving transportation services. Through interviews with staff from VTA, Caltrans, RIDES for Bay Area Commuters, MTC, Bay Area Air Quality Management District, and others, information on bus, light rail, carpool, and public/private shuttle services was collected. The inventory information was used to identify service gaps that may be barriers to CalWORKs participants in finding or keeping steady employment. The information was also assembled into a comprehensive transportation resource guide for use primarily by SSA staff, community service providers, and others who assist CalWORKs participants in determining transportation options.

Phases 1 and 2 of the Transportation Planning Project helped to identify a number of transportation-related gaps and barriers that impede a CalWORKs participant's ability to obtain and maintain employment. These barriers were organized into the following three categories:

1. gaps in service (availability, convenience, reliability, and safety),
2. gaps in necessary information and skills (language, literacy, and navigational competency), and
3. gaps in affordability (cost).

Phase 3 of the project identified specific strategies to address the three types of barriers, through the involvement of community representatives including local transportation providers, education and job training providers, child care specialists, CalWORKs, and those that participated in Phases 1 and 2.

Members of the planning group were organized into four strategy teams: (1) ride sharing, trip planning, and information, (2) transit, (3) automobile, and (4) taxi, bicycle, paratransit, and kids' shuttle. Team members were encouraged to think creatively, to build on existing resources, to identify potential partnerships, and to be strategic and selective. After brainstorming opportunities and solutions related to their areas, they prioritized the most promising ideas and developed action plans along with key partners to assist in implementation (Phase 4). The final plans consisted of a series of strategies to be carried out in two stages. The first strategies were to be initiated in the first year and included the following:

- developing a trip planning test,
- compiling a transportation resource guide,
- hiring a transportation program coordinator,
- developing a guaranteed ride home program,
- improving transit stop security and amenities,
- expanding lending capacity of the family loan program,
- developing an auto repair program participant list,
- developing emergency skills training, and
- subsidizing emergency roadside assistance.

Out of these planning sessions the idea for the Guaranteed Ride Home Program was developed: a strategy for meeting the immediate transportation needs of CalWORKs participants in getting to work.

THE GUARANTEED RIDE HOME PROGRAM

Getting Started

When the county needs assessment indicated that additional transportation options for CalWORKs participants were needed, a collaboration was formed between Santa Clara County SSA, VTA, and OUTREACH, a non-profit transportation service agency, to develop a plan. Because paratransit services are required for all federally funded public transportation, and therefore were already in place, the three organizations saw a way to utilize the existing paratransit system, mainly serving the elderly and disabled, for a program that could assist CalWORKs participants in obtaining a reliable means of getting to and from work. The Guaranteed Ride Home Program began as a pilot program in November 1999.

OUTREACH is an independent, private nonprofit transportation agency which operates with a state-of-the-art Intelligent Transportation System that

utilizes high technology such as automatic vehicle locators and global positioning satellite technology to provide superior paratransit service throughout the Silicon Valley area. The agency had an available fleet of cars, empty seats on a daily basis, and the technological means to support the operation of a program that would coordinate rides for CalWORKs participants in need of transportation to sustain employment.

To institute such an operation, it was necessary to obtain approval from both the VTA which owned the fleet and the county which had access to funding from the Federal Transit Authority (FTA). The county was required to match the \$500,000 in funding that came in from the FTA, giving the project a total operating budget of \$1 million for the year. Following approval of the pilot program, intensive training was initiated to help staff learn about GRHP, general transportation issues, and the needs of the new population they would begin serving. Over 750 CalWORKs employment services staff and community partners received three hours of in-depth training from professional transportation consultants. The notion was that agency staff and community partners would support clients by not only making referrals to the program, but also by assisting them in completion of written individual transportation self-sufficiency plans. Staff and community organizations were provided with forms labeled "My Transportation Plan" in three languages and asked to disseminate them widely in the course of case management and other means. County staff keep track of persons they assist with transportation issues using a transportation information and referral tracking form which lists client name, date assisted, and type of service provided.

Enrollment

Enrollment in the program is limited to CalWORKs-eligible participants. The program offers same-day transportation to work, home, education, child care, and other approved locations for eligible enrolled participants, and it is limited to those situations when notice of more than twelve hours is not possible for alternate transportation. Referrals to the program come from county CalWORKs employment services staff, social workers, district office receptionists, staff at community-based organizations, or from the clients themselves.

Enrollment is a simple process that can be completed by faxing the enrollment form or simply by calling OUTREACH, and a client is generally enrolled and able to receive rides within twenty-four hours. The eligible GRHP participant is one who is entering employment or engaging in job-readiness activities, with priority given to a single head of household with custodial responsibility for one or more young children (up to thirteen years) or other dependent adults unable to care for themselves. Santa Clara

SSA determines the clients' eligibility for the program and then refers them to OUTREACH who enrolls them and begins processing ride requests. At the time of enrollment, participants are required to develop a plan for continued self-sufficiency when GRHP is no longer available. "My Transportation Plan" outlines destinations, usual trips, backup plans, cost, stops, transfers, and other details relating to getting to and from work and any other related trips. The document also includes tips on getting maps and directions, information on various types of travel, and numbers that clients can call if they need more information on services. Forms are also available at Transportation Resource Centers, located in the Employment Connection sites, along with transportation forms, GRHP enrollment forms, and bus maps.

Features of GRHP

The GRHP offers transportation for eligible enrollees in situations that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Nonscheduled overtime requests from employers
- Car breakdowns
- When the participant or participant's dependents become ill and must leave work
- A household emergency
- When a carpool is unexpectedly not available
- When a change in schedule makes alternate transportation unavailable

In general, transportation is provided to and from the workplace or home, including necessary multiple destination stops at child care locations, schools, or other sites where dependents might be located. At times, OUTREACH will also transport the rider and dependent, if ill, from home to a health care provider, although emergency medical transportation is prohibited.

A client is eligible to receive a total of forty-eight free guaranteed rides home over a period of six months, and the transportation service is available twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. The GRHP is available in all fifteen cities in Santa Clara County, spanning an area of over 342 square miles. Rides with multiple stops still count as one ride, and riders may schedule multiple same-day rides with one call to OUTREACH. As remaining rides approach ten or less, calls are made by staff to inform clients in order to give them time to make alternate arrangements as soon as possible.

When calling OUTREACH, clients need to provide a program identification number, the time of desired pickup, and the exact name and address of the drop-off or pickup location. Riders inform the dispatcher if they intend to take a dependent with them, as well as any other pertinent information re-

lating to the ride. Although riders are free to bring along car seats for young children, car seats are available through a generous donation to the program by California State American Automobile Association (AAA). OUTREACH dispatchers then inform the rider if the pickup or drop-off location is within the OUTREACH service area and provide him or her with transfer locations for alternate transportation. Currently, OUTREACH schedulers/dispatchers are available who speak English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, French, and Russian.

By August 2000, over 1,000 CalWORKs participants were enrolled in the program, and the number is steadily increasing. The program is featured prominently in the Santa Clara County Transportation Resource Guide (another product of the planning project) that was mailed upon its completion in October 1999 to 12,000 CalWORKs recipients throughout the county. The guide is available in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese and is a comprehensive outline of all available transportation services in Santa Clara County.

In addition, the project has developed laminated posters, available in several languages, that describe the program and are widely distributed among social service offices and community-based nonprofit organizations. The number of participants is rapidly increasing due to these efforts as well as word of mouth among riders and county staff. Rides for GRHP participants average nine miles per ride, with many rides including two or more stops.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Throughout the first eight months of operation (November 1999 to July 2000), ongoing evaluation was an important feature of the Guaranteed Ride Home Program. The process included phone calls to regular riders (10 percent of riders selected at random) to inquire about the quality of services, and county employment centers collected survey feedback from clients to be delivered to VTA. A comprehensive customer survey was prepared to give feedback from the first year of operation. In addition, clients leaving the program complete exit interviews with county staff to obtain further information about their levels of satisfaction and recommended areas for improvement.

In terms of updating and improving services, OUTREACH is mapping the location and destinations of program participants by utilizing GIS software to geocode addresses of participants and their frequent destinations, such as work sites and child care facilities. In the future, this database will include geocoding scheduling and routing information as well, using factors such as time of day, size of street, and destination to increase safety and efficiency. In using this type of technology, OUTREACH is in a unique position

to increase the efficiency of existing services and the effectiveness of future services.

PROGRAM SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

The successes of the Guaranteed Ride Home Program have been many. More and more people (over 1,000 to date) are able to get to work despite the lack of a vehicle or alternate transportation, resulting in increased job placement and retention of CalWORKs participants. Participants have been educated about travel options and given the tools for developing effective transportation plans. Due to increased usage, OUTREACH has doubled their existing phone system and added automated push/speech recognition functions. The demonstrated successful collaboration among agencies can also serve as a catalyst for future partnerships and further progress.

Although challenges have been relatively few, some are significant. First, rush hour is a challenge for any transportation system. Getting drivers and riders to destinations during peak hours requires careful planning and knowledge of alternate routes. Second, many riders become aware of their need for rides without much advance notice, making the situation even more complex given time constraints. Although program staff encourage participants to engage in preplanning whenever they can, it is not always possible. Third, trips with multiple stops can often require more time than can be predicted due to unforeseen factors such as waiting at schools or health centers, or assisting elderly persons or small children. Fourth, although data are collected on a monthly basis, usage tends to fluctuate from month to month, and it is difficult to project utilization rates for the system.

A future challenge involves the county's attempts to get state funds earmarked for future operations. Building on the success of the pilot program, the county would like to offer additional services to address the needs of more of its county residents. For example, there is a proposal to expand services for low-income women, which would include not only CalWORKs participants but also the working poor (who are currently not eligible), the homeless population, and children only, who could be taken to school, day care, health appointments, and other necessary destinations.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following are some of the lessons learned from launching the Guaranteed Ride Home Program:

1. Implementing transportation services for welfare-to-work participants can be a difficult process. Service delivery agencies must commit large amounts of existing resources to planning before hiring staff and providing services. It is important to use existing systems whenever possible.
2. When instituting pilot programs, it is often difficult to predict usage patterns. It was unforeseen that so many GRHP participants would need multiple stops. In programs such as this, it may not be prudent to count multileg trips as one ride.
3. It is sometimes difficult to collect the feedback that is necessary to evaluate the program. It is important to train both social services and transportation staff to be proactive in seeking feedback from clients on a regular basis.
4. It is important to develop contingency plans for clients whose needs exceed program services. Some clients need more than their allocated forty-eight rides due to emergency situations, while others do not use all of their forty-eight rides. Criteria are needed to address under- and overutilization.
5. It is important to attempt to leverage resources for noneligible clients who are in need of services. Currently no sponsors support services to the working poor or children, although efforts are being made to secure funding.
6. When creating new transportation programs, it is important to secure the commitment of top leadership of local agencies and government. Local match in funding plays a major role in supporting long-term sustainability of state and federal funds.

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