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Consensus Conference for Paratransit Managers

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ABSTRACT

Recruitment, Training, Retention and Rewarding Paratransit Managers

Easter Seals Project ACTION (ESPA) is funded through a cooperative agreement from the Federal Transit Administration and is charged with promoting cooperation between the transportation industry and the disability community to increase mobility for people with disabilities of all ages. In late 2005 ESPA convened a panel of experts from transportation agencies and associations, higher education, the disability community and the personnel recruitment field to explore strategies related to the recruitment, training, retention and rewarding of paratransit managers. The purpose of the meeting was to review the current situation and suggest remedial steps. Panel members focused on and recommended solutions in response to these questions:

- How do we get young people engaged in paratransit: recruit, retain, train, and reward?
- How do we get students and new graduates to see it as an opportunity, a career path?
- How can we attract people with disabilities to work in paratransit?
- What training is available now? What kind of existing training, both academic and continuing education is available, who offers the training and where is it offered?
- What actions need to be taken to improve recruitment strategies for people to work in all transit modes?
- What are the appropriate courses and curricula for educating transit and land planning?
- What are some strategies for recruiting (new employees), training, retaining (current employees), and rewarding transit managers in order to increase their competencies in serving all customers, specifically those with disabilities?
- How do you identify qualified staff, with appropriate knowledge and skills and then encourage them to pursue careers in public transportation?

A synopsis of the event's summary report will be presented at this Transportation Research Forum. The presenter will be available following the presentation and throughout the Forum to discuss the report and network with others interested in

supporting these efforts. Copies of the summary report are currently available through ESPA and will be distributed at the Forum.

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

In 2005, a Statement of Need was submitted to Easter Seals Project ACTION proposing an effort related to the recruitment, training, retention and rewarding of paratransit managers. In response, ESPA convened a day-long consensus conference of experts from transportation agencies and associations, higher education, the disability community and the personnel recruitment field. The goal of the conference, held Oct. 6-7, 2005, was to review the current situation and suggest remedial steps. The group recognized that in order to meet the transit demands of diverse customers, including those with disabilities, strategic recommendations were needed. In the outcome, suggestions emerged for increasing the competencies of transportation industry personnel. This report is a summary of the proceedings.

A BUSINESS OF HEARTS AND MINDS

Bill Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), opened the day by inspiring the group to reconcile sometimes-conflicting views. Millar, who began his career as a paratransit manager, discussed the difference between paratransit and fixed-route service and emphasized how difficult paratransit service delivery is compared to fixed-route. He also noted that delivering paratransit service is a business of the heart as well as a business of the mind.

THE QUESTIONS

Facilitator Jim McLary continued the program by explaining that panel members would first learn about training resources currently available to the field and then be invited to respond to and discuss the following questions throughout the day.

1. How do we get young people engaged in the paratransit occupation; recruit, retain, train, and reward?
2. How do we get students and new graduates to see paratransit work as an opportunity, a career path?
3. How can we attract people with disabilities to work in paratransit?
4. What training is available now? What kind of existing training – both academic and continuing education – is available, who offers the training and where is it offered?
5. What actions need to be taken to improve recruitment strategies for people to work in all transit modes?
6. What are the appropriate courses and curricula for educating transit and land planners?
7. What are some strategies for recruiting (new employees), training, retaining (current employees), and rewarding transit managers in order to increase

their competencies in serving all customers, specifically those with disabilities?

8. How do you identify qualified staff, with appropriate knowledge and skills and then encourage them to pursue careers in public transportation?

Prior to launching the discussion on resources, Valerie Fletcher of Adaptive Environments Inc., Boston, Mass., was asked to challenge panel members to maintain a constant awareness of universal design throughout the day. Fletcher expressed her belief that paratransit is the price paid for the failure of public transit to be a system that serves all customers. She emphasized that universal design alters existing environments to create a world of access to all, not just “special” populations such as older adults or people with disabilities. Fletcher noted that until that objective is achieved, paratransit is an industry that needs champions, serving to keep people connected, active and visible.

THE DISCUSSION

Continuing Education Resources

Representatives of the organizations seated at the table described the roles, resources and potential applications of their agencies.

Paul Larrousse, the National Transit Institute, New Brunswick, N.J.

As the training arm of the Federal Transit Administration, NTI offers courses on a wide range of topics for people with transit experience and those who are entering the profession. The agency increasingly works with transit and other organizations to develop partnerships that might lead to new courses within NTI’s offerings. Suggestions for new topics and areas of need are always encouraged.

Joe Niegoski, the American Public Transportation Association, Washington, D.C.

APTA has workforce development subcommittee that guides their staff development activities. A clearinghouse of workforce development materials is part of their current efforts. In addition, APTA is establishing online communities that will include chat rooms, a place to hold meetings and take courses. In addition, Leadership APTA is a program that trains young managers, provides mentors and leadership training. The current class has asked for training on leadership and creative thinking while next year’s group has established disaster planning and terrorism prevention response as hot topics. APTA’s challenge in building these programs is to market their availability.

Kelly Shawn, the Community Transportation Association of America, Washington, D.C.

CTAA offers more than 50 training opportunities at its annual meeting, where experts provide training on subjects ranging widely from human resources to intelligent transportation systems. The most popular class is Passenger Assistance Safety Security (PASS) and safety training. CTAA responds to multifaceted and multi-regional small urban and rural transit needs. Second in training popularity is the Certified Community Transit Manager (CTMM) class. There are more than 2,000 CTAA CCTMs, including many paratransit managers. CTAA also offers customized workshops ranging from one to three days and week-long training events. Along with CTAA's extensive training program is a technical assistance capacity that operates with the constant goal of moving paratransit to the forefront as a service that enhances the quality of life.

Hal Morgan, the Taxicab, Limousine, and Paratransit Association, Kensington, Md.

Morgan distributed results of a survey completed by the TLPA members regarding paratransit training needs. In summary, Morgan reported that respondents felt:

- Years of experience can be substituted for formal training
- General Managers and the Operations Managers have different skill sets
- Training in management and technology are important
- Compensation needs to be improved to attract top managers
- Important skills include good communications and people sensitivity

Chris Jenks, the Transportation Research Board/Transit Cooperative Research Program, Washington, D.C.

TCRP's program focuses on problem solving and applied research for the transit industry. The 12-year-old program receives approximately \$8 million a year. TCRP funding will increase to \$9 million in FY06 and to \$10 million in FY09 due to SAFEFEA-LU. TCRP is governed by APTA with the FTA participating through funding and as a voting member on the research selection committee.

TCRP's selection of research topics is a bottom-up process and problem statements are solicited from the industry. TCRP has completed many paratransit and paratransit-related projects in the past and continues to have a number of projects under way. TCRP works with partners NTI and ESPA in selecting projects, conducting research and disseminating information. Ultimately, APTA maintains a dissemination Web site and provides all TCRP reports online at www.tcrponline.org. Reports can also be obtained at TRB's Web site, www.trb.org/tcrp.

Karen Wolf-Branigin, Easter Seals Project ACTION, Washington, D.C.

ESPA offers training activities that include the five-year-old Mobility Planning Services Institute. The MPS Institute selects teams through a competitive application process to design a local action plan to address an issue related to accessible transportation. Teams are required to include a member from the transit industry, and managers are encouraged to serve as team members. Wolf-Branigin also described a travel trainer curriculum currently in development. As with NTI, most ESPA training is for professionals working in the field. Recruitment is not a current focus for the organization.

Jill Hough, the Small Urban and Rural Transit Center, North Dakota State University, Fargo, N.D.

The group learned that a number of university programs offer both academic and continuing education related to transportation. Hough reported that her center offers a minimum of two training sessions annually for managers in North Dakota. She believes they are successful due to a needs assessment survey that is conducted with managers prior to building and delivering training events.

Sean Kimble, MV Transportation, Fairfield, Calif.

The company offers training for their own staff and provides drivers with a company-developed training manual. Kimble noted that the company is creating an internal managers-in-training initiative. MV supplements their training programs through strategic relationships with colleges, universities and technical schools. He commented that in recruitment for this industry, he sees a need to expand search efforts to reach out more to women and people of color to ensure a diverse representation in the employee ranks, especially at the management level.

Based on the presentations and related discussion, the group concluded there is a need to significantly improve recruitment and retention for qualified staff, a situation that is not unique to paratransit. The group agreed that it is critically important to find talented people, recruit them to the profession, develop their skills and reward their efforts. The goal should be to create career paths, not just jobs. Ultimately the group agreed that “We need to say it, believe it, and do it.”

RECRUITMENT

Considering whether the field is facing the same predicament initially encountered in the 1960s, there was agreement that managers are retiring and there are few people in the wings prepared to fill the vacated positions. It is estimated that 50-70 percent of all transportation employees will be ready to retire in the next ten years. The general feeling was that as a field, there is an impression of being no better off today than forty years ago. Although some veteran employees may continue working past eligible retirement age, others are retiring earlier.

Low pay was a recurring theme. Paratransit salaries tend to be lower than earnings of employees providing fixed-route service. The group noted that while paratransit managers must have good technological skills, other fields with similar needs are able to recruit these individuals through higher salaries, creating an ongoing challenge for transit agencies.

One trend observed by the group is the hiring of human service agency personnel by small urban and rural transportation providers. Another point of discussion regarding hiring was that paratransit managers should be hired for their personality, intellect and drive – since skills can often be taught on the job. A perspective expressed by a representative in her early twenties added that many people entering the job market in entry-level positions do not expect to remain with the same company for their entire careers. Consequently, if recruiting for talent and skill, in order to entice people to remain with the same company, clear career paths and meaningful opportunities for growth and engagement must be made available.

The discussion about recruiting young professionals continued and the group noted that many young adults are motivated by jobs they consider to be socially meaningful. One such example is employment opportunities that focus on sustainability. Younger employees often think about having new experiences and opportunities, and not solely on promotion. It was suggested that transit and paratransit managerial career paths can be framed as creating a new vision for the world, emphasizing innovation and excitement. It was also suggested that the industry address career paths from the very beginning. Management must create space for the creative young professional.

The group agreed that career ladders in paratransit are not available as they are in fixed-route service. After a show of hands, it was revealed that among the entire group, only two began their careers with the intention of providing specialized transportation for people with disabilities. The group concluded that there is a need to level the playing field between fixed-route and paratransit managers, dispatchers and operators. In many systems, there are substantial differences regarding continuity, seniority, wages and benefits between the two services.

One noted concern was the service disruptions that occur when there is a change in paratransit subcontractors. This can eliminate employee seniority since individuals may have to start again, as opposed to advancing. Some group members were blunt in their observations - paratransit is often seen as a dead-end career. It was observed that many fixed-route employees do not want to transfer from fixed-route to paratransit, because paratransit is viewed as an organizational “step child.”

The group discussed an interest in exploring a rewards and incentive program for transit and paratransit managers. Such a program could be sponsored by national or state transit agencies and associations.

TRAINING MANAGER PREPARATION

There was lively discussion of the role of universities in providing programs for training paratransit and transit managers. The consensus was that institutions of higher education do not and should not be the only source for training, and numerous options should be made available. The group believed that a one-size-fits-all model is not a viable solution. It was agreed that universities, technical colleges and community colleges should consider offering courses and supervised on-the-job training.

The use of on-line training, virtual classrooms and webinars is an expanding learning tool. Hough noted that North Dakota State University, for example, offers online courses for transit managers. In addition, the University is considering the idea of offering an Associates Degree that will be a joint program with NDSU Departments of Psychology and Sociology. This joint venture between the departments recognizes the need to include human relations content that could include conflict management and negotiating skills in the curriculum.

The group agreed that a number of courses to prepare transit managers can be found in Colleges of Business. Many participants thought that other content could be taught in targeted courses available outside the university environment. The group identified course work that could support transit manager preparation both within and beyond universities. The list is as follows:

A. Suggested academic courses

Business Management including:

- Strategic planning
- Statistics
- Economics
- Marketing/communications/public relations/customer service
- Conflict resolution/human resources
- Working in a public environment/board relations/government relations
- Logistics
- Maintenance and fleet operations
- Practicum (field placement)
- Psychology/sociology/intro to human difference
- Urban planning
- Field placement (co-op or intern experiences)
- Environmental justice and ethics ¹

¹ Recurring theme throughout all coursework

B. Suggested continuing education courses

- Passenger assistance techniques – “train the trainer”
- Call center strategies
- Procurement
- Risk management
- Paratransit planning and operations management
- Scheduling and dispatch
- Mobility management
- History of public transit
- Technologies

C. Transit Agency Training

- Internal transit agency training, Chicago Transit Authority Technical Institute (CTATI)
- It was noted that many of the aforementioned courses are currently offered but communicating their availability to potential students remains a challenge.

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

The group learned that several training resources are available at The Mineta Transportation Institute, located at San Jose (Calif.) State University. In addition, scholarships and an interdisciplinary program are available at the University of Denver. These programs help managers understand the whole spectrum; however, paratransit is not included.

The group suggested connecting with programs involved with The U.S. Green Building Council (promoting buildings that are environmentally responsible, profitable and healthy for living and working) and to create a new identity for the industry. It was reported that 21,000 people have signed up for training in this environmentally sensitive program that builds important groundwork for thinking about inclusiveness as a benchmark for the future.

MARKETING

It was suggested that the field intensify efforts to tell the story of why public transit management is a good career choice and cite courses that interested individuals can take to prepare for careers. These stories can be disseminated to prospective candidates through a number of avenues, including job placement and career counseling centers. Personal testimony and success stories could be included on paratransit managers' focus on community building, individuals' enjoyment of greater mobility, and the positive impact on local economies

(people going to jobs, earning money, spending it). Personal satisfaction and the emerging phenomena of sustainable communities and new urbanism are additional success elements.

It was agreed that once a curriculum is established, a clearinghouse with information on where and when courses are available should be publicized. Activities around building a curriculum and disseminating information about courses could involve the FTA-sponsored University Transportation Center programs. It was also suggested that these training courses could provide recruitment sites for both public and private transportation providers.

POTENTIAL FOLLOWUP STRATEGIES/ACTIONS

Consensus Conference participants were charged with developing potential strategies to close the gap between the need and availability of qualified and competent paratransit managers. Their recommendations are:

1. Develop and encourage adoption of a transit manager degree program based on the list of aforementioned core courses.
 - a. Convene a meeting of transit professionals and university faculty.
 - b. Make the program available to both transit and logistics managers.
 - c. Recognize the role that entities such as NTI, APTA, CTAA, TCRP and ESPA can play in providing continuing education programs.
2. Stimulate the creation of practicum and internships relating to the preparation of future and current personnel regarding paratransit management.
 - a. Short-term experiences that would also support continuing education
 - b. Development and marketing of learning experiences among universities, colleges and technical schools to create awareness of the field and related opportunities
3. Develop and disseminate a course on universal design which builds on the concept of one transportation system for all customers.
 - a. This would address the change in U.S. demographics (aging baby boomers) and support the involvement of the transit industry in encouraging and applying the principles of universal design.
 - b. The ultimate goal should be to eliminate a dual system of general population transit and specialized transit. A course on universal design could also promote the concept of mobility management.
4. Develop and disseminate a story of why people should choose careers as paratransit/ transit /mobility managers to assist in the recruitment of people to the profession.
 - a. Complementing the “story” should be the development of a strategic approach for its distribution to people in settings that can assist and inform prospective students in this career area.
5. Create and disseminate a comprehensive list of current academic, continuing education and other training for use by people interested in becoming paratransit managers (students and current transit employees).

- a. This resource could address the current challenge of locating information about where a person can go to learn to be a transit or paratransit manager.
- b. NTI and ESPA could consider leading this effort.
- 6. Explore the creation of a universally recognized transit certification program similar to CTAA's current CCTM that would convey stature and recognition.
 - a. Although initially focused on transit and paratransit management, the program could potentially be expanded to fixed-route managers, mobility managers, dispatchers, supervisors and drivers.
 - b. CTAA, APTA, NTI and ESPA could consider working together on this project.
 - c. NTI involvement would be assisting with the development of the certification and supporting it through training; however, NIT would not serve as a sponsoring organization (to award certification).
 - d. NTI could assist in providing information on development needs.
- 7. Develop and disseminate community projects for elementary, middle and high school students to activity create awareness of transit careers.
- 8. Synthesize the background and experience of current paratransit managers.
- 9. Develop practicum for degree candidates to work with paratransit providers.

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