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Partnering with Transportation Network Companies to Improve Mobility for Older Adults, People with Disabilities, and Low-income Individuals in Massachusetts

On-demand ride-hailing services, such as Uber and Lyft, are transforming the transportation landscape. These transportation network companies¹ (TNCs) are disrupting conventional travel and impacting the way public transit agencies and other organizations deliver transportation services. In Massachusetts, organizations are partnering with TNCs to provide subsidized rides and enhance mobility for transportation-disadvantaged populations (older adults, people with disabilities, low-income individuals). This paper highlights five examples of TNC partnerships currently operating in the Commonwealth and discusses considerations for organizations interested in pursuing similar collaborations.

STRUCTURING THE PARTNERSHIP

Existing partnerships with TNCs in Massachusetts fall into three broad categories based on the type of transportation provided: (1) paratransit, (2) first mile/last mile, and (3) general mobility.

Supplementing ADA Paratransit

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), transit authorities that offer fixed-route service must also provide complementary paratransit service: origin-to-destination, shared-ride transportation for passengers whose disabilities prevent them from riding the fixed-route. The ADA paratransit for the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) in Greater Boston is The RIDE. Typically, RIDE customers must schedule their trips at least a day in advance.

The MBTA is piloting a program with ride-hailing companies Uber, Lyft, and Curb Mobility to provide on-demand service to RIDE customers. The partnership is an effort by the MBTA to decrease the cost per paratransit trip while also enhancing customer service. RIDE customers who enroll in the pilot receive a monthly allotment of subsidized rides through the partner TNC organization of their choice. The MBTA uses a formula to determine the number of rides allocated to each consumer. Instead of having to request a shared ride in advance, customers are able to summon a vehicle on demand, choosing between a shared and private option. This model provides greater flexibility for RIDE consumers, allowing for spontaneous travel and increased convenience.

¹ Under Massachusetts law, St. 2016, c. 187 “An Act Regulating Transportation Network Companies” (2016), a TNC is defined as “a corporation, partnership, sole proprietorship, or other entity that uses digital network to connect riders to drivers to pre-arrange and provide transportation.”

First Mile/Last Mile

The second category of partnership covers riders of public transit who are unable to complete a trip in full due to a gap in service. In northeastern Massachusetts, North Shore Community College (NSCC) is using TNCs to connect student commuters to education opportunities. NSCC's Danvers campus is three miles from the nearest bus stop, and students were having difficulties connecting to campus. In an effort to increase access and improve educational outcomes, NSCC partnered with Uber to provide a subsidized rate for student riders traveling between designated areas. The discount is automatically applied when students travel between the eligible geographic zones during select times. These students were previously served by a shuttle van. Following the success of a two-year pilot program, and the enhanced connectivity of point-to-point, on-demand transportation, NSCC eliminated the shuttle service and reallocated those funds to the Uber partnership.

General Mobility

The final category of partnership is that of general mobility, where organizations are increasing access for consumers by providing TNC rides when another service is not available.

The Needham Community Council, a non-profit organization that supports residents of Needham, supplements its volunteer transportation program with TNCs to fill travel needs when no volunteer driver is available. If staff cannot find a volunteer driver, they ask whether the person requesting the ride would like a Lyft trip. If so, staff schedules the Lyft trip directly, maintaining communication with both the driver and rider to ensure they connect.

In Southeastern Massachusetts, the Community Accessing Rides (CAR) program provides Uber rides to consumers of participating organizations when public transit is not an option. The Attleboro-Norton Social Responsibility Alliance, a consortium of organizations that partnered in response to community forums which cited transportation as one of the area's largest unmet needs, created CAR. Alliance members include the Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA),² human service agencies, a faith-based organization, and a behavioral health center. When a consumer of a participating organization needs a ride, staff of that organization first makes sure that local public transit services are not available before summoning a ride for the consumer.

The Brookline Senior Center (BSC), which serves residents of Brookline over the age of 60, supplements its senior van service with both Uber and Lyft. Qualifying older adults contact the BSC to request rides outside of the senior center's van hours. It also extends the subsidy to riders needing last minute transportation to medical appointments and those interested in trying a TNC for the first time.

² Following the completion of the CAR pilot, participating members formed the Attleboro Area CAR Collaborative to sustain the program. GATRA is not part of the new collaborative, but is working to replicate the pilot in other areas of Southeastern MA. In addition, GATRA did not order any rides for consumers. GATRA obtained the grant funding, and participating social service agencies were responsible for summoning rides.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Organizations design their partnerships differently depending on the goal they are trying to achieve. For example, the CAR program was developed to expand mobility above and beyond what was available through local public transit, so rides are only subsidized at times when or locations where the bus service is not operating. In contrast, the MBTA wanted to reduce the cost of its service by incentivizing riders to choose TNCs instead of The RIDE. As a result, the MBTA only subsidizes trips for eligible RIDE customers within The RIDE service area.

Programs need to determine the procedure around how rides will be scheduled. In the MBTA and NSCC programs, individuals summon their rides directly, using a smartphone; RIDE customers who do not have a smartphone can utilize the call-in option offered by both Lyft and Curb. In contrast, the Needham Community Council, BSC, and CAR programs have staff schedule and dispatch the ride on behalf of the consumer. The Uber Central and Lyft Concierge platforms offer this option. CAR uses Uber Central, which allows multiple organizations to schedule rides from a central portal. Each organization uses a unique access code to log in and request rides, as well as track trip data for billing purposes. The Needham Community Council utilizes Lyft Concierge to manage rides for its users. Both options allow the organization to schedule rides on-demand or in advance from a central portal, and provide live tracking of the trip.

Staff training is an important component of program implementation. Prior to launching their program, the Needham Community Council had staff use TNCs to better understand the process and feel more comfortable offering it to consumers. Staff members participating in CAR received training on how to operate the Uber Central platform and how to use Google Transit to determine whether or not a rider could instead utilize GATRA to complete the trip request.

Organizations also need to decide whether they plan to pay the full cost of rides, or whether riders will contribute. The MBTA covers a portion of the trip cost with riders paying the first \$2 of a single occupancy ride and then anything over a \$42 total trip cost. NSCC rides are subsidized \$10, leaving students to pay the remaining fare if the total trip cost exceeds \$10. The Needham Community Council pays the full cost of rides, but often recoups their subsidy through donations that riders send in. CAR and BSC subsidize the full cost of riders' trips.

FUNDING

Organizations need funding to cover the costs of TNC rides, market their programs, and pay for staff time assisting consumers or managing the program. BSC uses money donated from a charity dancing event³ to fund their initiative. The MBTA's paratransit budget covers the cost of its pilot program's ride subsidies, with the remaining trip amount being paid for by the consumer. The Needham Community Council also sets aside money in its yearly budget for rides but has

³ <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/MassMobility---Issue-52--January-2017.html?soid=1110714961086&aid=FaeYr1Cor38#LETTER.BLOCK104>

found that sending a follow-up survey with a donation request to the rider after each trip often covers the cost of the ride provided. NSCC reallocated funding from a shuttle service towards operationalizing their First Mile/Last Mile initiative. The CAR program utilized a variety of funding resources, including contributions from participating pilot members, donations from local organizations, and a grant from MassDOT's Community Transit Grant Program⁴ awarded to GATRA.

CHALLENGES

TNCs rely on smartphone-based digital platforms, but not all older adults, people with disabilities, or low-income individuals have smartphones. Even people with smartphones may not be comfortable using apps.⁵ While some organizations circumvent these challenges by utilizing the Lyft Concierge or Uber Central platforms, others are bridging the technology gap by developing and providing workshops that teach older adults how to successfully use TNC software to summon a ride. For example, the Brookline-based TRIPPS (Transportation Resources, Information, and Planning & Partnership for Seniors) program, which offers resources and programs for older adults who are transitioning away from driving, offers a multi-day instructional lesson that teaches participants how to download and use the apps. The workshop culminates in riders pairing up to summon and take a trip on either Uber or Lyft in order to put their learning into practice.

Additionally, some organizations have found the lack of wheelchair-accessible vehicles (WAVs) to be an obstacle in providing adequate service through TNCs.⁶ One mitigation strategy is to contract with other vendors to provide accessible vehicles. Livery companies and other organizations that have WAVs can contract with either the TNC directly or the organization running the partnership to provide service for people who need wheelchair-accessible transportation options. For example, NSCC students who needed WAVs found that they were unable to reliably get rides through Uber. NSCC contracted with a vendor to provide a parallel level of service for people with mobility impairments. By contracting with a livery company that has accessible vehicles, NSCC was able to provide equal access for its students.

Concern about safety is another barrier programs face in recruiting participants. Massachusetts requires TNC drivers and their vehicles to comply with various eligibility rules.⁷ These regulations include background checks – one completed by the TNC upon hiring and again semi-annually – and a CORI/SORI check performed by the Department of Public Utilities, the TNC oversight body in Massachusetts. State law provides a base level of safety standards, but

⁴ <https://www.mass.gov/community-transit-grant-program>

⁵ Another option is to use a third-party scheduler. GoGoGrandparent and GreatCall provide a call-in option for individuals to connect with an operator who will summon their ride. These services are geared towards older adults and assess an additional fee, increasing the total trip cost.

⁶ On April 1, 2019, the MBTA and MassDOT launched a year-long pilot program that provides financial incentives to TNCs in an effort to increase availability of WAVs. During the pilot, Uber and Lyft will receive a subsidy on a per-hour basis for every hour that WAVs are available for use in The RIDE service area.

⁷ https://www.mass.gov/files/220_cmr_274_00_final_9-22-17_1.pdf

driver competency in addressing the unique needs of older adults or people with disabilities varies, as no training beyond that needed to obtain a driver's license is required.⁸

Another important factor to note is that the availability of TNCs varies by region. Areas with higher population density tend to have a greater number of TNCs available. Understanding the level of availability of TNCs is critical to assessing the possible success of a partnership. An annual Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities report⁹ provides town-by-town information about the number of TNC rides originating in each municipality.

CONCLUSION

Partnering with TNCs provides a wide range of opportunities for organizations to improve mobility for consumers. These examples from Massachusetts serve as a road map for others interested in similar public-private partnerships. Utilizing this customized, flexible, and on-demand option can provide improved connectivity to critical services and enhance customer experience.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Please contact jennifer.henning@state.ma.us for additional information about partnering with TNCs in Massachusetts, or for technical assistance.

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REFERENCE

Jennifer Henning. (2019) Partnering with Transportation Network Companies to Improve Mobility for Older Adults, People with Disabilities, and Low-income Individuals in Massachusetts. Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Human Service Transportation Office, Quincy, MA

⁸ The exception is for UberWAV drivers, a segment of the Uber driver pool with wheelchair accessible vehicles, who must complete a Passenger Service and Safety (PASS) training or similar certification program before being eligible to drive.

⁹ <https://tnc.sites.digital.mass.gov/>