



Public Advocate for the City of New York

Seniors at a Stand-Still

Poor Funding Halts Transportation for
City's Elderly

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In response to reports that many vehicles intended to serve the elderly are kept off the road due to insufficient funding, the Office of the Public Advocate for the City of New York recently conducted a survey of transportation providers serving seniors.

Methodology

Throughout the month of December, surveyors from the Public Advocate's Office contacted transportation providers serving seniors listed in a directory provided by the Department for the Aging (DFTA).¹ Surveyors asked each organization about the number of vehicles used for senior transportation purposes and inquired as to whether the organization owned any vehicles that were not used regularly.

Findings

The Public Advocate's Office surveyed 36 providers and found that nearly 20 percent of groups reported vehicles sitting idle due to a lack of funds. These seven groups include:

- Four senior centers in Queens
- One transportation provider in Brooklyn
- One senior center in Manhattan
- One senior center in Staten Island

In discussing funding constraints, five providers stated that they keep vehicles out of service because of insufficient operating funds. These providers commented specifically on rising fuel and insurance costs, as well as trouble paying sufficient driver salaries. The other two providers reported an inability to cover costly vehicle repairs.

Transportation for Seniors is Critical

Whether seeking a ride to a doctor's appointment or a lift to the grocery store, seniors require reliable transportation. For many, transportation can mean the difference between remaining an active member of one's community or becoming isolated and homebound.

For older individuals, public transportation is not always a viable option for a number of reasons, including the following:

- Distance to the nearest bus or subway stop
- Security concerns
- Accessibility problems (e.g. trouble navigating steps or gates in subway stations)
- Trouble finding their way
- Difficulty carrying belongings

Many seniors who are unable to use the bus or subway system qualify for assistance through Access-A-Ride. This program, which is administered by MTA New York City Transit, offers shared ride, door-to-door paratransit service.² Unfortunately, seniors and

¹ Department for the Aging. Accessed at https://a069-webapps1.nyc.gov/egovt/services/service_query.cfm.

² NYC Transit. Accessed at <http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us/nyct/paratran/guide.htm>, Dec. 21, 2004.

others have found Access-A-Ride to be problematic and unreliable. Problems with Access-A-Ride are well documented and include:³

- Late pick-ups
- Extremely early pick-ups
- No-show drivers
- Excessively lengthy trips
- Unfair service denials
- Unsafe vehicles

Additionally, some seniors may be unable to reach desired locations because Access-A-Ride will not transport passengers to destinations outside of the five boroughs. This poses a problem to seniors who live close to borough borders and may need just a short lift across the city line to reach their local hospital or medical service provider.

Unable to rely on public transportation or Access-A-Ride, and unable to afford taxicabs or car services, many seniors have turned to transportation offered by their local senior centers and other community-based organizations.

Ninety-seven providers, many of which are senior centers, operate an estimated 300 vehicles to assist seniors with everyday transportation needs.⁴ The NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA) estimates that these groups provide approximately 700,000 one-way trips in a year.⁵

The level of service varies among these providers. Some transport seniors around town to appointments and other outings, while others merely provide a shuttle to and from the local senior center.

Lack of Funds

Agencies funded through DFTA have not received funding for inflationary cost increases since 1999, during which time costs across the board have continued to rise.⁶ Transportation programs have faced rising costs, including fuel, insurance, and driver salaries. As a result, providers appear to be struggling to make ends meet.

"The vans operated by senior centers transport seniors to doctors, senior centers, adult day services and other important sites," states Bobbie Sackman, Director of Public Policy for the Council on Senior Centers and Services. "After five years of no funding for fuel and van insurance to keep pace with inflation, senior centers are finding it very difficult to keep all the vans on the road. The city needs to invest new funds into these vans in order for seniors to access services that are critical to them."

³ Greg B. Smith, "A Hell on Wheels for City's Disabled," New York Daily News, Feb. 23, 2003. Accessed at <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/story/61905p-57669c.html> on Nov. 16, 2004.

⁴ NYC Department for the Aging.

⁵ Phone conversation with a DFTA representative, Dec. 21, 2004.

⁶ Id. Also Council on Senior Centers and Services, "More With Less Is Impossible," Jan. 2005.

Already, advocates estimate that operating costs for a single vehicle range from \$30,000 to \$50,000 annually. Insurance alone is believed to cost between \$5,000 and \$8,000 per vehicle per year.⁷ Many providers have long relied upon discretionary funds distributed by borough presidents and other elected officials to supplement DFTA funds and keep their programs afloat. These funds have been critical in enabling providers to replace aging vehicles. Providers report concern, however, about their continued ability to provide transportation services for seniors if City funding is not increased beyond current levels.

Case Example: SNAP of Eastern Queens

Services Now for Adult Persons (SNAP) of Eastern Queens is located in the Jamaica area of Queens, which is served by only limited public transportation. There is no subway service in the area and bus service is limited to just one east-west bus line and one north-south line. The area's limited transportation presents a serious problem for local seniors, many of whom face long walks to reach the nearest bus stop.

SNAP purchased its first van for transporting seniors in the early 1980's with the help of the Queens Borough President. At that time, SNAP provided rides to the elderly three days a week. The center has gradually expanded its service over the years. SNAP's Executive Director Linda Leest reports that demand for transportation service among the area's elderly has always been high. "As many [vans] as I can get, I can fill," states Leest. SNAP currently owns four vehicles, purchased brand new in 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2003.

The group does its best to anticipate cost increases, but this has become increasingly difficult. Rising fuel prices have hit the center hard, and its '97 van has been breaking down with increasing frequency, necessitating costly repairs. Additionally, SNAP recently received a letter from its automobile insurance company stating that the group's rates are likely to increase by 25 percent later in the year. SNAP currently pays approximately \$120,000 annually to operate its four vans. This includes driver salaries, fuel, insurance, and maintenance expenses. The center also pays an estimated \$9,000 per vehicle for insurance coverage.

SNAP reports that rising operating costs have forced the group to scale back its transportation service. These days the center is often unable to operate all four of its vehicles at the same time.

Leest worries about the effect the reduced service is having on local seniors. Many require transportation to doctor's appointments at North Shore Hospital in Manhasset – a trip which cannot be made with Access-A-Ride. Leest reports that the scaled-back service means that many seniors are forced to postpone critical doctor's appointments to later dates when transportation can be guaranteed.

⁷ Phone conversations with senior transportation advocates, Nov-Dec. 2004.

Conclusion

Without funding increases from DFTA, transportation programs have been forced to do more with less. Unfortunately, programs are now reaching their breaking points and have no choice but to sideline vans in order to control costs.

Vans intended to transport seniors should not sit idle. The City must understand the critical role transportation plays in the lives of seniors and ensure that transportation programs serving the elderly receive sufficient funding to put all vehicles on the road.