

Union/Snyder Transportation Alliance
Written Testimony – Districts 2 & 3, Lock Haven
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Community Transportation, also known as Class 5 Shared-Ride Transportation is a vital service in the rural communities of Pennsylvania, providing service for a very dependent population. It is a lifeline to services and often the difference between a person continuing to live in their home or moving to a nursing home, being on disability or gainfully employed. As noted in the Transportation and Reform Commission's Executive Summary, Community Transportation Shared-Ride has its own patchwork quilt of funding and program requirements.

Service is available in all Commonwealth Counties and open to the general public however, full fare rates are so prohibitive that virtually no individual can afford a trip without program sponsorship and as fares increase, programs operating on fixed budgets can afford fewer trips for clients, resulting in lack of access to services. In the rural counties of the SEDA-Cog region, transportation services are primarily available only to those that qualify for specific Commonwealth sponsored programs such as the Shared-Ride Programs for Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities and the Medical Assistance Transportation Programs.

There are those that believe that the current shared-ride program meets most of the transportation needs in our region, however, a recent study completed by the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way identified limited transportation as a barrier for individuals of all ages, including youth. As a result of this study the United Way has formed a Taskforce that includes leaders from local medical facilities, universities, human service agencies and governmental entities in an effort to assess transportation needs regionally. The mission statement of the Taskforce is as follows: *"To achieve a regional system that addresses public transportation needs so that area residents can better access employment, educational, medical and social services within the North Central Pennsylvania region in an efficient and cost effective manner."* The Taskforce is a recipient of a PDOT grant that has local matching fund contributions from several counties to complete a regional public transportation needs assessment.

The Commission recommended that the Commonwealth evaluate community transportation to improve efficiency and productivity of public and human service transportation through the coordination of service and funding for long-term stability, stabilize and expand service for Programs of Statewide Significance and create a Service Stabilization program for community transportation services.

There have been strides made as it relates to Community Transportation since the implementation of Act 44. The Shared-Ride Program for Persons with Disabilities is being expanded statewide. USTA implemented this program in 2003 and PwD ridership now accounts for 10% of the total trips provided, 50% of which have been employment related. Agencies had opportunities to apply for Service Stabilization funds for the first time. The condition of agency fleets has been greatly improved over the past three years, which positively impacts agencies operationally. We hope a way can be found to not let the fleets deteriorate.

A Human Services Coordination Study has been completed and providers are working towards a higher level of coordination. PDOT asked for pilot coordination projects to be submitted and a proposal to better coordinate longer distance out of county services was submitted by the SEDA-Cog region. Although the proposal was not chosen to be a primary candidate we are pleased to learn that consideration is being given to provide the applicants with technical assistance in an effort to develop the proposal. It will be several years until the pilot results are available and during the interim providers will continue to make efforts to coordinate better with their partners, manage costs and monitor productivity.

Coordination of service is desirable in the rural counties as it is a cost effective way in which to provide service, however, there is a gap in operating funds for Community Transportation providers. There is no source of fixed revenue available as a base. When there are unexpected changes in ridership, revenue takes an immediate dive but fixed expenses remain the same. Agencies live on a shoestring, trying hard to keep fares affordable to riders and local agencies and generally have limited reserves on which to fall back on when unexpected spikes in costs occur.

There is still a major concern about the need for Community Transportation providers to have available to them a form of fixed revenue, similar to asset maintenance dollars that mass transit providers receive. Service Stabilization funds have been used in various ways statewide. In USTA's case, funds enabled USTA to hold off a fare increase for an additional year without incurring a

significant deficit. Other systems used the funding for a variety of projects in an effort to make program improvements. The funds were used for GPS Tracking units, training programs, marketing, software, communication systems. I believe finding a way to fund a continuation of the Service Stabilization Program should be considered.

The reason people come to work for Community Transportation providers is because they like what they do, which is to help people. The work is meaningful unfortunately, wages are generally low. In USTA's case agency paid health insurance is only available to full-time employees, not their families. In some counties, the directors of the agencies are sometimes called upon to drive the bus. There is little opportunity for administrative staff to plan, outreach to the community, develop partnerships because the staffing is so tight that management is often involved in day-to-day operations more than is ideal.

Continuation of Service Stabilization funding could be used to assist providers with strategic planning so that providers can look at ways in which to improve services and efficiencies, cover fixed operational expenses due to loss of ridership revenue during harsh winters, and allow providers to hold the line on fares that are a burden to our riders and local agencies.

All public transportation funding, including local support must be adequate, dedicated, predictable and growing sources of funding not subject to fluctuations. Relatively speaking, the small systems are just as valuable to our communities as the large systems are to their communities.

Please continue to include Community Transportation services in your funding considerations.

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Rider Story

Gary L. Jarrett, Milton Pennsylvania

1 (570) 742-1482

Mr. Jarrett is 50 years old and has been blind since the age of 16. He learned how to work on cars as a young teenager. Mr. Jarrett is a Northumberland County resident and has been employed by Premier Automotive in Mifflinburg, Union County as a mechanic for 12 years. For many years a neighbor that worked at Wood-Mode in Mifflinburg transported Mr. Jarrett to/from work. That individual had worked at Wood-Mode for 22 years, however, due to the downturn in the economy lost her job, leaving him to count on family and friends for transportation. Due to obligations of family and friends, provision of his transportation became a problem, leaving him at risk of losing his job.

Mr. Jarrett contacted Northumberland County seeking transportation. Because his schedule did not fit well with Northumberland County's routes, and because Northumberland County and Union/Snyder Counties have been working in a cooperative effort, Northumberland County contacted USTA's PWD Program Manager to see if USTA could provide the rides.

Mr. Jarrett has been riding the USTA bus to/from his full-time job Monday through Friday since January, 2010. He says he is very grateful to have USTA's transportation; he feels he could not stand sitting at home all day and is thankful to be employed.