

Washington County Transportation: Challenges and Opportunities

Prepared for The Community Caring Collaborative

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Background

A key reason why individuals are unable to access healthcare and activities of daily living is due to lack of transportation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “A lack of efficient alternatives to automobile travel disproportionately affects vulnerable populations such as the poor, the elderly, people who have disabilities and children by limiting access to jobs, health care, social interaction, and healthy foods.”

On February 9, 2012, The Community Caring Collaborative and other stakeholders met to discuss transportation for their clients. The facilitated conversation included listing barriers to transportation, presenting potential transportation options, and brainstorming strategies. This report is a summary of the meeting’s discussion as well as recommendations based on other experiences, research, and models.

Goal: A sustainable transportation system that supports access for all community members in Washington County and ensures health equity

Challenges

Challenges can be divided into three categories- demographic, client-based and organizational.

- *Demographic:* Washington County is a rural community with a population density of 12.8 people per square mile. Calais and Machias are the largest cities in the county and home to most of the county’s social services and businesses. Bangor is the closest metropolitan area. It is not uncommon for people to travel 30-60 miles one way to Calais or Machias to visit the Maine DHHS office and 50-100 miles one way to Bangor to receive specialty healthcare. The rural nature of the county does not make bus and taxi services efficient and profitable. Therefore, there are no fixed bus schedules and less than 2 taxi services.
- *Client-based:* Approximately 20% of the population of Washington County is at or below the poverty level. With personal finances stretched thin and raising standard of living costs, it becomes a financial burden to own and maintain a vehicle. Many individuals need to make choices between paying for medications, food, living expenses, and transportation costs. Therefore, these individuals do not have the ability to pay for a vehicle, gas, repairs, inspections or even a driver’s license. Lack of transportation results in unemployment, poor health status, and a continued cycle of poverty.
- *Organizational:* Organizations and agencies providing social services and medical care to people experiencing poverty are challenged by the lack of transportation options in Washington County. Currently, organizations have not collaborated in Washington County to discuss the specific issues and find solutions. As a result, there is no coordination among services and agencies in order to assist in streamlining transportation for clients.

Strengths

While the challenges seem daunting, there are strengths to highlight. First, The Community Caring Collaborative has extensive experience in successfully bringing together organizations and agencies to improve the lives of clients. Second, other entities, such as Washington County: One Community and the Tribes, have strong ties to the community and a proven record of successful assessments, program implementation, advocacy, and collaboration.

Recommendations: The following are recommendations to assist in exploring possible strategies for addressing transportation in Washington County. No one organization or agency can do all the work. It will take strong leadership and a collaborative effort to overcome the barriers and implement effective initiatives. This is not an exhaustive list but a place to start and assist in determining priority activities.

- Assessment and Monitoring: Currently there is no good way to quantify transportation barriers and needs in Maine. Anecdotal information has been the primary source for describing transportation challenges. In order to describe the barriers to access, quantifiable data needs to be collected, summarized, and disseminated. In addition, it is essential to map out the transportation services available in the area. Action steps include:
 - In working with the University of New England evaluation team, collect information and data on transportation barriers encountered by clients.
 - Indicators to consider include:
 - Reasons for not having reliable transportation
 - What have they not been able to access (work, pharmacy, school, grocery store, etc.)
 - How have they adjusted (relied on family, paid for gas for car instead of oil for house, etc)
 - Have they ever tried to get transportation through WHAP, taxi, etc and not been able to/why
 - Do you need a handicap accessible vehicle or a child seat? Has this ever created an additional barrier to getting transportation?
 - Inventory area's transportation services and available funding (DHHS, Office of Substance Abuse, etc.).
 - Report unmet rides and other transportation issues for MaineCare patients to the MaineCare office.

- Education: Education about transportation is an important step in ensuring accurate information is disseminated and used appropriately for planning and policy development. Clients/community members need to be informed of the services available and not available to them. Communities as a whole should be made aware of the transportation needs with the hopes they will participate in problem solving, collaboration, and advocacy. Numerous volunteer transportation networks began at the grassroots, community level. Finally, information about transportation needs to be shared with municipal officials, policy makers, organizations' decision makers, and legislators in order for them to make transportation a priority at all levels.
 - Inform clients of their options, such as MaineCare Friends and Family Program. The Maine Department of Transportation's Transit Toolkit could be useful. It is located at: <http://www.maine.gov/mdot/technicalpubs/index.htm>.

- Inform municipalities, policy makers, and legislators on results of the assessment and possible solutions.
 - Inform agencies how they can support transportation for their clients such as recruiting volunteers, including transportation in their budgets and applying for grants.
- Policy: Policy founded on assessment results and informed decision making can create a stronger and sustainable infrastructure for transportation. MaineCare is a crucial partner whose policy is most influential to the lives of individuals affected by transportation barriers. Policy, especially as it relates to liability, is a critical issue for those organizations who want to create transportation opportunities through organization owned vehicles and volunteer transportation networks.
- Work with MaineCare to clarify policies on medical necessity to include parental visits to newborns in the NICU and pharmacy visits to pick up medications.
 - Determine liability and insurance policies and costs for agencies in regards to transporting clients in their own cars or in a designated vehicle owned by the organization.
 - Work with Washington Hancock Community Agency (WHCA) to strengthen policies that improve reliability, consistency, and customer service.
 - Ensure state grants with funding formulas are equitable and consider demographics and travel distances.
- Mobilization of Stakeholders: The CCC is not the only organization experiencing transportation challenges and attempting to brainstorm solutions. It will take a collaborative effort to address access issues in Washington County. Therefore, any organization involved in transportation should work together.
- Identify organizations, agencies, and other entities working on/discussing solutions to transportation in Washington County.
 - Engage faith based organizations, volunteer groups and businesses in this discussion.
 - Host a Washington County Transportation Summit. At the Summit, review results of assessments and determine prioritized action steps. It may be beneficial to invite statewide resources to share their models for providing transportation. This could include a representative from People Plus to discuss the VTN model, staff from the University of Maine to present on their use of the Zipcar, etc.
 - Identify organizations with “rolling stock” or vehicles belonging to the organization that are used infrequently. Typically, churches and YMCAs have rolling stock. Meet with these organizations to discuss broader use of their vehicles.
 - Explore options for bringing services to where people congregate or a location where more than one service can be provided. (example: WIC)

- **Research:** Many municipalities, organizations, and communities have collaborated to address access issues. It would be beneficial to research and talk with entities that have developed transportation models for rural areas like Washington County.
 - o Research other rural areas with demographics similar to Washington County to explore other options. Based on data gathered by the federal DHHS in their Community Health Status Indicator project, the following link provides a list of counties that are comparable to Washington County based on population size, population density, and poverty rate:
<http://www.communityhealth.hhs.gov/homepage.aspx?j=1> (Click on Maine and Washington County in drop box on right and then display data.)
- **Funding:** Funding plays an instrumental role in implementing initiatives and programs. In economic times that call for shrinking budgets and cutting of programs, funding becomes an increasing challenge.
 - o Look to businesses, including car dealerships, to determine how they can invest in the area's transportation system.
 - o Work with agencies to include transportation costs in their budgets for their clients.
 - o Consider grants that will fund transportation infrastructure development.

Resources: Below is a list of resources to assist in transportation planning efforts:

- **Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT):** The MaineDOT is a crucial partner in transportation planning. They provide funding to public transportation service providers as well as support community transportation efforts. Currently they are developing a guide for creating a community volunteer transportation network. Included on their website is a toolkit for individuals to devise a transportation plan. It can be found at: <http://www.maine.gov/mdot/technicalpubs/index.htm>. The contact at MaineDOT is Penny Vallencourt.
- **Coastal Trans Mobility Management Program:** Coastal Trans in Rockland, the public transportation service provider for Brunswick, Sagadahoc, Lincoln, and Knox Counties, received funding for a mobility management program. The goal of the program is to assess barriers, identify resources, and develop new solutions. They are currently implementing a transportation voucher program. The contact at Coastal Trans is Michele Manley at 596-6605.
- **People Plus Volunteer Transportation Network (VTN):** People Plus has become a leader in developing and maintaining a volunteer transportation network. They are willing to share documents, policies, and lessons learned.
- **ITN America:** Nationwide program focused on providing sustainable transportation services for seniors. Their website is: <http://itnamerica.org/>. There is an affiliate office in Portland. Currently they are doing market research in Midcoast Maine.