

The Role of Transportation in Addressing Social Isolation in Older Adults: Program Example Series

Dakota Area Resources and Transportation for Seniors (DARTS) Loops: Minnesota

Dakota Area Resources and Transportation for Seniors, or DARTS, grew out of an initiative in 1974 to give older adults in Dakota County, Minnesota access to their local community college. From these small beginnings, DARTS has expanded to serve older adult riders all over the state of Minnesota, with the majority of its operations in the Twin Cities metro area. DARTS offers a number of services, including but not limited to transportation, that help older adults age in place. The DARTS philosophy is that transportation services are a great starting point for identifying what other help an older adult might need. Their view is that it is easiest for older adults or their caregivers to ask for assistance with transportation, a basic public need; then, over time, clients may seek out other services as well. DARTS offers three types of transportation — Individual rides, contracted group rides, and weekly semi-fixed loops in specific communities – with the loops being its most recent offering, beginning in 2015. For this case study, we focused on the DARTS loop service because loop rides are affordable and bring together groups of older adults who may not otherwise know each other.



Location, Service, Riders

DARTS operates eight semi-fixed-route loops in Cottage Grove, Edina (2), Hastings, Lakeville, South St. Paul, West St. Paul, and Stillwater. Each loop runs once per week and lasts about five hours. The semi-fixed route is developed with input of a community committee and allows approximately ½ mile deviations to help drivers stick to the fixed route schedule. Each loop has its own "personality"; some focus on traveling to destinations that meet basic needs, such as grocery shopping or medical appointments, while others focus on destinations that promote socialization and recreation, such as the YMCA, retail destinations, and restaurants. Loops are available to all older adults (age 55+) as well as their caretakers, with the exception of one route, for which federal block grant funding restrictions require riders to be at least 62 years old. Outreach is primarily conducted through word of mouth and community committees.

Fee

Riders on the DARTS loop routes pay between \$2 and \$5 for an all-you-can-ride day pass.

Transit Operations

The DARTS fleet consists of six wheelchair accessible buses, the smallest of which holds fifteen passengers with up to two seating spaces for individuals in wheelchairs. DARTS trains its own drivers and also serves as one of the State of Minnesota's certified trainers of specialized (accessible) transit services. Drivers assist riders into and out of buses as well as through the doors of their homes and destinations. DARTS is interested in adding a van to its fleet; findings from a recent study suggested that there is less stigma associated with riding a van than a bus. The DARTS organization has three funding sources: grants and private donations, program fees, and contracts with agencies or businesses.



Collaboration

All loops have community committees to help set the route for the weekly loop. DARTS employs different models of community collaboration to operate each of the loops. In a few communities, DARTS enters into an agreement with the city government to operate the loop and, in at least one of those communities, funding comes from a federal community development block grant. This funding is guaranteed, but DARTS may assist with additional fundraising. In another community, a local nonprofit has an agreement with DARTS to operate the loop. Other communities rely on DARTS to raise the funding to operate the loop, but assist with outreach.

Results, Lessons, Looking Forward

DARTS estimates that three to four individuals ride the loops each hour on average. Loops in some communities have higher ridership than others, but DARTS has observed consistency in ridership and slight increases in ridership over time. While DARTS fields a client and rider satisfaction survey annually, most of the proof of DARTS' success in addressing social isolation in older adults comes from stories and feedback to the staff. Regular loop route riders know each other and their drivers by name and tell DARTS staff how much they appreciate the friends they have made through the weekly ride. In at least one community, the loop fills a gap in proximate, accessible transportation to essential destinations. DARTS has been involved with pilot projects to explore variations of this transportation service, and are experimenting with how to continue the loops under social distancing measures.