

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

Senior Connections, Ride Connection: Virginia

Ride Connection programming came into being almost a decade ago when Senior Connections, an independent, nonprofit Area Agency on Aging in Richmond, Virginia, responded to the closing of the local Red Cross. The Red Cross had provided non-emergency medical transportation to older adults in the area, and Senior Connections recognized the importance of filling this new service gap. Ride Connection began by sharing knowledge of and increasing access to available transit services to connect older adults and people with disabilities with the people, places, and services that help address their social determinants of health. From this impetus, Ride Connection has grown into a mobility management service that leverages existing transportation infrastructure to help riders “age safely at home and live a healthy, connected life.”

Location, Service, Riders

Ride Connection operates in the Richmond metro area, providing services within the city itself as well as surrounding counties, including Charles City, Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, New Kent and Powhatan counties. Its three Ride Connection counselors (one of which is a full-time employee) monitor a recorded telephone line on which clients leave messages with their transportation needs. Counselors respond to requests within 24 to 48 hours. Services fall into three categories: 1) mobility transition planning as well as county-specific transportation education and referral to promote “access to the things that make life enjoyable”; 2) the provision of a limited number of discounted public transit vouchers to older adults with disabilities traveling to non-emergency medical appointments, or connection to other public transit or volunteer programs in the service area; and 3) ride scheduling and follow up for those unable to use public transit. While the majority of callers are looking for information on local transit options, many clients call Ride Connection to schedule individual rides to medical appointments, social engagements, shopping trips, and other destinations within the service area. Due to limited funding, medical trips are prioritized. Ride Connection expects a notice of seven business days from individuals wishing to schedule rides.

Fee

Fees vary according to the transportation provider, ride distance, and accessibility needs. Program staff estimated that about 70 percent of riders who requested services had incomes at or below the federal poverty level, and several clients pay for rides according to a sliding fee scale. For discounted rides through Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) Transit Service, donations are suggested - according to recent documentation, four GRTC bus tickets can cost Senior Connections \$7 per month. Hanover County rides cost a flat rate of \$6 one

way. Hanover's senior rides volunteer driver program, which operates with two local churches and facilitates rides across five zip codes, is free of charge but donations are accepted.

Transit Operations

Ride Connection partners with a variety of transportation providers in its service areas to refer clients to transit options or to schedule rides to and from desired destinations. The program does not own or operate vehicles. GRTC is one of its partners, which offers fixed route bus service as well as curb-to-curb paratransit van services in the Richmond area. GRTC also offers free travel training. Chesterfield and Hanover Counties provide public transit options specifically for older riders, but transit services in other surrounding counties are more limited. Ride Connection is supported by the Virginia Department of Rail & Public Transportation. Funding from the Older Americans Act covers public transit tickets. The program also seeks out funding from local businesses and other donations.

Collaboration

As a mobility management program, Ride Connection collaborates with GRTC, other local public transit agencies, volunteer driver services, and private fleets of vans and buses to schedule individual rides. See [here](#) for a complete list of Ride Connection partners.



Results, Lessons, Looking Forward

Ride Connection's message line receives about 400 calls every month and it is estimated that half of these calls are information requests only. Of the 840 individuals enrolled in services that provide vouchers or rides through partners, approximately 5,000 rides were given in the last year. Outcomes of interest include increased awareness of transportation options and cost-effective medical transport, increased access to medical care, and better continuity of care. The most common ride destination was medical appointments and according to its rider experience survey, all riders either agreed or strongly agreed that the assistance they received helped them keep their appointments and better manage their health care costs. It is important to note that Ride Connection also asks about whether the ride helps riders stay more engaged and connected to their family, friends, and community; while twenty percent of riders responded in the affirmative, seventy percent of riders responded that the question was not applicable. Consistent with its program goals, Ride Connection hopes to secure additional funding in the future to promote more social rides. It also has identified a gap in availability of door-to-door or threshold-to-threshold services. Ride Connection is in the process of developing a new web-based software system and portal to support ride scheduling and tracking, which is expected to inform future service offerings. Separate from the Ride Connection program, Senior Connections hosts Friendship Cafés where older adults can enjoy a group meal and conversation with their community. Senior Connections coordinates transportation to and from about half of the Friendship Café events throughout its service area.