

Jerom Theunissen 0:06

This is mobility lines podcast, a show where we interviewed thought leaders, practitioners and experts that relates to delivering customer centered mobility management strategies. This program is organized by the National Center for mobility management, a Federal Transit Administration funded Technical Assistance Center. This is episode number one, titled, Statewide Mobility Management: Factors affecting the Creation and Success of Networks. Hosted by Dr. Judy Shanley, Easterseals Director of the National Center for Mobility Management.

Dr. Judy Shanley 0:44

Hello NCMC podcast listeners! I'm Dr. Judy Shanley, the Easterseals Director of the National Center for Mobility Management. We call it NCMC for short. Today I have the pleasure of kicking off the NCMC podcast series with a colleague, a highly respected researcher and a friend, Dr. PS Sriraj. Dr. Sriraj, thank you for participating in our inaugural podcast hosted by the National Center for Mobility Management. We're excited to hear about the research that you and your team have conducted on behalf of NCMC. Your first study and report was in 2018, and it was entitled "Mobility Management: State of the State's Report." And more recently, in July, you concluded a second study entitled "Statewide Mobility Management: Factors Affecting the Creation and Success of Networks." Both of these reports are available on the ncm website.

We're looking forward to speaking with you about these studies and what you learned. But before we get started, I'd like to introduce Dr. Sriraj. First, let me tell you a little about his background.

Dr. PS Sriraj is the Director of the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois Chicago (which is where the national office of Easterseals happens to be). In this role as director and researcher he oversees many studies and many programs some projects, including the Metropolitan Transportation support initiative, and research programs, the METS project, and he also served as research associate professor with the Urban Transportation Center. We'll get started now in learning more about Dr. Sriraj and the work that he's done on behalf of NCMC. First, Dr. Sriraj, please introduce yourself and the work of your center. And tell us a little about any other exciting work that your center has been involved in.

Dr. P.S. Sriraj 2:49

Thank you, Judy. And thank you Jerom for inviting me to be part of this podcast. I'm super excited and happy that you asked me to participate in this and then the same feeling that I had when you asked us to work on the state of the state's report and subsequently the follow up to it. And in order to understand the factors affecting the statewide mobility management networks, the same feeling I have now that I had back then when we started those projects, and they've been super fun, super informative, and we learned a lot along the way, and I hope to translate some of those lessons learned to your audience.

But before I do that, I want to just take a couple minutes talking about the Transportation Center. The Urban Transportation Center, which is located in the College of urban planning and Public Affairs at UIC, is in its 41st year of existence at UIC. So started as a campus wide center that looked at many different transportation issues back in 1979. We have come a long way since then, but along the way, we have really worked on some significant projects, both at the national level, the state level and the local level, that have led to numerous policy, impactful studies and has also shed light on behavioral issues associated with transportation.

The main focus, the thread, the thrust of the Transportation Center has been about mobility. We study both mobility of passengers and mobility of goods. And this particular study that we did for the NCMM and the FTA is focusing on the mobility of the passengers. So I am very excited about sharing what we found through those two studies to your audience.

Dr. Judy Shanley 4:39

Wonderful. Yeah, I continuously am impressed with the work of your center and I feel fortunate that we're in the same city and we get to work together. Please describe the purposes of both of the studies that you did on behalf of the National Center for Mobility Management.

Dr. P.S. Sriraj 4:58

So going back in time... When you approached us, Judy, back then in 2017, or 2018, the goal and you and I discussed what we wanted to get out of this and the goal of our first study was to see what these fledgling emerging novel experiments called the statewide mobility management networks looked like across the country. And so it was somewhat new to us as an as a research community. We had looked at mobility management from many different perspectives, but looking at it from the network perspective was a new approach to us and and we were curious what we were going to find out and as a way of putting this all together, we set out with a methodology which was an online survey instrument where we put together a list of questions and floated them to the national audience and we sent them to many different state mobility management networks with your help Judy and NCMM. And in terms of understanding who the appropriate contact personnel will be, we also did our own homework and identifying pertinent people in the various states. The survey went out to all states, and we received about 14 responses, 14 completed responses I might add. Many other states did start the questionnaire but stopped halfway through. What we did was we took the 14 completed ones and used that to understand what these mobility management network statewide networks were functioning as. And we compiled that study, reported the findings of the survey, and presented that as report to you, pursuant to which more questions came up. And that was what led us to design the second study the follow up study to the first one, which was to talk to the statewide mobility managers and understand what they were facing as far as issues? What were some of the reasons why they existed? And what were some of their accomplishments? So that is what these twin studies were focusing on.

Dr. Judy Shanley 7:13

Thank you. I remember trying to identify the appropriate people across each state was one of our biggest challenges because mobility management networks in many places are evolving and developing. And so even identifying the most appropriate person to complete this survey was really a challenge for us. But I think that we hit it as a first step. So what did you learn? Positively, negatively? What were your big "aha's" or findings as a result of these two studies?

Unknown Speaker 7:49

So if I can take a step back, before I get to the "aha" moment, and talk about the importance of mobility management, if you will, and I've been looking at this from many different perspectives over the last 20 years that have been at UIC. And when I came to UIC, the very first exposure that I had was to something called the Interagency Council for Coordinated Transportation, ICCT. And that was something that the Illinois DOT folks had put together in somewhat of a very nebulous form. We had many members from different parts of the State of Illinois and different districts of IDOT, different transit entities from all over the state. And we would convene as a collective to discuss how we can better coordinate the activities together and then that while we because it was an unfunded effort, it really didn't move too far. To where we would see the fruits of now those meetings.

Dr. P.S. Sriraj 8:54

At the national level, we've had similar efforts to establish the coordinated transportation initiative. And for some many, many different reasons, complex reasons, they have not really taken off. And that's why when you came to us and said, you know what, these statewide mobility management networks, they are coming up, we should be very poised to take advantage of those and and see how we can understand how they're functioning. I was very excited. I was curious. And with the help of our colleagues, Lisa Durks at UTC, and our very, very able, very talented graduate students, Em Hall and Mike McCarthy, we were going at it to study the literature, we looked at the landscape. And what we found when and because it was such a you, you asked me you threw the kitchen sink at me, with that question, what did you find because we found many different things. And I'll try to list them one after the other. And if I forget, for any number of reasons, I'll always be able to get back to what I got, but...

The first thing that we found was that the same problems that we had encountered in the past that I had seen in the past existed even now, because in between I had also studied human service transportation agencies and networks and human service transportation managers at the state level. And so, some of the same issues that they were facing, some of the same issues that coordinated transportation has always faced, is what the mobility managers and the mobility management networks were facing. Those were pertaining to funding, dedicated funding. Some of the issues are also a lack of understanding of the role of the mobility managers and the most statewide mobility management network.

Where this tends to affect their progress is they are not able to sustain their efforts in the in the absence of funding, they cannot get training, they cannot do a whole lot of other things that they would like to do, and they are also not in a position to impart training. So the way the mobility management networks work is they provide counseling and advice and guidance to many different entities in their state who are seeking to coordinate their activities together. And the mobility managers, if you will, are the fulcrum around which all of this revolves, and they are working in earnest, the 14 that we received input from, they were all from different walks of life in terms of the training, so there was no formal training that was available to train to be a mobility manager. So they came from different backgrounds, but once they got to their current role, they also saw opportunities that existed that they would like to take advantage of in terms of structured training, some of them are being offered by the National transit Institute. Others are being offered by Community Transportation Association of America. There are others that are offered by the University of South Florida, there are a few other opportunities, but nothing that is in one package in terms of if you want to be a mobility manager, this is the sequence of training courses and modules that one needs to go through. So it's almost like in a piecemeal manner, they are putting this together the skill sets and the understanding that they need.

There is also a big gap, in our opinion based on what we've talked to these individuals, for convening them together in the same space and exchanging some of the best practices and some of the challenges. So there is a void in my opinion about that particular aspect is concerned. But the benefits are that there could be if done right, if done the right way, there could be a lot of the smaller transit operators who for a number of reasons, are seat-of-the-pants type operations, can immensely benefit by communicating with the mobility managers and taking advantage of the synergies that exists in their state to coordinate services and coordinate activities. And that is where I see the mobility management networks playing a significant role, we have come to a point and in today's society where everybody is talking about mobility, mobility-as-a-service, mobility on demand, there is many different variations of mobility that are being discussed. And in this particular instance, the role of the mobility manager could be very, very

crucial. If we want to focus on the goal of mobility and enhancing mobility, then the mobility managers have a very vital role to play within all of that.

Dr. Judy Shanley 13:44

I think your findings really sum up the work that the national centers been doing all these years and we've learned that every mobility management networks looks different from any other network. There isn't one mold, there isn't one set of responsibilities that mobility management professionals have, that every network is as unique as the needs and the conditions of the place it's in. So in some ways, your findings of the studies were not surprising, and in other ways, I think they affirm where we're headed in the industry, in the field, and confirm the value that mobility management can have, so I was very appreciative of the work you did in that area.

You touched on some of the recommendations and some of your learning that could be applied as new states and regions are thinking about implementing, or advancing, or extending their mobility management networks. What recommendations would you have for places based upon your findings that you think could be useful as they're scaling up their mobility management networks?

Dr. P.S. Sriraj 14:54

So there are many many recommendations that we are listing in the report and I know you mentioned it as on your website. And we've also featured it on our website, on the Transportation Center's website. But to just list them, one of the things we found in our conversations and in our surveys was that the way these mobility management networks were established, there seems to be some variation across the board in two or three states, they were established by the legislation, so meaning that it is authorized as fully blessed by the state legislature as a functioning entity, as far as a mobility management network at the state level is concerned, that is the best case scenario, in my opinion, because then it has some cachet in terms of its existence.

There were about five or six states that the DOT had taken it upon themselves to establish the mobility management network at the state level, so that the even that is also significant in our opinion. There were a few others that were spearheaded by nonprofit sector, the advocacy groups that saw the vacuum in the space and decided to put up a statewide mobility management functionality within their agency. And so there's all these variations, but in my opinion, if you can have a mobility management network that is established through a process of legislation, I think that will have the best outcomes in my opinion.

With that way of establishing it, the other aspect that we found was that funding dedicated funding, many of the mobility managers that we talked to were wearing multiple hats in many cases. So if they are working within a DOT, they may have a transit manager role, and they may be splitting the duties of the mobility manager role alongside their other roles that they being paid for. So there is no dedicated funding, there is no dedicated position that we saw existing in many of the states that we talked to. So that is another area that I would strongly advocate for creating this office of mobility management and an also blessing it with the help of the legislation and throwing some money. I'm not talking about significant dollars, maybe one or one and a half FPE that can be funded for the purpose of the mobility management discussion and some more dollars and then that comes to my next point is the formal training that is needed. Many of these mobility managers are very, very adept. They have figured out how to go about getting the requisite training that they need to do their job, even though they are doing their jobs in a very partial manner in terms of their responsibilities, what they are being paid for their splitting their time between their current position and the mobility management position. They have

still figured out to be very resourceful in taking advantage of the meager opportunities that come their way in a very cost-efficient manner. So, I would strongly advocate for more communication more opportunities that are funded by that are supported by adequate funding will be a way to go.

And then of course, the communication aspect which is let the landscape of transportation providers be known that here is the central office at the state that can play the role of convener, can facilitate discussions, can explore collaborations, can look at mobility management. So knowing and acknowledging the fact that many, many transit operators and transportation providers in different states are very, very thinly staffed in terms of: they don't have a huge resource pool available for them to look at strategic initiatives like mobility management, but this office of mobility management which can have the statewide establishment, can definitely work alongside these transportation providers. I keep in mind, I'm talking about transportation providers and not necessarily targeting just transit alone, letting it be expanded to transportation providers of all different modes, then you have the best outcomes that one can think of, because then you can have different sizes, different shapes of mobility management partners that can work with the mobility management network, and that is probably the best outcome one can think of.

So those are the big picture. But alongside those, the one of the critical aspects that we found was the lack of proper training curriculum for the mobility managers. So that may be something that either the National Center for Mobility Management as an entity, in collaboration with other entities like the FTA, maybe there should be the development of a curriculum that can be advocated for unlike APTA puts out a transit curriculum for entry level to mid level managers in the transit industry. I'm thinking if we can design with the help of an academic institution, or NCMM, along with Community Transportation Association of America and the FTA, come up with a curriculum that says okay, these are the skills that mobility manager at the state level ought to be having, and here are a few canned course offerings that you can take advantage of, just go through these course material, and then maybe have a workshop or something along those lines where ideas can be exchanged. I think that is also desperately in need of for the improvement of the mobility management network.

Dr. Judy Shanley 20:58

Thank you. That's a really robust set of recommendations. I know one of the pieces of work that we do as a national TA Center is to try to look at the governance and the ideology of where mobility management networks have been established in the states and try to connect the coordination work that may be going on in a state with mobility management work that's going on because the two are not synonymous, but they certainly support each other. So I think your recommendations regarding dedicated funding and the formal training and certainly having communication mechanisms is really critical.

We've been looking at competencies over the years of our center to look at exactly what are the skill sets of mobility managers, what are those skills that are desirable versus required in a position and I know we're working with some places to actually developed some curriculum and we on our website have some entry level materials for mobility management professionals but I agree that it's certainly a field that's growing and needs to be developed more. So thank you for those thoughtful recommendations. What did I forget? Is there anything else that you learned in both of your studies that you want to communicate to the field as we're advancing the field of mobility management.

Dr. P.S. Sriraj 22:22

So one, this is something that was an observation based on the twin studies is the importance of having a statewide mobility management network. I don't know if people really understand how impactful that could be. Based on the many different research projects that I've been part of, I know for a fact that transit agencies, and I am talking about very specifically public transportation agencies, have the primary responsibility to cater to their service area and in many states, the service area may not be contiguous. We may have many different transit agencies, but there could be gaps between the ending of one transit agency service area and the beginning of another transit agency service areas. And then that could also be funding driven. So there could be this lack of an owner, if you will, for areas that are either not covered by a transit agency or may be covered by a nonprofit entity that is receiving federal funds could be a mixed mishmash of different types of services that are existing and in my opinion, because of the variation, right, some so you can have a regular transit agency that is put together but with the help of legislation, you can have a Mass Transit District that is established with the help of a referendum. You can have a nonprofit entity that is the recipient of a 5310/5311 funding, that may be filling the gaps, if you will, that the mass transit district or the transit agency is not taking care of. And I don't know if there is a proper forum where those three different entities that I can think of, there may be many other entities including some of the TNCs and others, that can convene in in a very common setting and discuss mobility in a law for a large state. And that is the area of need. And that is the role that I see mobility management networks fulfilling.

Dr. Judy Shanley 24:35

Wonderful, I think you summarized it nicely that mobility managers are in an ideal position and the networks that they operate in are in a wonderful position to reduce the mishmash of services that exist in communities. Now we know the Coordinating Council and Access and Mobility is charged with ensuring that there is efficiency in transportation, that there access, and availability. And I think similarly the mobility management networks can accomplish that.

So, we're going to close now, but I wanted to thank you, Dr. Sriraj, so much for your work with NCM and your work in the field and contributing to what we know about mobility management, and addressing some of those deficiencies.

And thank you to all of our listeners for this inaugural podcast. Please remember that our center offers free products and technical assistance, all of which can be accessed through our website, which is www.ncmm.org. And for questions about this particular podcast, I can be reached at jshanley@easterseals.com. So thank you, Dr. Sriraj. Thank you, my colleague at Easterseals, Jerom, and thank you to all of your listeners for contributing to the field of mobility management.

Dr. P.S. Sriraj 25:57

You're welcome Judy I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and good luck with the next editions of the podcast. I'll be staying tuned!

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