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Tom Seekins Ph.D.

University of Montana - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

Andrea Hartsell

University of Montana - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

Diana Spas

University of Montana - Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

University of Montana Rural Institute

scholarworks-reports@mso.umt.edu

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Faith Based Organizations and Rural Transportation

Background

Advocates and service providers frequently cite inadequate transportation as one of the major problems facing people with disabilities, especially those living in rural communities. Many approaches have been tried to address this problem. People with disabilities and community service providers frequently suggest that local faith-based organizations (FBOs) such as churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, and other organizations might be involved in improving transportation.

In 2004, RTC: Rural conducted a national survey of recipients of *Section 5310 Formula Grants for Special Needs of Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities*. Ten percent of respondents reported being faith-based organizations, which suggests that nationally as many as 484 FBOs may provide Section 5310-funded transportation services.

Consistent with suggestions in the literature (e.g., Crawford, 1996; Sider & Unruh, 2004), significantly more FBOs providing transportation tended to be located in urban rather than rural communities (Seekins, Enders, Pepper, & Sticka, 2005).

Still, the fact that many FBOs and communities of faith are in rural areas promises new options for community transportation. In response to consumer suggestions and these findings, RTC: Rural is conducting a series of studies to explore how FBOs might help address the problem of inadequate transportation for rural Americans with disabilities.

Method

To date, researchers have completed a survey of centers for independent living (CILs) which serve rural areas. The goal is to both assess how (or whether) CILs partner with FBOs, and to establish a national sample of rural FBOs from which to select survey respondents.

We sent surveys to 89 centers for independent living located in non-metropolitan counties (see *RuralFacts: Update on the Demography of Rural Disability, Part Two: Non-Metropolitan and Metropolitan* at <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/RuDis/NonMetro.htm>).

Results

Terms:

Faith Based Organization (FBO) - a generic descriptor for a place of worship, a "church-sponsored" agency (e.g. Catholic Charities) or other local non-profit organization.

Faith Community - a community of religious groups, including churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, etc.

Sixty-two CILs (70%) responded. Responding centers served an average of 711 consumers, with a median of 400 consumers. They served an average of 7.1 counties, and in their catchment areas some type of public transportation (fixed route, on-demand, etc.) served an average of 3.9 counties. Thirty-five respondents (56.5%) reported providing some transportation to their consumers. Of those, nine CILs sponsored a voucher program. Still, CILs rated average quality of public transportation in their service areas as “very poor” (range: 0=very poor to 4=excellent), both for all individuals (.9) and for people with disabilities (.8).

In the previous year, respondents’ centers had been involved in “modest” efforts to develop and improve community transportation options in their service areas. Table 1 shows numbers of respondents providing various transportation services.

Table 1. Numbers of CILs Reporting Various Transportation Services (N=38)

Transportation Services Provided	Number Reporting	Percent Reporting
Use CIL vehicle to provide limited transportation to and from CIL functions	23	61%
Facilitate needed transportation through other organizations	22	58%
Maintain fund to help pay for emergency transportation	12	32%
Participate in a coordinated local transportation system	11	29%
Sponsor a voucher program	9	24%
Maintain organized group of volunteer transportation providers	8	21%
Provide significant transportation services such as a demand-response system	8	21%

Involvement with FBOs

Twenty-three respondents (37%) reported that their centers partnered with an FBO (i.e., church, synagogue, Salvation Army, mosque, etc.) to conduct some form of outreach activities. Five (8%) reported working with an FBO to provide transportation.

Those not currently working with an FBO to provide transportation reported their willingness to do so on a five-point scale (range: 0=very unwilling to 4=very willing). Twenty-seven respondents (47%) said they were very willing to work with an FBO to provide transportation. Willingness to work with an FBO to provide local transportation rated 3.2 (quite willing). Only one respondent reported being very unwilling to do so. Table 2 shows numbers of CILs reporting barriers to CIL-FBO transportation collaborations.

Table 2. Reported Barriers to CIL and FBO Transportation Collaborations

Barrier	Number Reporting	Percent Reporting
CIL financial resources insufficient to purchase/operate additional vehicles	45	75%
CIL has insufficient staff for such an effort	43	72%
Concerned about liability	23	38%
Lack resources to train FBOs in how to transport individuals with disabilities	20	33%
CIL concerned about becoming entangled with religious activities	17	28%
Transportation not in CIL mission	9	15%

Table 3 shows numbers of CILs reporting various requirements that would have to be met in order to establish CIL-FBO transportation collaborations.

Table 3. CIL Requirements for Establishing Transportation Collaborations with FBOs

Requirement	Number Reporting	Percent Reporting
Funding to support activities	54	84%
Board approval	46	75%
Training or technical assistance in developing transit services	39	64%
Training or TA in working with FBOs	31	51%
Funding agency approval	21	34%

CIL respondents commented that they could work with FBOs but that there would have to be specific and clear objectives, with an understanding that the purpose would be to provide transportation and not to proselytize to consumers. Several respondents also commented that there was a need for funding such collaborative transportation projects.

Conclusions

Many people believe that FBOs could play a significant role in filling the rural transportation gap for people with disabilities. A few rural centers for independent living already work with FBOs to provide some transportation. However, the overall willingness and capacity of rural faith communities to serve non-members is unknown.

The literature on involvement of faith communities suggests that those churches involved in community services are larger (e.g., Crawford, 1996) and tend to be more “liberal” (e.g., Chaves, 1999). Rural communities of faith may be smaller and more conservative.

Limitations

This study focused only on CILs located in non-metropolitan areas. While 70% of surveyed CILs responded, 30% did not. As such, these results should not be generalized to all CILs.

Next Steps

We are conducting a national survey of faith communities located in responding CILs' service areas. We hope to use these data to assess the willingness and capacity of rural faith communities to help solve local transportation problems.

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Resource: Faith In Action. A national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. <http://www.fiavolunteers.org>. Telephone: 877-324-8411.

For more information, contact:

Tom Seekins, Director

Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

The University of Montana Rural Institute: A Center of Excellence in Disability Education, Research and Services, 52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812-7056

(888) 268-2743 Toll-free (406) 243-4200 TTY (406) 243-2349 Fax

rural@ruralinstitute.umt.edu <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu>

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