

POLICY POSITION
PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF AREA AGENCIES ON
AGING, INC.

Transportation

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

Transportation is a major imperative for older Pennsylvanians, consistently identified in needs assessments as the number one priority. While this need is universal, methods of meeting it and supports required are quite diverse. Older adults with access to automobiles may need assistance in determining adjustments in driving habits needed to promote safety as they age, including deciding when driving is no longer safe at all. Those with the ability to access fixed route public transportation benefit significantly from the Free Transit Program. Since its inception, the Shared Ride Program has been a critical lifeline connecting older Pennsylvanians without access to their own cars and unable to meet their needs using fixed route transportation to the community services that are essential for them to remain active and independent within their communities. Vital to retaining independence, transportation is an integral part of Pennsylvania's continuum of long-term care; essential to permit consumer choice; and a key component in supporting and enhancing the delivery of service to older persons.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As a State whose topography and population density already present special logistical and financial challenges, Pennsylvania faces an increasing dilemma if it is to provide efficient, comprehensive, and effective public transportation for individuals with diverse needs. Further, recognizing the Commonwealth's large and growing elderly population, one must view their need to rely upon public transportation as compelling evidence that these services must be improved if they are to meet the needs of the senior population in days ahead.

Prevailing economic conditions exacerbate the concern. Gasoline prices exceeding four dollars per gallon increase the financial cost of maintaining even the current degree of mobility, whether through fixed route, shared ride or private vehicles. Without funding increases, transit routes and hours will be curtailed. There is also the danger in all forms of transportation that resources budgeted to maintain vehicle safety will be used to purchase gasoline.

Additionally, improvements to the Shared Ride Program are desperately needed. There has been very little change to the Shared Ride Program since its inception a quarter of a century ago. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation operates the program as a transit program that in some cases supports human services. What is needed is for the Shared Ride Program to **BECOME** a human services program. In the meantime, the Aging Services Network has undergone a dramatic transformation. While in the seventies and early eighties the typical Aging Services consumer was ambulatory and reasonably active, many of our consumers in the community today have illnesses and disabilities that in the past would have ensured their placement in a nursing facility. The Shared Ride program needs to be updated to appropriately serve these individuals.

GOAL:

Emphasizing Pennsylvania's priorities of consumer choice and independence, the goal of maintaining seniors in their home when they so choose, can *only* be attained with adequate transportation. Therefore, we support transportation efforts that will:

- Provide assistance as a routine and not "supplemental" part of a responsive transportation program to ensure access by older people with severe illnesses and disabilities.
- Respect the older person's right and ability to make educated choices on mode of transportation, trip purpose and destination in keeping with his/her needs - at a reasonable cost.
- Provide a coordinated system that effectively balances the older person's need for specific transportation requirements and special needs with providers' need to operate a reliable, responsive, and cost-efficient transit system.

THE POSITION

1. Provide for, and adequately fund, door-through-door services in the Shared Ride Program, including adequate funding for capital acquisition and replacement. This will offer older people with illnesses and/or disabilities a supporting hand with groceries, navigating public buildings, etc. while practically drawing the line between helping an individual with their coat and walker vs. helping him/her to dress. Further, this door-through-door service should be provided within the parameters of a clear definition which focuses on common sense and reasonable expectation. Without such service, older persons most in need will be cut off from transportation and community life.
2. Deliver a more comprehensive programmatic response to older riders' needs in the Shared Ride Program including:
 - a. statewide, uniform availability of transportation across county and state lines when needed by the consumer, which is extremely important when there are population centers straddling county lines or when the major regional medical center is across county or state lines

- b. availability of same day service, when needed, particularly in cases of sudden illness or unforeseen hospital discharge, providing a measure of flexibility on how this could be implemented with reasonable efficiency
 - c. opportunity to stop and pick up a prescription on the way home from a doctor's appointment
 - d. statewide, uniform opportunity to travel with an attendant or companion at no extra charge
 - e. flexibility to meet unique locally identified needs and priorities
3. Reduce the minimum eligibility for shared ride services to the age of 60, and raise the Shared Ride subsidy to 90% of the fare. This would bring the service into line with most other human services programs, and provide financial relief to riders and sponsors experiencing increased fares due to skyrocketing oil prices and other inflationary factors.
 4. Provide sufficient funding for all existing public fixed route transit routes and programs, including the Free Transit Program.
 5. Provide funding to increase the availability of older driver education programs, coordinating with existing resources to promote maximum efficiency.

CONCLUSION:

We believe that the enhancements that we are proposing will provide a coordinated system that will best utilize public dollars and provide the best and most comprehensive service to consumers. While implementation of this program will require the General Assembly to provide increased appropriations for transportation and related services, we believe that such increases could be supported by State Lottery revenues, are warranted and are long overdue.

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