

Youth Employment Transportation Briefs



Brief #2: Transportation For Youth in Minnesota: Recent Initiatives

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Written by April Kaplan on behalf of the Community Transportation Association of America

Employment initiatives for one often-neglected segment of the working population—youth—received a boost when Congress passed the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998. Title I of WIA, which authorizes employment-related services for youth as well as for adults, mandated the creation of Youth Councils in every local delivery area. The councils were charged with developing a coordinated youth policy and strengthening linkages between existing youth services and resources. This marked a drastic change from the way services had been traditionally delivered to youth, moving from disjointed, short-term interventions to a more comprehensive, coordinated approach. In recognition of the social disadvantages some youth face—such as the lack of strong family support systems, stable community ties, and connections to social services—WIA mandated increased spending on out-of-school youth activities, with the goal of improving youth educational achievements, preparing youth to succeed in employment, providing supportive services for youth, and developing the potential of youth to become active citizens and leaders.

Many other federal programs have funding that can be used for transportation for youth, such as the

- Corporation for National and Community Service
- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Education
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of Justice
- Department of the Treasury
- National Endowment for the Arts
- Department of Transportation
- Department of Defense

Although most of the youth services funded by these agencies do not set aside funds specifically for transportation, many of them do fund support services, one of which is transportation services.

Minnesota is one state that has been particularly active in pursuing solutions to support youth employment. In so doing, it has undertaken several initiatives to assist youth in overcoming transportation barriers. Details of two of these programs are provided below.

Youth Connections

Youth Connections is the main youth initiative offered through Workforce Development, Inc. (WDI), the nonprofit agency that delivers workforce-related services on behalf of the state of Minnesota and local counties. WDI operates as the Workforce Investment Board for

southeastern Minnesota and staffs ten area offices located throughout the region. Six of these locations are designated as Minnesota Workforce Centers, in which multiple agencies deliver a family of services for job seekers and employers. WDI annually serves thousands of people through career planning and pre-vocational skills training in four major areas:

- Workforce Investment Act programs (adult and youth)
- Dislocated workers
- Welfare reform
- Youth programming

Youth Connections offers youth and young adults a variety of activities focused on life and work skills as well as career preparation. Participants in the program range in age from 14 to 20 years and have a variety of needs. As part of the Connections program, youth participate in projects in partnership with local, city, county, and other community-based organizations. These projects give participants the opportunity to see themselves as valued members of the community.

Support services offered through Youth Connections revolve around two basic concerns for youth and young adults: 1) helping them complete high school (or the equivalent) coursework and 2) aligning their skills and interests with meaningful employment. To accomplish these two goals, Youth Connections participants are aided in

- Completing job applications
- Learning computer skills
- Developing resumes
- Securing transportation
- Learning independent living skills
- Achieving job training
- Obtaining or renewing driver's license
- Securing financial assistance with education

Each young person entering the Youth Connections program meets with a caseworker who, as part of the intake process, interviews the participant to become familiar with his or her relationships, needs, barriers (including mobility deficits), and involvement in the community. Staff then develop an individual development plan for the new enrollee, choosing the specific components that would best meet his or her needs (e.g., subsidized employment, personal and/or career mentoring, college-based training, life skills preparation).

Meeting Participants' Transportation Needs

According to the program director, WDI staff who work with youth have found that 70–80% of youth entering the program identify transportation as a significant barrier to their fully accessing community and WDI services. WDI serves about 400 youths a year, with 25% facing transportation challenges throughout the year; 50–70% of new referrals alone struggle with transportation issues. Recognizing this fact, the agency attempts to maximize the resources of its public and private partners to help participants overcome any transportation barriers. Approximately 20% of every \$1,000 spent per youth goes to subsidizing transportation.

WDI staff use several different strategies to address participants' transportation needs:

- Mobility strategies. Strategies to improve participants' transportation options include purchasing vehicles, supporting the addition of new bus routes, subsidizing existing

bus services, recruiting volunteers or using other organizations' volunteers to assist in transporting youth, identifying peers who can help drive youth, and carpooling.

- Public transit partnership. In this initiative, students from a rural high school traveling to a technical school to attend a summer program needed transportation. WDI worked with the public transit provider to arrange for a new bus route to be added; WDI agreed to pay for the expenses associated with the additional stop and the fare for the youth they transported.
- Using volunteers serving other populations. Local senior centers had recruited volunteers to assist older adults in traveling to and from the senior center and other destinations. WDI was able to tap into that volunteer pool to help youth as well. WDI asked the volunteers to pick up youth in neighborhoods where they were already picking up older adults and then paid for the additional mileage related to the youth trips. Young people and older adults thus began commuting together, which in some cases led to mentoring relationships being established.
- Recruiting new volunteers. Efforts with 14- to 16-year-old participants in the Connections program are usually focused on reconnecting these youth with education more so than with employment. One challenge for these youth, who often have been expelled from school in their home district, is arranging transportation to a neighboring school district. To fulfill this need, WDI recruited volunteer drivers to drive students back and forth to school. For other youth, WDI organized for a school bus from the neighboring district to pick up youth traveling to a school in that district from a designated location, such as a shopping mall. Transportation to the designated collection point was provided by either the students' parents or volunteers.
- Using identified volunteers. Often during the creation of the individual's development plan, the participant identifies people who could serve as volunteers. Then when a youth's mobility needs are identified, case workers contact these identified volunteers, who are often willing to assist the youth with his or her transit needs.
- Partnerships. WDI is part of the Family Preservation Collaborative, an entity funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that allowed several Minnesota counties to come together and discuss issues facing their constituency and maximize existing services already provided for clients. The collaborative has extended into several counties that are now funded through means other than the initial federal grant and has grown to include several community-based organizations. Through such partnering, these groups can share resources, such as vehicles and volunteers.

In one initiative, the collaborative found that its constituents, especially youth and older adults, lacked transportation, so it obtained a grant to purchase a bus. The bus now goes to schools and retail locations throughout the city as well as to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, courts, and hospitals. Anyone can use the bus for \$1.00 a day, regardless of their destination.

- Peer to peer support. Case workers can sometimes link young program participants with other driving youths who live in or near the participant. To serve as a peer driver, the youths have to have a clean driving record and be fully insured. WDI then reimburses the youth driver for gas through a voucher system. Youth drivers who do

not drive responsibly lose their vouchers. WDI found that although a few youths were not responsible drivers, most responded positively to the responsibility given to them.

- **Direct support.** Another way WDI helps youth is by helping them obtain or renew their driver's license or insurance or pay for car repairs. Youth who have lost their licenses often do not have the money needed to pay insurance premiums or license reinstatement fees and may not fully understand the legal issues involved. WDI walks them through possible solutions for having their license being reinstated, such as helping them find work so they can pay their fines, taking them to court for driving-related hearings, or showing them how to pay off fines by doing community service activities. For youth who have cars that need repairs, WDI provides vouchers to one of many car repair programs that are supported through federal or state funds.
- **Contracting services.** For 14 years, WDI operated a residential summer school for at-risk youth; the main impetus for developing the residential program was the transportation barriers these youth faced in attending summer school. Enrolled students stayed at the center Monday through Friday and went home on weekends. Parents who could transport their children to the program; however, to serve those families that lacked transportation, WDI contracted with four bus companies in rural communities to help provide services. The buses would then pick up participants at designated points to transport them to school on Monday mornings and bring them home on Friday evenings.
- **Relocation.** WDI is part of the Youth Build initiative, a state-funded program that provides specialized training in the construction and building trades, leadership and basic academic skills, and construction-based work experience for youth at risk of not completing their high school education. The program participants are generally students who have dropped out of school in the eight participating school districts. When it was determined that some youth could not reach the Youth Build school site because of a huge transit gap spanning two counties, WDI worked with the school district to move the Youth Build site to a new alternative school for youth. School buses now pick up those youth and bring them to the alternative school.

Recruitment

To spread the word about its services, WDI reaches youth by sending staff into schools and places in communities to speak and hand out information on the services the center provides. Potential WDI participants are also educated about the range of transportation options provided through the center. For youth who are interested in WDI's services but do not have transportation to the center for their initial intake interview, a case manager organizes a ride for them, either by walking them through public transit options or by arranging a ride through volunteer drivers or taxi cabs. As part of the individual's development plan, more cost-effective mechanisms for transportation other than taxi cabs are developed.

Chafee Foster Care Independence Program

Two federal programs—the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (passed in 1999) and the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program (passed in 2001)—support youth transportation in Minnesota. Both of these programs were designed to ease the transition of children raised in foster care into an independent living situation by providing them with life skills training, assistance obtaining a high school diploma and preparing for higher level education, vocational training, job placement and retention, training in budgeting and financial management

skills, substance abuse prevention, and preventive health activities (including smoking avoidance, nutrition education, and pregnancy prevention).

Using Chafee Act funds, Minnesota supports life skills activities such as transporting youth to groups and retreats; assisting them in touring colleges and vocational technical campuses; and aiding them in visiting potential work sites, apartment buildings, grocery stores, garage sales, thrift stores, workforce centers, libraries, and used car lots. The programs Minnesota supports with Chafee Act funds would fail without a way to provide reliable transportation to youth. Transportation strategies supported with Chafee funds include

- Paying for driver's education and licensing fees for youth
- Reimbursing volunteer peer youth drivers for gas or mileage
- Purchasing a bicycle, car insurance, car maintenance, or car repairs to enable a youth to travel to a job or postsecondary school
- Reimbursing foster parents or volunteer drivers for expenses incurred in transporting youth to life skills group activities
- Funding agency-based staff vehicles or vans to transport youth. (Counties generally use county funds to reimburse county social workers for driving youth around.)
- In metropolitan areas with a public bus system, purchasing bus cards for youth

Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program

The Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV) program for Youths Aging out of Foster Care was added to the Chafee program in 2002. ETV provides resources specifically to meet the education and training needs of these youth. In addition, the law authorizes \$60 million for payments to states for post-secondary educational and training vouchers for youth who are likely to experience difficulty as they transition to adulthood after age 18 years. This program makes vouchers of up to \$5,000 per year per youth available for post-secondary education and training for eligible youth. Payments are made to eligible institutions to be used on behalf of the transitioning youths.

Transportation can be a major barrier for youth who are pursuing job skills education, because most of this type of education occurs in a technical college, community college, or other type of accredited trade school, very few of which have on-campus housing. There is no statutory definition of allowable transportation expenses. The institution may determine the amount of transportation expenses, if any, to allow in determining the cost of attendance. The state should consult with the institution to determine which expenses are allowable and appropriate.

Minnesota Legislation

The importance of transportation in transitioning youth from adolescents to adulthood was emphasized by Minnesota legislature when it passed a statute that requires all youth age 16 and older who are in out-of-home (foster) care to have an independent living plan. The law requires that the plan include but not be limited to the following objectives:

- Educational, vocational, or employment planning
- Health care planning and medical coverage
- Transportation, including, where appropriate, assisting the child in obtaining a driver's license
- Money management
- Planning for housing
- Social and recreational skills

- Establishing and maintaining connections with the child's family and community

The state-developed guide provides social workers with the information and resources to develop the components that comprise an independent living plan. Among the recommendations included in the transportation component of the guide are the following:

- Arrange opportunities for youth to learn to use public transportation
- Provide youth with bus cards
- Arrange for youth to take driver's education and obtain their driver's license
- Provide opportunities for youth to practice driving
- Help youth learn how to purchase auto insurance and a reliable vehicle
- Help youth learn basic auto maintenance
- Provide youth with a bicycle if they need it for transportation to work

It also provides sample transportation goals and objectives for independent living plans and defines certain transportation-related skills that youth should possess by a defined date, such as the ability to

- Read a map and follow directional signs
- Identify and use public transportation
- Read public transportation schedules and maps
- Understand the responsibilities involved with a driver's license and obtain a license
- Estimate the cost of owning and operating a car for a month/year
- Understand safety guidelines for auto drivers and passengers

Conclusion

For youth development initiatives to be most effective in helping youth achieve good education and employment opportunities, a broad array of partnerships must be established at the state and community levels. Just as important are linkages among different types of services at the local level, with transportation being one of the most important linkages: for youth to actively participate in programs, they must have access to reliable transportation. Young adults and other youth have benefited from Minnesota's innovative programs, which help provide them access to adequate transportation as they progress to an independent lifestyle.

The Joblinks Employment Transportation Initiative is a partnership of the Community Transportation Association, the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration. Joblinks assists communities in addressing challenges associated with accessing affordable and reliable transportation to work and related destinations. For more information, visit www.ctaa.org/ntrc.

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