

Community-based transportation services for older adults

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This research brief is one of a series of briefs that shares findings from research conducted as part of Mobilizing Justice's Theme 2, which aims to understand the experiences of people, especially those facing transport-related social exclusion, across different transportation modes.

SPOTLIGHT

Population(s) of focus	Older adults
Mode(s) of focus	Community-based transportation
Geographic area of focus	British Columbia
Community collaborator	United Way British Columbia and the Provincial Working Group on Seniors' Transportation

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

- Community-based transportation service providers are filling gaps in seniors' transportation.
- Funding is needed to support ongoing maintenance and service delivery of community-based services.
- Community-based transportation service providers should be engaged in the design of age-friendly transportation plans and services.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Older adults are at increased risk for experiencing transport-related social exclusion. Age-related changes in physical ability and cognition can limit older adults' ability to drive, and their mobility more generally. In the absence of alternative transportation options, research has shown that losing the ability to drive is marked by increases in social isolation and loneliness,¹ perceived loss of independence,² and declines in physical and mental health.³ Further, people who report unmet travel needs are disproportionately woman, with lower income and education levels, reporting a mobility limitation, living alone, and in rural settings.⁴ Thus, improving transportation options is particularly important for improving equitable access to opportunities for these populations.

The community-based transportation sector has stepped up to fill the gap in seniors' transportation. Community-based transportation refers to transportation services outside of the conventional public transportation system that are operated by public or non-profit organizations. Examples include volunteer driver programs and small shuttle bus/van-services operated by non-profits, or municipalities. These services are often designed specifically for older adults and can help address some of the challenges with conventional public transit, such as the long distances to bus stops, infrequent schedules, and difficulty boarding buses.^{5,6} Despite filling important gaps in the transportation system, the community-based sector is often overlooked in transportation research and planning because the services are often smaller in scale and these modes of transportation are not typically collected in travel behaviour surveys.

This research was initiated through a request from the BC Provincial Working Group on Seniors' Transportation - a group convened by the Community Based Seniors' Services Leadership Council and United Way British Columbia to research, identify, and propose solutions to seniors' most pressing challenges in British Columbia, Canada. In the fall of 2021, the Working Group identified over 100 community-based transportation services across the province.⁷ This case study research built on this foundation by doing a deep dive into six models from the inventory that were deemed to be promising or successful models of community-based transportation services for older adults.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This work profiled successful models of older adults' transportation in the community-based sector, and synthesized the facilitators and barriers to the implementation of these services. In this brief, we share learnings relevant to transportation researchers and practitioners.

METHODS

In consultation with Working Group members, we selected six services deemed to be promising or successful models, with an eye for a diverse set of models and geographic contexts. For each case, we reviewed publicly available documents and conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants knowledgeable about the services. The cases were:

- **Step Up 'N' Ride Society, Dawson Creek:** a wheelchair accessible transportation service in a small town in northeastern BC.
- **Zunga Bus, Powell River:** a municipally led on-demand transit pilot in a small coastal town.
- **Richmond Cares, Richmond Gives Volunteer Driver Program, Richmond:** a volunteer driver service in a medium-sized city.
- **Collingwood Neighbourhood House (CNH) Seniors Shuttle, Vancouver:** a door-to-door transportation service in an urban neighbourhood.
- **Delta Seniors Bus, Delta:** a municipally funded and operated curb side pick-up and drop-off transportation service for older adults in a suburban municipality.
- **Seniors GO Bus, North Shore:** a semi-fixed route neighbourhood-based community shuttle serving three municipalities



FINDINGS

Across all of the cases, four learnings that came from this research were:

1. **Benefits of community-based transportation services extend across sectors and populations.** Service providers described a wide range of successes – from helping to meet the transportation needs of older adults, to enabling social connections and well-being. Providers also described how benefits extended to families and caregivers by relieving responsibilities to provide transportation. The Zunga Bus, a service designed with older adults in mind but available to anyone, also benefited other groups including youth, people with disabilities, parents, and others without a car.

“I use it all the time when I’m able...So handy and so convenient. I don’t drive and have trouble walking. I use it to meet friends for coffee, regular things. I’d for sure like the Zunga Bus to stay. I’d be stuck at home otherwise.” - Zunga Bus rider

2. **Funding opportunities to support ongoing service delivery of existing initiatives are needed.** Obtaining enough funding to cover the costs of delivering the service was the number one challenge raised. Service providers noted that obtaining initial funding to launch the service was much easier than obtaining ongoing funding.

“Funders often target new and exciting things, rather than programs that are working well”.

3. **Consistent service delivery and drivers were important to the success of these services.** Due to limited funding, two of the services reduced services to two days per week. This cut made the services much less useful, resulting in a downward spiral on ridership. Additionally, all providers commented on the importance of the driver. The role demands someone skilled at driving, and also with a caring and empathetic demeanour. Non-profit agencies noted that it was challenging to recruit and retain drivers, whether paid or unpaid.

“When it was new and fun and exciting and prices were lower, we were able to run it at least three days a week which gave people enough flexibility to be able to do some planning around it. When we had to go down to two days a week It just made it so much less useful to people.”

4. **Community-based transportation service providers are highly knowledgeable about older adults’ transportation challenges.** Although services from this sector can be small in scale, they are often designed specifically around older adults’ needs. Thus, in developing solutions for older adults, transportation planners and researchers should ensure to engage those in the community-based seniors’ services sector, including coordinators of volunteer driver programs and seniors’ shuttles.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

- Specific details about each of the services and the complete list of facilitators and barriers are synthesized in this report: [Promising Models of Community-Based Transportation](#)
- More information about older adults’ transportation patterns and unmet needs are summarized in this thesis: [Designing age-friendly communities: A mixed methods investigation into built environments that support older adults’ access to transportation.](#)
- Contact the author at khosford@sfu.ca or Mobilizing Justice Theme 2 Lead at mwinters@sfu.ca

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