

Achieving Mobility Access for Older Adults Through Group Travel Instruction

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It is anticipated that the number of older adults in the United States will reach 70 million before midcentury. Although the majority currently meet their transport needs by driving, one in five older adults does not drive. That statistic is expected to rise as senior drivers experience disability, health-related issues, or both, that negatively affect their driving ability. For many older adults accessible public transportation can be a viable transport option provided they are aware of and familiar with available transit services, trip planning, and how to safely and independently utilize transit systems. Findings are presented from a group travel instruction program piloted with older adults in New Jersey that encompassed classroom training and a field trip. A robust survey evaluation protocol was implemented that yielded findings that included the important role of transportation to older adult quality of life; high participant program satisfaction; evidence of participant knowledge and skills gained after program completion; and participant interest, willingness, and actual usage of public transit after the program. Survey respondents also confirmed several quality-of-life indicators experienced from program participation. In total, these findings offer evidence of the benefits of group travel instruction for older adults with and without a disability as they seek to meet some or all of their travel needs via accessible public transportation. The findings also support the value of offering both classroom and field trip components in older adult travel instruction programs.

It is estimated that by 2030, older adults (persons 65 years and older) will represent 20% of the U.S. population, or over 70 million persons (1). That number is projected to increase to over 88 million by 2050 (2). Often the likelihood of having a disability increases with age. As discussed by He and Larsen in their analysis of the older U.S. population with disability using 2008–2012 American Community Survey estimates, 39% (15.7 million) of the 41 million persons aged 65 and older reported having one or more disabilities. In fact, almost one-fourth cited that they had two or more disabilities (3). The authors proposed that the number of older persons with disability will likely increase in the coming decades because of factors including the aging of the baby boom generation.

As the number of older adults in the United States with and without disability continues to grow, a vital policy dilemma looms:

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specifically, what transportation options and strategies can support this vulnerable population as they seek to successfully access life-sustaining and -enhancing services? Currently, the majority of older Americans meet their transport needs by driving, with approximately 40 million licensed older drivers in 2014 (4). However, one in five older adults does not drive owing to factors that may include voluntary or mandatory driving cessation or limitation because of age-related functional decline, disability, or both (5). In addition, research exploring driving-life expectancy compared with total life expectancy has shown that most people outlive their ability to drive by 6 to 10 years (6).

Public transportation is one potential travel mode for older adults with and without disability. However, many adults in the United States have limited or no experience utilizing public transit and thus are hesitant or uncertain how to explore the feasibility of these services to help meet their trip needs. Travel instruction or travel training can help to alleviate this and other obstacles to using public transportation. Travel instruction has been employed since the 1970s and became more widely available with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. As defined in 2011 by the Association of Travel Instruction (7),

Travel instruction is the array, continuum, or family of services offered to individuals with disabilities, seniors, and others who need assistance to increase their mobility and travel on public transportation independently. It includes a variety of plans, methods and strategies used by professional travel trainers to increase the independent travel skills of the people they serve.

Because of factors including the increased accessibility of public transportation services throughout the nation since ADA passage, travel instruction should be holistically considered as a means to facilitate safe and effective public transit usage by transportation-disadvantaged populations, which includes many older adults.

Relevant findings are presented here from a group travel instruction program developed and piloted by travel trainers from the New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJTIP) at Rutgers University and targeted at older adults residing in two New Jersey counties. The program, Travel Independence Program Senior Mobility and Resource Training (TIP SMART), was funded by the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation and was designed to increase participant familiarity with and usage of public transportation in their respective communities. Program participant feedback was gathered through a series of before and after surveys, discussed here, that garnered data on topics including participant initial familiarity and usage of public transportation, knowledge of public transportation services and features, TIP SMART satisfaction, gain in knowledge and skills after program completion, and opinion and transport mode changes made after program participation.

CONTEXT AND LITERATURE

Aging Population Seeking to Access Services

As noted earlier, driving a personal vehicle is the primary transport mode for most older U.S. residents (8–11). The reliance on driving among this population is especially understandable because over three-fourths reside in suburban or rural locales (10). Because many older adults seek to age in place, the question arises, “What consequences occur when older adults limit or cease driving and how will they continue to meet their often diverse transport needs?”

There is much literature discussing the various negative personal and societal consequences associated with driving cessation including but not limited to negative social and health costs (5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12). Burkhardt found through focus group work with adults older than age 70 who discussed the mobility consequences of reducing or ceasing driving that mobility typically declines. Further, he reported: “It is known that the older person who reduces or ceases driving bears the brunt of the changes that occurs in monetary, social, psychological, and emotional costs” (11). Marottoli et al. determined that driving cessation was strongly associated with a decline in out-of-home activities (8) and an earlier effort by these researchers found a significant increase in depressive symptoms among those who ceased driving (12). Bailey found that more than half of nondrivers aged 65 and older remain home on any given day at least partially because of lack of transportation (5). On a related note, Lynott and Figueiredo reported in their highlights of the 2009 National Household Travel Survey that more than half of persons 65 and older who reported not taking a trip outside their home in the past week indicated that they wanted to get out more often (9). When individuals decrease their out-of-home activity levels, their ability to engage in social activities as well as meet other needs declines. This finding is a serious concern because numerous studies have determined positive associations for older adults who maintain social integration, including reduced mortality rates, improved mental health, and overall functional status (13, 14).

Public Transportation as Viable Travel Option

There is general recognition among many researchers and practitioners that public transit is a viable mobility option for older adults, especially for those who do not drive or who limit their driving (10, 15, 16). As Cevallos et al. state: “Although several alternatives exist, public transportation is one of the most safe, reliable and affordable options. Transit also offers substantial independence, making it the most logical solution for millions of seniors around the country” (16).

Approximately half of Americans indicate that they have public transportation access (5). Notably, public transit usage by persons 65 and older as a share of all their trips increased by 40% between 2001 and 2009 (9). Further, in 2009, older persons took more than 1 billion trips using public transportation; this number represents a 55% increase from 2001 (9).

Older Americans have also conveyed positive feedback related to public transit in recent years, as evidenced from the findings of a 2005 national telephone survey of adults 65 and older by Harris Interactive that explored attitudes on mobility (17). Specifically, 83% agreed that public transportation provides easy access to a variety of common trip purposes older adults seek to access; over 80% agreed that “a good public transportation system is safer, easier and more convenient than driving”; 82% conveyed that using public transit is “a better alternative to driving alone, especially at night”;

and over 60% reported that older adults who use public transit are “healthier, more active, and mobile.”

A critical reason why public transportation is a viable option for many older adults with disability is because of increased system accessibility throughout the nation since passage of the ADA. As Neff and Dickens report, the U.S. transit vehicle fleet has achieved near-total accessibility for customers using wheelchairs and those with other travel-related disabilities (18). Specifically, from 1993 to 2014, bus accessibility increased from 60% to 99.7%, commuter rail accessibility increased from 43% to 87%, and light rail from 49% to 85% (18). In addition to the predominance of systemwide accessibility, a 2007 report by the Beverly Foundation and APTA found that most of the transit agencies that responded to their nationwide survey effort reported offering one or more non-ADA “special programs” such as travel instruction specifically for older adult customers (19). Another reason for the viability of public transit for older adults is that transit costs are typically less than costs related to automobile ownership (11).

Travel Instruction as Facilitator of Public Transportation Usage

As noted earlier, the travel instruction field took shape in the 1970s and as Wolf-Branigin et al. explain, these services are often distinguished by factors including the type of travel instruction offered (e.g., individual, small group), the entity offering the service, and the locale served (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) (20). The expansion of U.S. travel instruction owes to factors including federal legislation that granted funding for this activity through the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the 2005 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, with the latter establishing the New Freedom program (21).

Empirical findings related to the myriad benefits of travel instruction have increased in recent years, primarily because of the proliferation of travel instruction nationwide and keen interest in this service among a variety of stakeholders including but not limited to transit service providers, social service providers, persons with disability, older adults, and caregivers and advocates of these latter populations. A 2008 TCRP report stated that over 50% of transit agencies nationwide surveyed on the topic of best practices for serving customers with disabilities offer travel training programs, and the report recommended that more agencies offer the service as a means to promote use of fixed-route transit (22). Some of the many benefits associated with travel instruction often cited include expansion of travel options (22, 23); increased trip making, which can contribute to improved mobility and independence (23); quality-of-life enhancements (23–25); and cost benefits to transit agencies seeking to safely shift paratransit customers to fixed-route services (23, 26–28).

Research has also explored how travel instruction can benefit older adults specifically and successful strategies to employ in working with this population. Survey research investigating practices used by travel trainers when working with older adults found that many barriers related to older adult usage of public transit often relate to their unfamiliarity with these services and that travel training offers increased mobility and decreased costs for seniors (29). Burkhardt et al. discussed travel training as a high-impact strategy that can improve public transit options for older adults and usually includes both classroom and field components (30). They added that the most successful travel training efforts demonstrate to seniors

that public transit can be “a gateway to independence and recreation” (30). Babka et al. concluded after examining a group of older adults who participated in travel training in California in 2007–2008 that there was a significant positive association in the increase of participant local public transit knowledge after program completion. Results also confirmed an increase in participant familiarity with public transit and with how to access transit information independently (15). In total, as stated in the recent TCRP Travel Training for Older Adults handbook, “By educating people about other options, travel training has the potential to maintain or improve the mobility of older adults, people with disabilities, and others who are not able to drive or have someone else drive for them. Travel training can help anyone start using public transportation or use it more effectively” (23).

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

In developing the TIP SMART program, NJTIP travel instructors created a group training module that encompassed (a) a 90-min small group classroom training component offered at senior centers and housing sites located in the study area and (b) a local field trip utilizing public transportation to a destination of interest to participants implemented several weeks following the classroom training.

Core topics covered in the classroom training focused on providing an overview of accessible public transportation options available in the region, how to obtain public transportation information, how to plan a public transit trip, and strategies for successfully using public transit. The field trip component offered participants an opportunity to actualize the concepts and strategies taught in the classroom training.

NJTIP designed the program using an asset-based approach to help improve access to transit for the older adult participants: NJTIP thoroughly investigated the existing transit options available in the community and focused on increasing familiarity with and usage among senior participants of those specific assets, which included bus and rail services, to reach local destinations these seniors wanted to access. The two New Jersey counties where TIP SMART was implemented comprise a mix of urban and suburban locales, with program effort targeted on reaching older adults residing primarily in the urban core of those counties where much low-income and senior housing is located.

Consistent with literature suggested by Burkhardt et al. in TCRP Report 168 (23), the NJTIP team made concerted and continual efforts to partner with key community stakeholders such as senior housing sites, senior day programs, and other agencies aiding the area’s senior population to generate awareness and support for the initiative, as well as to help recruit participants. Also consistent with literature findings from TCRP Reports 168 and 82 (23, 30), the team developed and implemented a comprehensive program evaluation plan to help document both individual and program results and also selected the group field trip destinations in full collaboration with participants.

TIP SMART TRAVEL INSTRUCTION

Process

The first round of the TIP SMART program was implemented from April 2014 to March 2015 and the second round was offered from

July 2015 to December 2015. A total of 169 seniors received training in the first round and 173 received training in the second round. The analysis here was conducted by combining data from the two rounds.

The findings are gathered from the following program evaluation tools:

1. Classroom training paper before survey, fielded at the onset of the 90-min session,
2. Classroom training paper after survey, fielded at the conclusion of the 90-min session,
3. Field trip paper after survey, completed at the end of the field trip experience, and
4. Field trip follow-up telephone survey, conducted 6 to 12 weeks after participation.

The survey tools developed by the research team were approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board. A total of 173 participants completed the classroom training before survey and 163 completed the classroom training after survey. A total of 73 participants completed the field trip after survey and 59 completed the field trip follow-up telephone survey conducted 6 to 12 weeks after participation.

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of respondents in the TIP SMART older adult classroom session survey. The majority of respondents represented were female, black (not Hispanic), and resided in a household with an income of less than \$15,000. Over 70% of respondents were between 65 and 84 years of age and the highest level of education achieved by most respondents was high school graduate or General Educational Development recipient (44%). Also notable, when asked if they utilize a mobility device, 90% of the 56 persons who responded to this question reported using a cane, 18% used a walker, and 9% used a wheelchair.

Findings

TIP SMART Classroom Before Survey

The classroom before survey was primarily designed to determine typical participant travel modes and destinations; familiarity, knowledge, and usage of public transit; and demographics.

Over 80% of respondents reported that transportation was “very important” to their quality of life. Most frequent trips taken in a typical week were medical appointments, shopping, and trips to senior center programs and to religious services. Many respondents indicated at least some familiarity with the public transit options in their area. Regarding modes used in a typical week, the largest share of respondents took a New Jersey Transit (NJT) public transit bus during a typical week (49%); 32% used a car, bus, or van operated by a county, town, or nonprofit agency; 30% drove a personal automobile; and 26% walked.

Another key finding from the classroom before survey was that even though almost all respondents were eligible for an NJT reduced-fare card, only 22% reported having the card. Also, only 6% of respondents reported being a registered NJT Access Link customer. Access Link is NJT’s ADA-complementary, demand-responsive paratransit service. Although reasons why respondents did not have a reduced-fare card or were not Access Link customers were not documented via the survey effort, classroom dis-

TABLE 1 TIP SMART Classroom Training: Participant Profile

Category	<i>n</i>	Prevalence (%)
Gender of older adult		
Female	144	87
Male	22	13
Total	166 ^a	100
Age		
Under 55	11	7
55–64	27	17
65–74	56	34
75–84	62	38
85 or older	6	4
Total	162 ^a	100
Race		
Black (not Hispanic)	112	74
White (not Hispanic)	11	7
White (Hispanic)	14	9
Native American	7	5
Asian	3	2
Two or more races	3	2
Black (Hispanic)	2	1
Total	152 ^a	100
Education		
High school, no diploma	21	16
High school graduate or GED	58	44
Some college	24	18
Trade or technical school	8	6
Two-year college degree	7	5
Four-year college degree or more	14	11
Total	132 ^a	100
Household income		
Less than \$15,000	72	52
\$15,000 to \$24,999	33	24
\$25,000 to \$49,999	19	14
\$50,000 to \$99,999	13	9
\$100,000 or more	1	1
Total	138 ^a	100

NOTE: GED = General Educational Development.

^aSection totals are not equal because there is a variation in the number of respondents for each question.

cussion revealed that many participants were simply unaware of these available programs and services.

Regarding concerns with using public transit, the greatest share of respondents (30%) indicated concern about crime at the stop, onboard, or both followed by the stop being located too far from home (27%); difficulty getting on or off the transit vehicle (27%); and street crossing safety concerns (26%).

TIP SMART Classroom After Survey

The after survey collected feedback on the TIP SMART training and sought to determine perception or knowledge changes regarding public transit. Participant satisfaction with the classroom training was evident; more than half rated the session as “excellent,” 85% rated the information received at the training as “very helpful,” and 69% reported that they “learned a great deal” from the training. Further, more than 90% stated that some or all of their concerns about using public transportation were addressed in the training.

The after survey also sought to capture respondent perception changes regarding public transit. Almost three-fourths of respondents indicated that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they would use buses, trains, or both more as a result of what they learned from the TIP SMART classroom training. The top trips respondents expressed a specific interest in accessing by taking public transit were shopping, medical appointments, and visiting family or friends.

Evidence of knowledge gain from the training was also sought through the after survey. A total of six knowledge- and skills-based questions about New Jersey public transportation were presented in both the before- and after-survey tools. The same questions were included in both tools to facilitate a knowledge gain assessment among respondents. Respondents’ knowledge gain is evident; each of the six questions posed had more correct responses in the after survey tools than in the before survey tools. The question with the greatest increase of correct responses was, “Do you know how to plan a trip on public transportation?” (a 20 percentage-point increase). Other knowledge and skill gains are described in Table 2.

TIP SMART Field Trip After Survey

The field trip after survey was designed to briefly capture program feedback on the field trip experience and information on respondent willingness to use public transit after participation. The field trip experience consisted of a group trip via bus or train to a location of interest to the older adult participants. Not all persons who partook of the field trip also attended the earlier classroom training. Specifically, 71% of the 73 total field trip participants indicated that they participated in that earlier classroom training.

Similar to the TIP SMART classroom training, the field trip experience was rated highly among survey respondents, with 65% reporting that the field trip was “excellent” and 76% indicating they “learned a great deal” from the experience. Most notably, 93% of respondents reported that using public transportation during the

TABLE 2 Knowledge and Skill Gain Among TIP SMART Classroom Respondents

Survey Question	Correct or Positive Answer	Before Survey Correct (%)	After Survey Correct (%)	Change (%)
Do you know how to plan a trip on public transportation?	Yes	49	69	+20
Do you know how to request a stop while riding a bus?	Yes	79	90	+11
Are all NJT buses lift equipped?	Yes	66	77	+11
Does NJT offer reduced-fare tickets for older adults and people with disabilities?	Yes	86	95	+9
Is there priority seating on all NJT vehicles for older adults and people with disabilities?	Yes	71	76	+5
Do you need the exact fare to use the fare box on a NJT bus?	Yes	78	82	+4

field trip was “easier than I thought it would be,” thus demonstrating the value of actual transit experience. Also notable, over 80% of respondents stated that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they would use buses, trains, or both more as a result of what they had learned from the field trip experience. This 80% is higher as compared with the 73% who responded similarly when asked this same question in the classroom after survey. Finally, over half of the respondents reported interest in receiving additional training or assistance from an NJTIP at Rutgers travel instructor to reach a specific destination.

TIP SMART Field Trip Follow-Up Survey

Field trip participants were contacted approximately 6 to 12 weeks after each field trip session and were asked to complete a brief telephone survey designed to determine if and how the field trip experience affected their thoughts on and usage of public transportation.

One of the most critical questions the survey sought to answer was whether field trip respondents had taken one or more public transit trips since participating in the field trip. Survey findings demonstrated that 43% of the 56 respondents who answered this question indicated that they had taken such a trip. The research team was particularly interested in determining whether taking both the TIP SMART classroom training and the field trip influenced the percentage of respondents who took a public transit trip after participation. Isolating the two groups of respondents, it was found that a greater percentage of those who took both the classroom training and the field trip compared with those who took only the field trip used public transportation after program participation. Although it represents a small sample size, this finding potentially suggests that pairing the classroom training with the field trip is more effective in increasing the use of public transit among older adult participants than only offering the field trip component (Table 3).

The research team also sought to determine if there was a relationship between any other variables captured through the multiple-survey effort and the percentage of persons who confirmed using public transit after the field trip. Chi-square testing shows that neither participant age nor initial familiarity level with public transit options in the study area as documented in the classroom before survey has a statistically significant relationship with the use of public transit after the field trip.

In total, 96% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that TIP SMART field trip training is valuable for older adults. The majority

of respondents reported that the types of trips they took using public transit that they would not have been able to take without the field trip training were shopping (78%), doctor visits (48%), and social or recreational trips (30%).

As is the case in many research fields, quality-of-life benefits experienced by program participants can be difficult to ascertain. When questioned whether participating in the TIP SMART field trip had any influence on several specific quality-of-life indicators, the greatest share of respondents (86%) reported “feeling more confident getting around independently,” able to “get to more places I need or want to travel to” (28%), and able to “pursue new opportunities or activities” (24%). Sixty-seven percent noted experiencing “other” benefits from the field trip encounter and when asked to specify those benefits, some common responses included learning how to access public transit information and plan a trip and how to use transit accessibility features. The opportunity to meet new people and socialize during the training was also mentioned by several as a benefit.

Finally, respondents who reported not taking a trip using public transit since completing the field trip were asked to specify the reasons why they had not used these services. The greatest proportion (41%) responded “because I drive” followed by “I have a family member who drives me” (24%). In total, among all respondents regardless of whether they had used or not used public transit since completing the field trip, the majority (64%) reported that they were interested in continued training or assistance from NJTIP at Rutgers, demonstrating not only program satisfaction but also desire for additional travel instruction support services going forward.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of travel instruction as a means to facilitate safe and independent usage of public transit among transportation-disadvantaged populations has proliferated in recent decades. Factors why include improved nationwide transit system accessibility and increasing evidence of the multitude of benefits that travel instruction can offer participants.

The findings analyzed from four of the survey tools fielded among older adult participants of the TIP SMART group travel instruction program piloted in New Jersey present a series of positive results that contribute to the growing body of research demonstrating the benefits of group travel instruction for this population. Notable survey highlights include confirmation of the vital role transportation has in affecting older adult quality of life, the variety of trips older adults seek to make, the value participants found in the TIP SMART program, and participant knowledge and skill gain as well as evidence of public transit usage after program completion. Also relevant was feedback shared by survey respondents that participating in the program contributed to their lives beyond familiarizing and teaching them how to use area public transit resources. For example, 86% noted that the program contributed to increased confidence in their ability to travel independently, and others mentioned being able to access new opportunities or activities and several commented on the positive socialization benefit the training offered.

One reason that these findings are particularly impressive is that the greatest percentage of the TIP SMART program participants were older seniors between 75 and 84 years of age. In addition, almost 40% of the 173 persons who responded to the before survey

TABLE 3 Public Transit Use: TIP SMART Classroom and Field Trip Participants Versus Only Field Trip Participants

Public Transit Use 6–12 Weeks After Field Trip	Participants Who Took Both Class and Field Trip		Participants Who Took Field Trip Only	
	Count	Question Respondents (%)	Count	Question Respondents (%)
Used public transit	19	44	5	38
Did not use public transit	24	56	8	62
Total	43	100	13	100

reported using a mobility device such as a cane, walker, or wheelchair. This response showed the benefit of travel instruction among particularly vulnerable populations.

Also notable was the small percentage of program participants who reported having a NJT reduced-fare card, especially because the great majority were eligible (persons 62 or older and persons with disability are eligible). This finding was especially surprising to the research team because almost half of the before-survey respondents reported taking the bus in a typical week. In addition, the majority of respondents were low-income and thus could especially benefit from the reduced-fare program.

In terms of use of public transit services after program completion, survey findings also demonstrated the potential value of program participants' taking part in both the classroom training component and the actual field trip experience as opposed to only the field trip. In recognition that the data collected represented a small sample size, this finding will continue to be investigated by the NJTIP at Rutgers program as their instructors teach new groups of older adults how to utilize accessible public transportation modes.

One finding not collected through the survey effort but deemed critical by the NJTIP travel instructors leading this initiative was the importance that trainers use an asset-based approach to designing the TIP SMART program. In other words, the trainers made a concerted effort to first identify and then familiarize with and teach participants how to use accessible services in the area to reach local destinations participants expressed interest in accessing. Although a sizable portion of participants reported using local NJT bus services at the onset of training, most had limited to no experience with the accessible NJT train and light rail services available. NJTIP instructors made sure to capitalize on these accessible transit assets when program field trips were planned and exposed senior participants to these services on several of the group outings.

In total, in sharing evaluation-based and other program-related findings such as those presented here with the larger community that offers and supports travel instruction services, teaching methods and strategies can be refined to best serve travel instruction clients as they seek to learn how to use accessible public transit services successfully.

Moving forward, it is clear that determining viable strategies now to meet the travel needs of the nation's growing senior population—many of whom have one or more disabilities—must be a policy priority if this vital segment of the nation's population is to successfully meet their divergent travel needs as they age. Transportation providers, policy makers, social service stakeholders, and families and caretakers supporting older adults must be informed of the benefits of travel instruction so these services can be promoted and more widely utilized as a tool to benefit older adults with and without disability who seek to access needed and desired services.

For travel instruction services to be as usable as possible, increasing availability of accessible public transportation services as well as safe and connected pedestrian infrastructure must be a priority. Regarding the latter issue, supporting efforts such as the complete streets movement, which seeks to facilitate accessible roadways for all users, will assist in improving conditions for older adults seeking to navigate their communities and safely access public transit stops and stations. Access to public transportation as well as travel instruction must also be more regularly incorporated into age-friendly community planning so that older adults have the opportunity to meet their needs safely and independently with public and community transit options.

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