

Rides to Wellness

Bridging the Gaps

FINAL REPORT



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Flint Mass Transportation Authority

Project Title: MTA Rides to Wellness – Bridging the Gaps

Location: Michigan

Status 08/02/2022: Project ongoing

Partners: Flint MTA Mobility Managers, Valley Area Agency on Aging, Genesee Health System, state/local Departments of Health & Human Services, Greater Flint Health Coalition, Michigan Children's Health Access Program, McLaren Hospital and Outpatient Substance Abuse Services, Genesee County Department of Veterans Services, Community Foundation of Greater Flint, American Cancer Society, many individual medical facilities and dialysis centers

Project Description:

The Flint Mass Transportation Authority (MTA) received \$734,752 to support Bridging the Gaps, a pilot project to increase access to highly responsive, on-demand non-emergency medical transportation for seniors and person with disabilities and create partnerships with hospitals by utilizing mobility management and innovative technology to create a seamless, coordinated system of health and wellness transportation. The program builds on MTA's nationally-recognized Rides to Wellness program with an increased focus on older adults and developing partnerships with hospitals and related health care facilities.

Project Background:

In 2016, MTA Flint was one of 19 organizations who received funding through the FTA's Rides to Wellness pilot project. Through extensive planning and research, several key areas of need had been identified in Genesee County as opportunities to improve transportation through this demonstration grant. The results of the Rides to Wellness pilot were incredibly successful. The project allowed MTA to begin providing health and wellness transportation for the transportation disadvantaged in Genesee County. It funded the development of a new, agile software dispatching system, started a travel training program, and allowed MTA to begin exploring mobility management activities throughout the agency.

Through a partnership with Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), MTA was able to leverage the Rides to Wellness grant and receive funding from MDHHS to provide 81,188 on-demand, same day rides to low income residents of Genesee County for medical appointments, doctors visits and trips to full-service grocery stores.

Another key aspect of the Rides to Wellness project was the growth of the relationship between MTA and the PACE (Program for All-Inclusive Care) project. Through the time of the pilot, MTA was the only public transportation system in the Country that was providing transportation for the CMS-funded PACE project. Through this partnership, MTA provided door-through-door transportation for PACE participants to get to and from their Center. In total, over 30,000 rides have been provided to PACE participants.

Despite the success of the pilot project, it uncovered additional gaps in service, unmet needs in the community, and the need for increased coordination. While MTA was serving some seniors through the VAAA and PACE program, there were many seniors and persons with disabilities who were not connected to a program and did not have access to NEMT transportation. MTA conducted stakeholder meetings with its Local Advisory Council, senior centers, and assisted living facilities and heard consistent themes throughout the process - seniors need convenient, reliable on-demand transportation.

One woman in a senior living community shared she was spending \$260.00 per month for a private NEMT provider to take her to her weekly doctor's appointment. Another shared that he felt so helpless because his daughter was having to take off work almost every week to drive him to the doctors. He said he could not use a ride-hailing service or cab because he needed someone to help him to and from the vehicle, but MTA's Rides to Wellness service would be a perfect solution. Unfortunately, due to a limited number of vehicles and drivers, the pilot project was at capacity and MTA hesitated to expand service to this wider pool of passengers because it did not want to sacrifice quality.

Bridging the Gaps was designed to allow MTA to build upon lessons learned during the Rides to Wellness pilot and begin to address the unmet needs still faced by hospitals and the aging residents of Genesee County.



Figure 1 ADA Accessible Rides to Wellness Vehicle

Key Partnerships

Partnerships are absolutely critical to the success of MTA Flint's Rides to Wellness/Bridging the Gaps program. As of August 2022, MTA has 25 active partner organizations. Nine of these are hospitals and their related facilities (i.e. Genesys Hurley Cancer Institute). All of the partner organizations serve older adults, with dialysis centers and veterans being the largest groups of passengers served.



Figure 2 Rides to Wellness Vehicle at Hurley Medical Center

Implementation

Bridging the Gaps successfully increased access to highly responsive, on-demand health and wellness public transportation for seniors and person with disabilities and created partnerships with hospitals by utilizing mobility management and innovative technology to create a seamless, coordinated system of health and wellness transportation.

Elements of Bridging the Gaps included:

Mobility Management

With ICAM funding, a Mobility Manager was hired to coordinate transportation services and also provide referrals to other community agencies when a need was identified. For example, if an elderly patient at a hospital needs a ride home after discharge, the mobility manager will arrange for the ride, but will also provide a referral to the patient to the Valley Area Agency on

Aging or the PACE program so the patient, if eligible, can receive ongoing, coordinated transportation services after their hospital stay.

The Mobility Manager responsible for the hospital partnership works closely with hospital staff to identify potential passengers, and also address any unusual or out of the ordinary needs a patient might have, such as a long-distance trip to another hospital facility. It was originally planned that Mobility Managers would be located in office space near discharge planners, however, with the development of the online scheduling technology, the need to have a Mobility Managers on-site diminished.

Innovative Infrastructure Technology

During the original Rides to Wellness pilot, funding was provided and utilized for the creation of a software dispatching system that allows for highly-responsive, ride-hailing type on demand service. It also provided for development of an online scheduling system and an app. While the online scheduling system and app were built, they had not been widely deployed to the public. Lack of staff training and targeted community outreach have left the online system largely unused.

With the ICAM funding, the utilization of the online scheduling system, improved dramatically. MTA was able to develop unique cloud-based portals for each partner organization. They are able to log on to their portal, enter the pertinent information, and a ride request is submitted immediately. Due to the software design that utilizes a dynamic routing system, ride requests are sent directly to the nearest available driver. The entire process takes under five minutes and has eliminated the need for hospital staff to sit on the phone trying to get through to a ride scheduler. The software records what specific department has requested the ride to assist the hospitals in keeping track of transportation expenses.

Vehicles

With the growth of Rides to Wellness and the addition of the Bridging the Gaps pilot, it was necessary to purchase additional vehicles. MTA was able to purchase seven vehicles with ICAM funding to support the program.

Dialysis

MTA has long served dialysis patients through its paratransit program. But through the ICAM project, MTA made the decision to move dialysis passengers to Rides to Wellness. It also hired a Mobility Manager to be assigned as the point of contact with all 13 dialysis centers in Genesee County. This has significantly improved the service passengers are receiving and the logistics of providing the service on MTA's end. On-time performance in 2022 for dialysis patients was 94%, almost 20% higher than it had been before being moved to Rides to Wellness.

Performance Measures

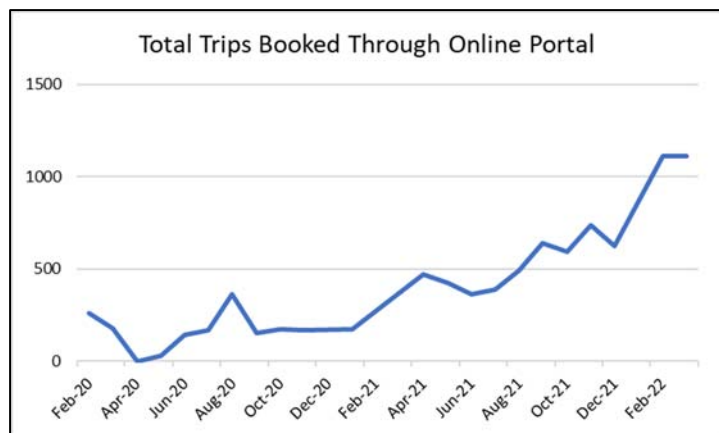
Bridging the Gaps will increase access to care; improve health outcomes; and reduce healthcare costs. Impact of the project will be measured by the following outcomes:

1. Total # of rides provided to/from hospitals and their related healthcare organizations
2. Total # of health & wellness rides provided to Seniors
3. Total # of trips booked through the online scheduling software
4. Procurement of 10 vehicles to support Rides to Wellness programming
5. Number of partnerships with dialysis centers
6. One new Mobility Manager hired to support hospital partnerships

Data and Outcomes

MTA reports that their project performed far better than anticipated. In September of 2016, the first month the project was fully operational it provided 169 trips. It was housed in a small office in the MTA's downtown transit center and had five drivers, three vehicles, and two committed partners, the local Department of Health and Human Services and the Valley Area Agency on Aging.

In FY2021, even with the challenges of Covid-19, Rides to Wellness provided 104,673 trips, has 140 drivers, 96 vehicles, and 25 partner agencies that assist in the funding of the program.



COVID-19

With the onset of the Coronavirus, Rides to Wellness faced new, unprecedented challenges. After several staff contracted the virus, the program made the difficult decision to temporarily suspend Rides to Wellness operations. Fortunately, as a result of the CARES act funds, staff continued to work from home and regularly communicate with employees and partner agencies. MTA maintenance staff began retrofitting Rides to Wellness vehicles by installing barriers between drivers and riders. PPE equipment was obtained to allow for masks, temperature checks upon operator arrival to pick up passengers, and installation of hand sanitizers in the vehicles.



Figure 3 Covid Barrier in Vehicle

Rides to Wellness began reopening its services on May 18, 2020 with all partner agencies able to use the services by June 1, 2020. Originally, Rides to Wellness had intended to use the ICAM money to connect with senior living facilities. With Covid, that became unrealistic to achieve. So, Rides to Wellness adjusted its plan, focusing on growing partnerships with dialysis centers and chemotherapy treatment centers.



Figure 4 Rides to Wellness Vehicles and Drivers



Figure 5 Dr. Bobby Mukkumala administering Covid vaccine to MTA employee Andre Goulbourne, April 2021

Moving Forward/Sustainability

Rides to Wellness and the expansion of the program that was funded through the ICAM grant are now well-established and will operate for years to come. By diversifying its partnerships, charging a premium, but affordable fare, and modernizing its on-demand technology, Rides to Wellness has transformed health and wellness transportation in the Flint area. It will only continue to grow in the coming years.

Lessons Learned

Hopefully it will be a situation that never happens again in our lifetime, but Covid-19 was a striking lesson in how transportation must be prepared to respond to anything, at anytime. As transit systems across the Country were shutting down, it became very apparent to us that Rides to Wellness had thousands of passengers who were counting on its rides to travel to life-saving treatments. Dialysis, chemotherapy, and hospital discharges did not stop happening even during the worst days of Covid and MTA's service helped ensure we were ready to respond.