

TRANSPORTATION VOUCHER PROGRAM

Disability Connection of West Michigan, Fremont, Michigan

SUMMARY OF THE STRATEGY:

Disability Connection of West Michigan provides transportation assistance to individuals with disabilities through its Newaygo County Transportation Voucher Program. Program participants find their own volunteer drivers who are reimbursed for up to 100 miles per month per program participant.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION:

The Newaygo County Transportation Voucher Program provides reimbursement for 50 cents per mile for volunteer-provided transportation for program participants. To become eligible for the program, an individual must be a Newaygo resident with a disability with barriers to community integration due to a lack of reliable transportation. Program participants are encouraged to find their own volunteer drivers through family, friends, neighbors, or church. Participants are limited to two eligible volunteer drivers. All drivers must pass a criminal and driving record background check and meet minimum insurance requirements before being eligible to drive for the program reimbursement.

The Newaygo County Transportation Voucher Program currently funds any trip purpose, and each eligible user may be funded for up to 100 miles per month. The transportation is scheduled by the eligible individual directly with the volunteer with no restrictions on days, times, or geography (up to 100 miles per month). Unused miles may be carried over to the next month, and under special circumstances, miles can be

AGENCY PROFILE

Organization Type: private nonprofit center for independent living

Service Area: Newaygo County (2010 pop. 48,460, 861 sq. mi.). Contains more than 2310 natural lakes; over half of the county is in the Manistee National Forest

Resources:

- **Fleet size:** none; transportation is provided by volunteers using own vehicles
- **Staff size:** 2 individuals for this program
- **FY 2011 Program Budget:** approx. \$40,450

Service Summary:

- **Modes Operated:** demand-response
- **Days and Hours of Service:** no restrictions
- **General Public Cash Fare:** not applicable
- **Passenger Trips/Year:** 3,272 in FY 2011

Contact:

Ada Linderman, Program Manager
Lisa Sullivan, Transportation Coordinator
Newaygo County Transportation Voucher Program
4424 W. 48th Street
PO Box B
Fremont, MI 49412
(231) 924-7615
<http://www.dcilmi.org/>

authorized for use earlier in the year. Participants must exhaust other available transportation resources before using the voucher program.

The Newaygo County Transportation Voucher Program was created in 2008 and is funded by the Michigan DOT's New Freedom Program, matched by in-kind and other local grant dollars. The total program

budget was \$40,450 in FY 2011, with \$19,800 coming from MDOT.

The Disability Connection program was developed based on a training project funded by Michigan Developmental Disabilities (DD) Council, to educate the county about what a voucher program could look like. The DD Council training project supported travel for trip purposes related to medical, leisure, independent living, employment, and seeking employment, and the Disability Connection authorized a specific number of miles to each eligible user based upon a review of each person's unique travel needs. There was no funding opportunity to continue this training grant through the DD Council.

The restriction of trip purposes was lifted with the New Freedom funding, and beginning with the current fiscal year (October 2011), the approach was changed to 100 miles per participant per month to reduce the administrative burden. Under the current structure, participants are responsible for budgeting use of their miles, which often results in more efficient trip scheduling (e.g., they will group their travel needs to reduce the total number of amount of miles needed). There are currently approximately 65 program participants, and the program continues to grow in popularity. Because of limited resources, the Disability Connection is looking as reducing the number of eligible miles to 85 per month per individual to ensure that they can do not run out of funds before the end of the grant.

Disability Connection originally approached Newaygo County to apply for the New Freedom program funds, because of the way the program is structured in Michigan. Even though the Disability Connection West Michigan already had

50% cash match committed from the Fremont Foundation, the County was not interested in pursuing the funding at that time. The Newaygo County Commissioners felt they did not have the staff to handle the fiduciary responsibilities of the transportation voucher program and stated they formerly had experienced negative results when working collaboratively with other private non-profits.

Fortunately, Michigan DOT allowed the Disability Connection to apply directly to MDOT. For the first year, the grant application had to ensure that the funds were not being used to supplant existing funds. Thus, the first year of the service under New Freedom needed to be targeted toward specific trip needs which could not be previously provided under the DD Council grant.

In developing the pilot program, Disability Connection used the *Toolkit for Operating a Rural Transportation Voucher Program* of the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL).

CONDITIONS THAT PROMPTED THE STRATEGY:

There is no public transportation service in Newaygo County. Limited human service transportation is available to people with disabilities through the County's Commission on Aging Senior Transportation Service, but this service is primarily for older adults and is focused on shopping, banking, congregate meals, and medical transportation needs.

RESULTS OF THE STRATEGY:

People with disabilities who live in Newaygo County have transportation services to support independent living. In

FY 2011, a total of 3,272 rides were provided to 99 participants with a total of 87,335 volunteer miles reimbursed under the program. The program continues to grow in popularity.

METHODS USED TO DOCUMENT RESULTS:

- Number of participants, volunteers, rides provided (by purpose), miles reimbursed.

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS:

- Willingness of volunteer drivers to transport program participants. In many cases, these drivers are friends and relatives of the participant, but Disability Connection also has a few dedicated drivers who are willing to transport those who cannot locate drivers from among their personal acquaintances.
- Program participants monitor their own usage of their allocated miles.

This has become much simpler since the soft limit of 100 miles per month per consumer was imposed.

- Disability Connection has been lucky to have a great working relationship with other local organizations such as the Empowerment Network drop-in center and Newaygo County Community Mental Health. These organizations have referred participants to the program, assisted them in completing the applications and worked with Disability Connection to help make sure participant questions are answered.

CHALLENGES:

- Demand for services exceeds available funding.
- At times, maintaining updated contact information for all of our participants can be a bit of a challenge, but a manageable one.

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

RECOMMENDED FOR:

- Communities with unmet needs for specialized transportation services.
- Programs supporting independent living and decision-making.

RECOMMENDED ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS:

- Volunteers who are recruited by the riders as well as the agency.
- Good working relationships and collaboration with other community agencies.

METHODS FOR DOCUMENTING RESULTS:

- Track number of participants, volunteers, rides provided, miles reimbursed.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:

- *Toolkit for Operating a Rural Transportation Voucher Program* may be purchased for \$20 from the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) - <http://www.april-rural.org>, phone: 501-753-3400. (approx. 75 pages)