



# Michigan Mobility Challenge

Final Report 2020

Presented by **MTA**, Flint in partnership with:



Genesee County Veterans Services

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## Summary

Vets to Wellness is an innovative mobility initiative that was designed to improve access and increase transportation options for veterans in mid-Michigan using a highly coordinated, regionally based approach. Modeled after MTA Flint's successful Rides to Wellness program, this new pilot project combined the best of public transportation with the convenience and personalization of ride-hailing services. The program works to eliminate the silos that exist in both transportation and social/government services and utilizes technology to improve the rider's experience while creating efficiencies in the transportation network.

Through the coordinated efforts of Genesee, Shiawassee, and Lapeer Counties, Vets to Wellness offered a simplified and high-quality personalized transportation service, resources, and care that matches



Figure 1 Vets to Wellness Logo

veterans' needs. In addition, the program used existing and emerging technologies to expand and improve service to veterans while increasing the accessibility of transportation options for servicemen and women of all ages.

## Project Background

### Veteran Mobility Gap

Through the Vets to Wellness program, the MTA and its partners sought to address the challenges of coordinating and providing easily accessible and reliable transportation to the veteran populations of Genesee, Lapeer, and Shiawassee Counties. Transportation is a key component of the daily activities of life, especially when transitioning from military to civilian lifestyles, and is necessary when finding and maintaining housing, employment, and medical care.

Many of the financial, medical, and social problems faced by veterans can be traced to a lack of knowledge and access to assistance programs. Though community and government programs exist that are geared towards serving the veteran populations of Genesee, Shiawassee, and Lapeer Counties, the lack of collaboration and coordination between them leads to inefficiency and wasted resources. Some transportation programs offered by government and non-government organizations have service restrictions that can prevent veterans from taking advantage of them, making an already complicated system even more inaccessible. For example, while the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) vans provide transportation from the mid-Michigan area to the Ann Arbor and Saginaw VA Hospitals, the vans are often inaccessible for wheelchair users and veterans are typically not allowed to bring a personal care attendant with them. For many veterans, this creates a major barrier to utilizing the service.

Each county has a Department of Veterans Affairs/Services that assists veterans and their caregivers in navigating the various benefits and services available to them through community organizations and agencies. Lack of transportation to these departments, and in many cases being unaware that these departments exist, leads to large numbers of low-income, elderly, homeless, and disabled veterans that are unable to utilize and understand these systems. These veterans face some of the greatest transportation barriers, making it harder for them to navigate the various regulations required to get a



ride, which leaves them more apt to experience missed appointments and prescriptions due to lack of transportation.

The lack of communication between government programs and the nearly 45,000 non-governmental or non-profit groups found nationwide leave many veterans and their caregivers overwhelmed in their efforts to obtain assistance (Shane, 2015). This results in a siloed approach to providing for the needs of veterans and causes inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the system.

As ride-hailing services continue to grow, residents in the tri-county region have some access to ride-sharing programs such as Lyft and Uber. While these programs offer valuable services to the general public, veterans, especially those facing illness or disability, are not always given the same consideration and quality of service. According to recent lawsuits, people with disabilities are often discriminated against, and their medical devices are not accommodated by Uber and Lyft drivers. Ride-sharing vehicles are independently owned and seldom equipped to transport wheelchairs, walkers, service animals, and other ADA approved devices that many elderly or disabled veterans require. Ride-sharing drivers often lack the training needed to provide the level of service that facilitates veterans with disabilities or PTSD, to travel in dignity and without stress-triggers (Martinez, 2018).

### Geographic Area Served

The counties of Genesee, Lapeer, and Shiawassee form a tri-county region with a combined population of 570,200, and a combined veteran population of 35,809, according to the *2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates*. Local veterans served during WWII, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and both Gulf Wars. With over 6.2% of the regional population classified as veterans, coordinating and providing services targeted towards meeting their specific needs has become crucial.

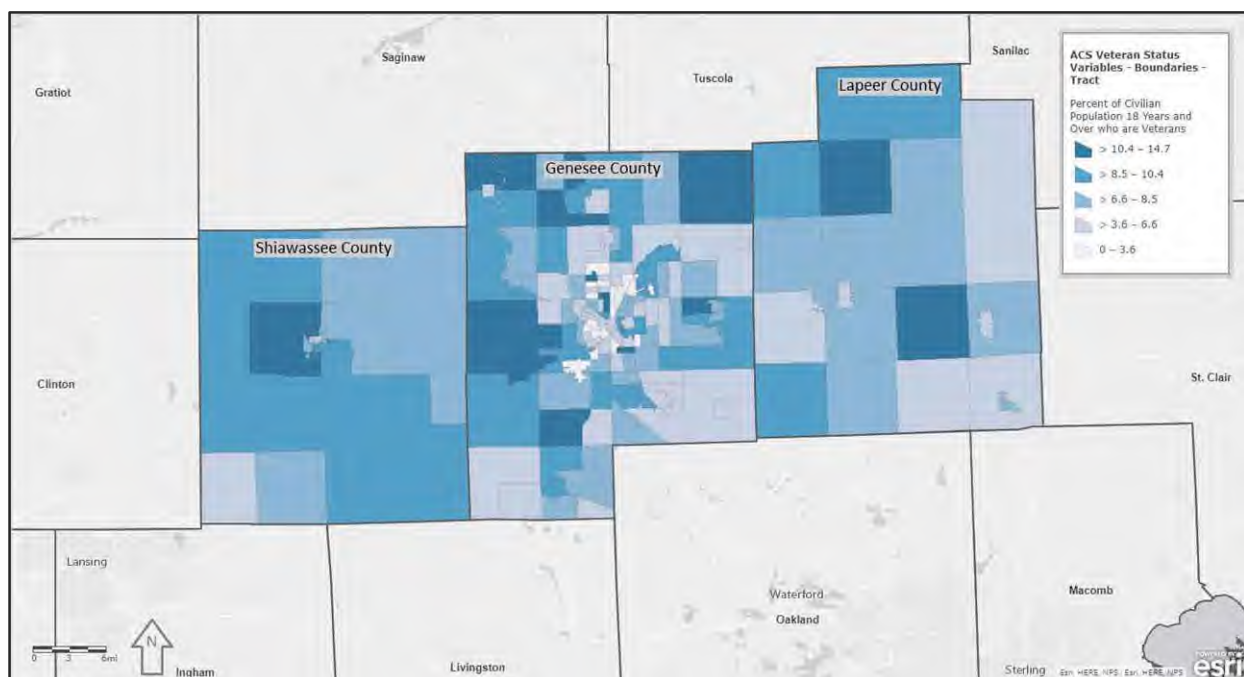


Figure 2 Map depicting veteran population in the three partnering counties

Genesee County, MI is considered mainly urban with suburban and rural areas, and has a population of 413,090, 28% of which are minorities. The county is 636.98 square miles with a population density of 648.5 residents per square mile. The median income of Genesee County is \$43,246, yet the poverty level of 20.3% is much higher than the poverty level of 15% for the State of Michigan. Genesee County has the fifth largest veteran population in Michigan, with 24,969 veterans comprising 7.9% of the total county population, which is served by the Genesee County Department of Veterans Services. The VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic is the only VA healthcare facility currently available within county lines.

Shiawassee County, MI has a total area of 541 square miles and a population of 68,800. The county is designated mostly rural with a population density of 127.2 residents per square mile. The median household income is \$48,470 with a poverty rate near 12%. Shiawassee County has 4,786 veteran residents. There are currently no VA hospitals or clinics located within the county, but transportation services are offered by the Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center's Rural transportation program. The Department of Veterans Affairs offers a veteran transportation service, but with few volunteers, and only six pick-up/drop-off locations, utilizing the transportation service can be a challenge for many veterans.

Lapeer County, MI has a total area of 663 square miles, with a population of 88,310, and is designated as mostly rural with a population density of 133.2 residents per square mile. The median household income is \$54,174 with a poverty rate near 10%. There are 6,054 veterans that currently reside in Lapeer County. The Lapeer County Department of Veterans Affairs, along with other community organizations, offer services and assistance to local veterans. Veterans, especially those living in rural areas, must travel long distances to receive medical care at a VA facility as none currently exist within county borders.

*Data Source: United States Census Bureau: QuickFacts*

## **Vets to Wellness Destinations**

Vets to Wellness focused on providing transportation through new and existing services to meet all basic health and wellness needs of veterans, including medical care; access to healthy food choices; transportation to local social service or non-profit services; employment centers; and educational opportunities.

Medical appointments comprise the majority of requested trips for veterans in the tri-county area. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the main obstacles cited by rural Veterans in obtaining VA health care are distance, limited number of local providers, and lack of transportation. Having dependable and easily available transportation to veterans' services gives better access to financial, educational, family, health, and community support systems.

Veterans face numerous obstacles when rejoining civilian life and are often disproportionately affected with major health problems. According to a report by the United Health Foundation, veterans are nearly twice as likely to suffer from heart disease and heart attacks. Nearly half of veterans 80 years of age and older have been diagnosed with skin cancer, compared to only a third of civilians of the same age, prompting strong concerns for the men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Vietnam veterans are at least twice as likely to have hepatitis C, an easily treatable disease, if they can secure transportation to receive the necessary medical care (Harris, 2018).

Mental health and behavior issues can be treated with proper medical care and mental health services, which can be difficult to attend when transportation is not easily accessible. This is extremely important for veterans as the current veteran suicide rate of 20% greatly exceeds the national rate, with three out of five veterans dying of suicide having been diagnosed with mental health conditions (Samhsa.gov).

Rides to non-medical services are a large part of a healthy lifestyle for veterans of all ages. While there are some transportation options to VA Medical Centers, many veterans face transportation barriers when attempting to access local service and/or obtain basic needs, such as food. Providing safe and dependable transportation to places of employment, education, groceries, social functions, recreational activities, and various services for veterans is a priority of the Vets to Wellness project.

### Key Participants in Project

The Vets to Wellness Team is comprised of three public transportation agencies; Kevadiya Inc (KVD), a private Michigan-based IT company; the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission; two county veterans services offices; the Veterans Community Action Team Region 6 Coordinator; and Veterans of Now (VON), a Flint-based veterans advocacy group whose Director is a Veteran who was stationed in Afghanistan. This Team brought together a wealth of experience in issues related to mobility, transportation barriers, and the unique experiences of veterans.

### Flint MTA

Flint Mass Transportation Authority (MTA) is the countywide public transportation provider for the City of Flint and Genesee County, Michigan. The MTA family of services includes fourteen primary routes



Figure 3 A Vets to Wellness driver is dropping off a local veteran to a medical appointment.

operating seven days a week; 77 peak period routes that augment the primary routes at high demand times; regional service taking Genesee County residents to workplaces in four adjoining counties; and countywide on-demand services. In addition, MTA provides extensive non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) services for the elderly, persons with disabilities, and the transportation-disadvantaged. MTA ridership in FY2017 was 5.3 million passengers.

MTA's Rides to Wellness program began in 2016. It provides same-day, door-to-door transportation using a personalized approach to providing transportation services. Rides to Wellness is a mobility management initiative that combines the best of public transportation with the

convenience and efficiencies of ride-hailing services. MTA's Rides to Wellness program has been extremely successful providing over 50,000 rides in its first full year of operation. Rides to Wellness served as the model of the pilot program, Vets to Wellness.



## SATA

Formed in 1999, the Shiawassee Area Transportation Agency (SATA) in Owosso each year provides nearly 100,000 rides to passengers in the county through its curb-to-curb Dial-A-Ride Service. A small agency, SATA has 26 drivers, 3 administrators/managers, 4 dispatchers, 2 mechanics, and a fleet of 17 vehicles. SATA is an intergovernmental agency formed as a result of the county's need for transportation by area agencies, including ARC, the Council on Aging, and the local Department of Human Services to provide rides for citizens in the community including seniors, students, people with disabilities and the general population. It contracts with the local Shiawassee Council on Aging to cover transportation costs for seniors between 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

In 2008, SATA developed and implemented a volunteer-based mobility management program with Transportation Solutions, a division of SATA. The 21 volunteer drivers in this program, who are reimbursed only for mileage, traveled 163,000 miles and donated nearly 5,900 hours to transport local residents last year.



Figure 4 SATA flyer advertising Vets to Wellness

## GLTA

Greater Lapeer Transportation Authority (GLTA) provides safe, affordable and reliable transportation service that first meets the needs of the transit dependent in communities within Lapeer County by providing access to healthcare, education, employment, public services, shopping and recreational facilities, and eventually allows anyone to go anywhere in the region easily and effectively. GLTA's Service area comprises the City of Lapeer and the townships of Elba, Lapeer, Mayfield, Deerfield and Oregon (Lapeer County, Michigan). Additionally, GLTA has the authority, by statute, to provide service throughout the county.



Figure 5 GLTA Vets to Wellness vehicle

GLTA is a demand-response public transportation system which services a population of approximately 39,000

throughout the service area listed above. Lapeer County population is just over 88,000. Annual ridership exceeded 165,000 in 2017.

#### Genesee County Department of Veterans Services

Genesee County DVS promotes through advocacy the well-being of Genesee County veterans, their spouses, and dependents. The Department of Veterans Services works in association with local, state, and federal agencies to address the needs of veterans and to assist in obtaining maximum benefits and services, and to promote veterans' rights and issues. DVS is a networking center for all veteran organizations in the county. The staff assist veterans and family members with their claims and filling out VA forms for service-connected and non-service-connected disabilities and pensions for veterans, spouses, widows, and dependent children. DVS also provides help to indigent veterans and veterans in emergency situations who need basic necessities. DVS is funded through a County-wide millage and serves thousands of veterans each year.

#### Shiawassee Department of Veterans Services (SCVAD)

Shiawassee County VAD supports the well-being of Shiawassee County veterans and their families. SCVAD already relies on SATA's dial-a-ride bus system and specialized mobility management transportation program to assist veterans in their transportation needs. But mobility gaps still exist and SCVAD has been working closely with SATA to develop innovative solutions to addressing those gaps. This project will allow Shiawassee County to better support its veterans' transportation needs.

## Project Components

Vets with transportation barriers are often facing numerous other barriers, such as: medical issues; employment; legal trouble; housing or food insecurity; a disability; or just the sheer overwhelming feeling that come with returning to civilian life. Aging veterans face the same challenges the rest of the aging population face often requiring extensive medical care and learning to live with disabilities.

The original proposed design of the Vets to Wellness project including utilizing innovative elements such as: Regional Mobility Managers; state-of-the-art technology, including a veterans-focused portal on both the website and app; expansion of fare payment capabilities; an Interactive Voice Response system for scheduling rides through the telephone; a dynamic, automated vehicle scheduling software to improve capacity and maximize efficiency within the transportation systems; personalized trip planning; same day transportation and connected trips; ongoing coordination with all public and private veterans-serving and transportation- providing organizations; and travel training and technology training for riders.

#### Regional Mobility Managers

Regional Mobility Managers are the dedicated staff that works to coordinate transportation options for veterans across the three-county area. Regional Mobility Managers work with the VA and all veteran-serving organizations to ensure maximum access for veterans and reduce any duplication of services. Regional Mobility Managers are the resident "transportation experts" in Genesee, Shiawassee, and Lapeer counties. They attend VA-related coordination meetings and oversee the outreach efforts with stakeholders and veterans. Regional Managers work closely within the three transit agencies to create

seamless transportation services across the three counties, while coordinating with KVD to collect the information necessary for the Veterans app and website.

Each agency decided to hire their own Mobility Manager, with MTA Flint's working full-time and GLTA and SATA's working part-time on this project.

### Innovative Technology

The original project design called for team partner KVD to build on its already successful Rides to Wellness technology software and add a veteran-focused web portal and app that allows online scheduling through the website or through the app with real-time information about requested and scheduled rides; an IVR system for vets who prefer using the phone to schedule rides; and the ability for the software system to accept credit card payments in vehicles.

After several months of development, MTA Flint was able to integrate most of these applications into their transportation program, while the grant also allowed for SATA and GLTA to utilize the KVD technology through the pilot period to determine if it is a good fit in a rural transportation system. Typically hampered by cost restraints, this was a rare opportunity for two rural agencies to "test" a system before making a long-term investment in IT upgrades.



Figure 6 V2W Driver utilizes Square for convenient passenger payment



Figure 7 Diagram depicting options available to make appointments with Vets to Wellness

The results of the IT portion of the project were mixed and will be discussed further in the Outcomes and Challenges sections of this report.



### Personalized Trip Planning

By utilizing the mobility manager concept and personalizing the level of trip planning assistance, transportation resources are complemented by access to other resources in the community. Mobility managers assist vets in addressing their transportation barriers while also providing information and referrals to meet their other needs. Mobility managers are experts in all of the transportation options in the community, so they can connect the veteran to the most cost effective and appropriate option for the trip they need to make, whether that be to a long-distance medical facility or a local grocery store.

This was one of the most critical and successful pieces of the project as each transit agency was able to assist many veterans in connecting with services.



Figure 8 Driver assisting veteran from vehicle

### Same Day Service/Connected Trips

One of the ongoing challenges for anyone using public transportation, is the inability to request a ride on the same day the rider needs it. Almost all transits require a minimum of 24 hours for any type of on-demand service. This is a major drawback for people who do not have access or cannot use a fixed route bus service yet need to make it to an appointment or to the grocery store on a specific day. MTA Flint offers vets in Genesee County same day service. This is made possible through technology upgrades that mirror the ride-hailing companies and utilize a more efficient dispatching system than most public transportation companies currently use. Lapeer and Shiawassee transit systems continue to evaluate the need and capabilities to offer same day service to its clients. All three agencies will continue to share information to develop the most efficient and customer-friendly services.

Another barrier that is often faced by riders seeking to use public transportation is the ability to make multiple stops during one on-demand trip. For example, a vet may need a ride to a job interview and then when she is picked up for her trip home, she may need to stop at the grocery store. MTA Flint offers "connected" trips to vets to further reduce the difficulty of utilizing public transportation.



Figure 9 Vets to Wellness poster

related to using public transportation. Although many of the rides provided through this project will be door-to-door and not on a bus, travel training is still be helpful for someone who has never used any form of public transportation.

Through the project, Flint MTA continued to offer same day service and connected trips while discovering that many Veterans preferred to pre-schedule their trips and not utilize the same day option. GLTA was able to add same day service as an option for the Veterans and SATA has primarily pre-scheduled trips as they were mostly long-distance trips to medical appointments.

#### Coordination Among Service Providers

Improving coordination with service providers and reducing the “siloed” approach was one of the key components of the V2W project. Many inroads were achieved and there was a significant improvement in all parties better understanding the services and funding sources available.

Even as the project has ended, the Vets to Wellness team continues to use improved technology, mobility managers, and relationships with key stakeholders, to fundamentally change the transportation landscape for vets in the three-county region. Coordination of actual rides between transit providers proved to be logistically challenging, however, and will be discussed in the Challenges section.

#### Travel and Technology Training

When a veteran is unfamiliar with using public transportation, free travel training is offered. Travel training is a short-term, individualized course of instruction on how to book rides; how to ride and bus and understand route schedules; and anything else

## Veteran Outreach



Figure 10 Rides to Wellness staff were invited to host a table to hand out veteran transportation information at the annual "Veterans Stand Down" event at Catholic Charities Center for Hope in Flint, MI. Approximately 300-350 veterans attended the event.

The Vets to Wellness Team used a myriad of methods to inform, recruit, manage, and support riders with the primary method being the existing networks and partnerships with transit and veteran-serving organizations. In conversations with stakeholders, there was an unabashed, enthusiastic commitment from key veteran organizations to share information about the mobility services offered through Vets to Wellness.



## Outcomes

This project's mission was to improve transportation for Veterans in a three-county region and it achieved that goal. In the grant application, specific outcomes were provided.

1. Number of people who access the services of Vets to Wellness
  - a. Total Ridership of all three counties during project period: 6202 trips
2. Completion of the Veterans-focused app and web portal
  - a. The app and web portal were completed. However, the app was not deployed to the riding public as it had many bugs and the project ended before a more "user-friendly" version could be created. The app is still active, and MTA is working with KVD to ensure it is usable and ready for full deployment. MTA intended to recruit veterans who would learn to use the app and become early adopters. This did not happen due to time constraints. Staff turnover within the transit agency was a major barrier to this piece of the project not being completed during the project timeframe. MTA is currently recruiting a new IT Tech who will be assigned the task of ensuring the app is ready for use by the public and promoting the app so passengers are incentivized to try it.
  - b. The web portal was completed and is in use. The Vets team was hopeful the VA hospital in Ann Arbor would consider using the web portal to schedule rides for Veterans. That has not happened yet. However, a hospital in Flint has begun using the web portal to schedule rides for all of its patients. The feedback from hospital staff on the ease of use and the time-savings for scheduling through a portal instead of calling by phone has been incredibly positive. MTA is currently working towards introducing the online scheduling option to its other partner agencies.
  - c. Other items that were technology focused for this project include utilization of the Square app for customers who wanted to pay by credit card. The Team saw this as a low-cost method of accepting electronic payments inside of vehicles. SATA paid for all fares through the grant, so they felt there was no reason to utilize the Square app. GLTA did download and set up the Square app, but they also covered all fares through the grant and/or donations, so they did not have any out-of-pocket fares. MTA has widely utilized the Square app. The app has been installed in all Rides to Wellness vehicles and in all locations where customers can purchase passes. It has been very successful and is easy to use and low-cost to the agency.
  - d. To reduce live person phone traffic, the group designed an IVR for passengers to be able to manage their rides. The IVR was the last IT component of the project and was completed at the end of the project period. MTA is introducing the IVR into its call center in July 2020. The other agencies will not be using the IVR as they are not continuing the program.
3. Completion of a list of all available transportation resources that can be distributed widely throughout the three-county region
  - a. The project successfully created a diagram (Appendix A) analyzing local and state transportation resources for Veterans. All three transit agencies have been able to utilize this information to reach out to current and potential stakeholders. Both transportation and veteran partners said the exercise of learning how everything flows together was extremely eye-opening.

4. Connection of all veteran-serving transportation businesses and organizations for at least one meeting during project period.
  - a. Connecting and outreach were two of the main components of this program and each transit provider was able to visit many veterans-serving organizations in their respective areas. In addition, the team was invited to present at the VCAT meeting that brings together all veteran-serving transportation organizations.
  - b. Project details were shared with Department of Veterans Affairs; VCAT – Region 6 organizations; VA hospital transportation coordinators; Michigan Department of Military and Veterans Affairs; Flint VA Community-based Outpatient Clinic; Mott Community College Veterans services office; Genesee County, Lapeer County, and Shiawassee County Department of Veterans Services; 7<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court – Veterans Specialty Court and many others.
  - c. In addition to recruiting riders through partner organizations, Vets to Wellness implemented an outreach marketing campaign that included radio, print media, billboards, direct mail, and social media. Fliers and brochures were printed and shared at community meetings and with social service organizations, such as Department of Health and Human Services; Catholic Charities; North End Soup Kitchen; Food Bank of Eastern Michigan; Shelter of Flint; the Continuum of Care, and My Brother’s Keeper. Information was also sent to 211 in order that Vets to Wellness could be included in their resource information.
5. Improved communication between transit providers and veterans-focused organizations
  - a. As stated above, there was extensive connection between the transit providers and veterans-focused organizations and many of these connections had never existed until this project. A full list of meetings, presentations, and tabling events can be found in Appendix B.
6. Reported decrease in transportation barriers by veterans
  - a. Due to Covid-19, the group was only able to survey a limited number of veterans over the phone at the end of this project. Forty veterans and/or spouses were randomly selected from the database and twenty of those contacted were willing to complete the survey. Results were overwhelmingly positive, as seen in the Survey Results section below, with the largest decreases in transportation barriers being the removal of dependence on family and friends, as well as the convenience of being picked up at the veterans’ homes. See Appendix C for full survey.
  - b. Each agency has shared myriad of anecdotal evidence of the popularity of this project with veterans and their joy at having this service.

## **Summary of Survey Results**

MTA conducted a phone survey after the end of the project to determine rider satisfaction with the Vets to Wellness service. As described in the previous section, determining a decrease in transportation barriers was a specific outcome of the V2W project. As shown in the chart below, respondents indicated the various ways that the program improved their lives. For full survey, refer to Appendix C.

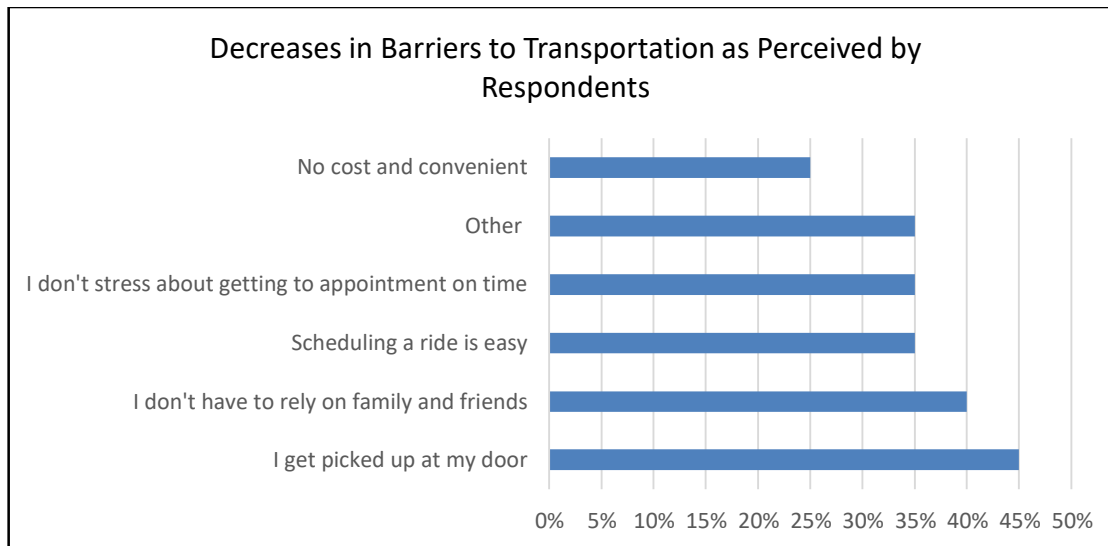


Figure 11 Chart depicting decreases in barriers to transportation as perceived by respondents

Survey results showed that 70% of riders were veterans, with 30% being the spouse of a veteran. Riders were primarily male at 55%, with 40% female and 5% declining to answer. Average age of respondents was 66, with participants born in years ranging from 1931 – 1985.

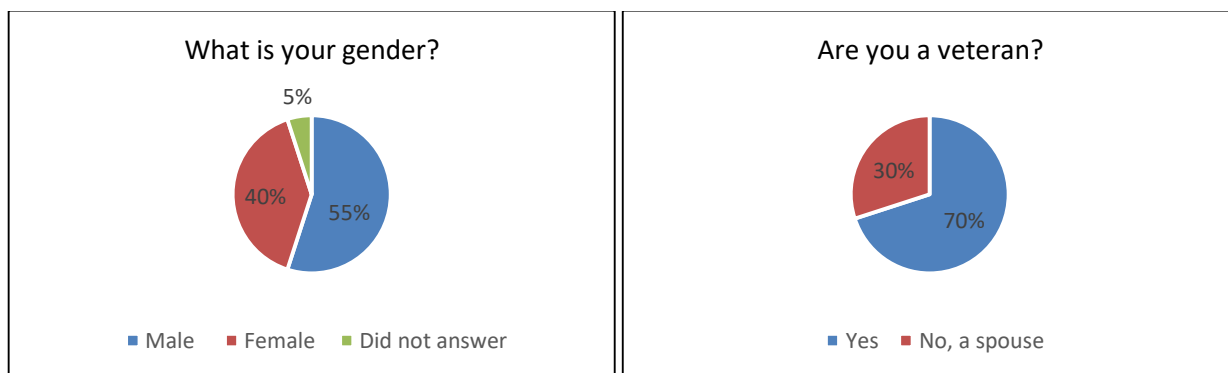


Figure 12 Charts displaying gender and veteran status of respondents

Respondent satisfaction was very high with 85% Completely Satisfied, 5% Satisfied, 10% non-response, and no negative responses, as shown in Figure 12. Satisfaction is also apparent in the high repeat ridership among survey respondents, with 60% indicating they each travelled with Vets to Wellness more than 10 times.

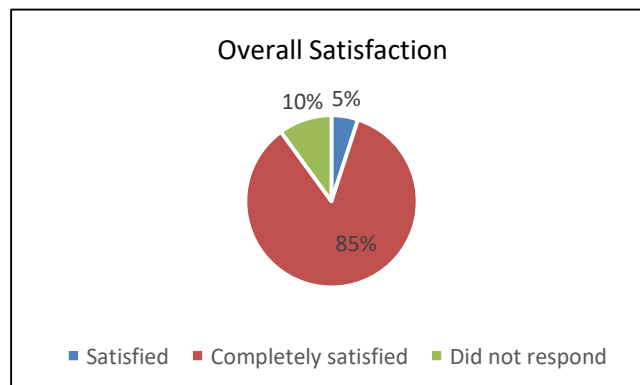


Figure 13 Chart depicting overall satisfaction with Vets to Wellness



Respondents were asked if they had ever used MTA transportation services before, and 40% indicated that they had not. This is a possible indicator that the Vets to Wellness outreach program and initiative to increase communication among veteran organizations had been successful. Not only were these new riders able to benefit from the Vets to Wellness transportation benefits, but they are also now more connected with the transportation and veteran communities in general.

With a large part of the Vets to Wellness program involving innovative technology, it was important to gauge respondents' interest. When asked if the respondent used a smartphone, 60% said Yes, of those that responded Yes, 67% showed an interest in using a Vets to Wellness app to make future appointments. This indicates that while a majority of respondents are using and intend to continue using technology for their transportation needs, there is a fairly large percentage (37%), that prefer to make appointments over the phone. This reinforces the need for transit agencies to continue implementing human interactions in their customer service alongside innovative technology in order to meet the needs of all riders.

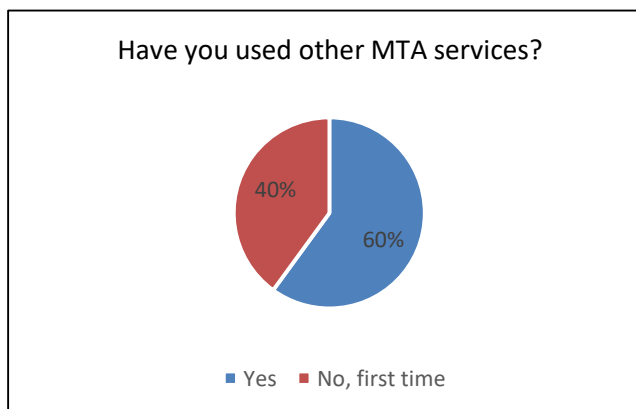


Figure 14 Chart displaying previous MTA service usage

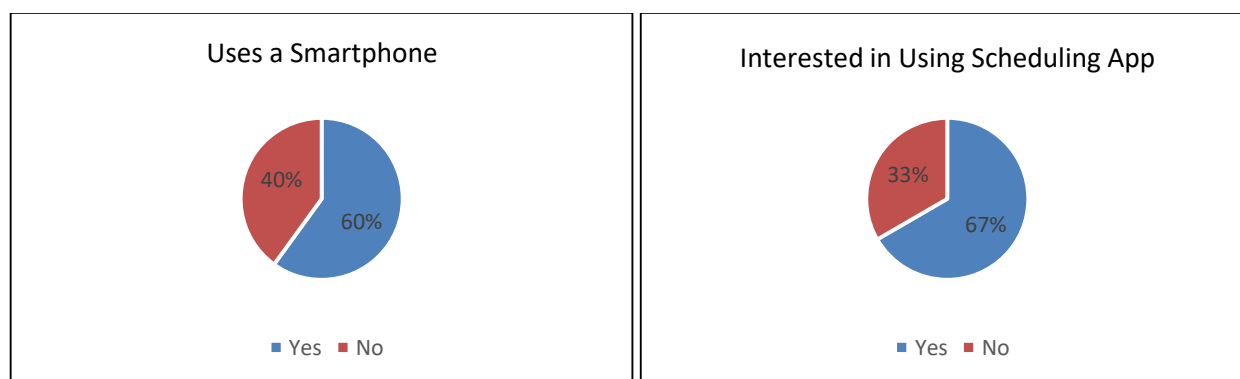


Figure 15 Charts displaying smartphone and potential app usage among respondents

### Anecdotal Feedback From GLTA:

"Lapeer has never had this type of service for our County prior to the Vets2Wellness program. Many that had never even ridden on any type of public transportation. This was perfect time for many as our taxi services have all but one closed. Lapeer is very rural and it is very difficult for people, especially veterans to find outside sources to provide them transportation. I feel this is why there is a very high no



Figure 16 Local GLTA Vets to Wellness article in Lapeer. Found at: <https://thecountypress.mihomepaper.com/articles/new-vets-to-wellness-program-provides-transportation-for-veterans/>

show rate for doctor's appointments. Vets were so pleased that we were able to provide door to door service for them. We had to overcome a few barriers here in Lapeer and even with all of the barriers, I feel we were able to show that this is a portion of our community that has been well underserved for years. I am sure that our numbers would have kept growing as more and more each month. Passengers, family and friends were very thankful for what the Vets2Wellness did and the care that everyone in the program gave to those that had serviced and their families.

This service helped to remove stress from several of our passengers.

(Having a driver know where they

needed to go; not having to find a place to park; getting let off and picked up right at the door; being helped into an appointment if needed)

A rider reported they felt healthier because they did not have to cancel medical appointments from not having any other transportation

We were told instead of feeling they were a burden to their children this helped keep their independence.

One rider reported it helped lower their monthly cost of using gas and another veteran had a leased vehicle and with us being able to now take them to their appointment they did not go over their allotted miles."

### Anecdotal Feedback From SATA:

"The majority of our trips were to VA facilities located in Ann Arbor, Saginaw, Grand Rapids, Flint, Battle Creek, Detroit, and the Shiawassee County VA. The other trips were to grocery stores, banks, doctors other than VA, to visit a relative in jail, food banks, mental health appointments, bill payments, to visit a friend in the hospital, DHHS, Social Security, apartment shopping, pharmacy, and a restaurant stop. We were proud to be able to help so many to get to much needed appointments and have the freedom of not having to rely on family and friends. The fact that the grant provided funds which covered the cost of each ride was an added bonus for the veterans!

We worked closely with the Shiawassee County VA to have them approve each veteran's DD214 number, making them eligible for the project. Surprisingly, there was a large number of veterans that didn't know their DD214 number. In those cases, the local VA was very instrumental in looking up their names and confirming approval for us. The Shiawassee County VA also referred a few veterans to us that did not meet the criteria for them to transport in their vehicles.

Due to the positive publicity of this project, we received a very pleasant surprise during the course of the grant. When one of our elderly TSD passengers that had been traveling with us for the past two years passed away, his family set up a Memorial in his honor by donating memorial funds to us to be used toward rides for Shiawassee County veterans. How awesome is that?! So we are still able to give veterans free rides with his memorial donations. That is a wonderful feeling!



Figure 17 We typically think of our Vets as older and not with children. However, we have several vets who are younger with children and we have transported the whole family.

we were able to give her a feeling of liberation from not burdening her family as we could transport her independently. I wish you could have seen her smile after her daughter helped get her rides set up. She was proud to be joining the world on her own again. What a joy to be a part of the process to enable her to feel useful again. This project made a difference!

We transported one veteran two and three times a week to cancer treatments in Flint. He was in a wheelchair, so the ramp was a vital part for him. He lived in an assisted living facility and his family was beyond grateful that we could take him to appointments. This project made a difference!

To us, the project was about more than just providing rides. It was being provided with the opportunity to show compassion, respect, lend a listening ear, and develop relationships. As one veteran scheduled his ride, he began to cry. He apologized, stating that he didn't know why he had lived and his buddies didn't make it home from war. He told of how he has terrible flashbacks of the war. What do you say to

One veteran that we transported was homeless for a time during the project. It was a good feeling to help him apply at apartments and to make a few necessary stops along the way. He scheduled several rides pertaining to eye surgery and care; his rides were essential for his health and he was very grateful. This project made a difference!

In October 2019, we registered our first female veteran, an Army nurse. She has Alzheimer's Disease and her doctor recommended a water exercise class to help her stay active. She attended the class twice a week, but more than that,

that? He was assured that he was important and was thanked for his service, service that he still carries today. Yes, staff also shared tears of compassion with him, and still do.

In closing, this has been an eye opening experience to the great needs of veterans in our county, as well as in neighboring counties. It has been the honor of SATA/TSD board members, management staff, and employees to serve so many deserving, appreciative individuals. It was encouraging to hear our veterans' stories and develop relationships that we believe will continue for a lifetime. This project is a beautiful illustration of the importance not only of public transportation, but also of the importance of neighboring agencies working hand-in-hand to provide much-needed services to its area residents by fostering independence and, subsequently, a strong sense of pride. The common thread that ties each of us to this agency is the ability to assist individuals with essential, and sometimes critical, services that so many people are allowed to take for granted. This is why we love our jobs! Thank you for allowing our agency and all involved to be a part of this tremendous project. We look forward to continuing the work started and enhanced by this grant to serve our very deserving veterans in the future."

### **Anecdotal Feedback From MTA:**

"The wife of a Veteran has said that she doesn't know what they would do without us. We have been a blessing to her and her husband both. She is his caregiver and we not only help get her husband to his appointments, but we have transported to the Saginaw VA for his respite care.

Another Veteran depends on V2W to get him to his medical appointments each month. He shared that with our services, he hasn't had to rely as much on family.

We've also had Veteran's share that we have given them their independence back by allowing them the freedom to get around to appointments and groceries using our services.

The project also strongly strengthened the relationship between MTA and the Genesee County Department of Veterans Services. Before the project there was almost zero collaboration. Now, the two agencies regularly refer veterans back and forth to each other and to other services. This has, by far, been one of the most positive outcomes."



Figure 18 A veteran's widow is dropped off at her medical appointment. The Vets to Wellness service allows for five trips per month for veterans, their spouses, and widows/widowers of veterans.

## Ridership

The Vets to Wellness program provided transportation to numerous veterans and their families during the extent of the project. The transportation partners worked together to provide 6,202 trips with SATA delivering 269, GLTA delivering 1,648, and MTA delivering 4,465.

The counties of Genesee, Lapeer, and Shiawassee are home to a combined veteran population of 35,809, according to the *2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates*. Vets to Wellness served a ridership that was multi-generational and came from varying economic and cultural backgrounds, including:

- Veterans aged 65 years and older comprise nearly 50% of the veteran population, and often require more transportation to medical appointments and pharmacies for medication.
- 10,819 veterans in the regional area are classified as disabled, and likely require the most assistance in finding transportation that accommodates their specific needs.
- The number of veterans living in poverty has reached 2,960 in the tri-county region, leading to more dependence on government and community programs for assistance in reaching medical care and various services.



Figure 19 Ridership totals for each transportation provider

- Female veterans (5.2% of the veteran population) and minority veterans (12.3% of veteran population) oftentimes face unique challenges that can require specialized care and services.
- There are 2,726 veterans who have earned less than a high school degree, demonstrating the need for simplified and cooperative services that can be easily navigated by people of all educational and technological skill levels.



## Challenges

There is no question the program overall was a success. However, as with almost any demonstration project, there were challenges that arose during the project period.

- The time period for the grant was very short. Initially, the project was expected to be completed in six months. This was not realistic. However, MDOT was very accommodating in creating more realistic timelines.
- There was some pushback from veteran organizations. They were concerned public transit was trying to step on their toes. It took many meetings to convince all involved that the project was about working together and knocking down silos, not duplicating services.
- There were mixed results on continuation of the program after the project period ended. MTA Flint was able to create a long-term partnership with Genesee County Department of Veterans Services to assist in paying for fares on behalf of Veterans and their spouses. For MTA and GCDVS, the service has grown, and the County is now paying for Veterans trips to both local and long-distance locations, such as Ann Arbor and Detroit.
- SATA was able to continue providing trips to some Veterans who were approved for VA medical appointments but has discontinued some of the services offered through the grant. SATA has indicated that to continue the program as designed, it would have needed funding for two additional vehicles in its fleet and funding for the drivers.
- GLTA strengthened the relationship with their Veterans community but did not continue offering a “Vets to Wellness” service. GLTA indicating they would need assistance with the cost of an additional vehicle and the drivers’ salary to continue the service. GLTA has applied for the vehicle and for a Mobility Manager its MDOT application but was denied because these items were considered service expansion.
- There was a significant amount of work involved in this project, especially related to introduction of new IT software and hardware and the work involved in bringing together so many stakeholders to carry out the project.
- GLTA felt that even though there was a significant marketing and outreach program there were many residents of Lapeer that were not aware of the program. They felt that even with all of the work that was put into distributing rack cards, running TV ads and billboards, there were many who did not see them because the time of the project was so short.
- SATA discussed a longer-term partnership with the Shiawassee County VA but was told the department had their own vehicles and volunteer drivers. They have continued to keep the relationship with the county VA office in case another opportunity presents itself.



Figure 20 Shareholder brainstorming lead by MTA's Harmony Lloyd

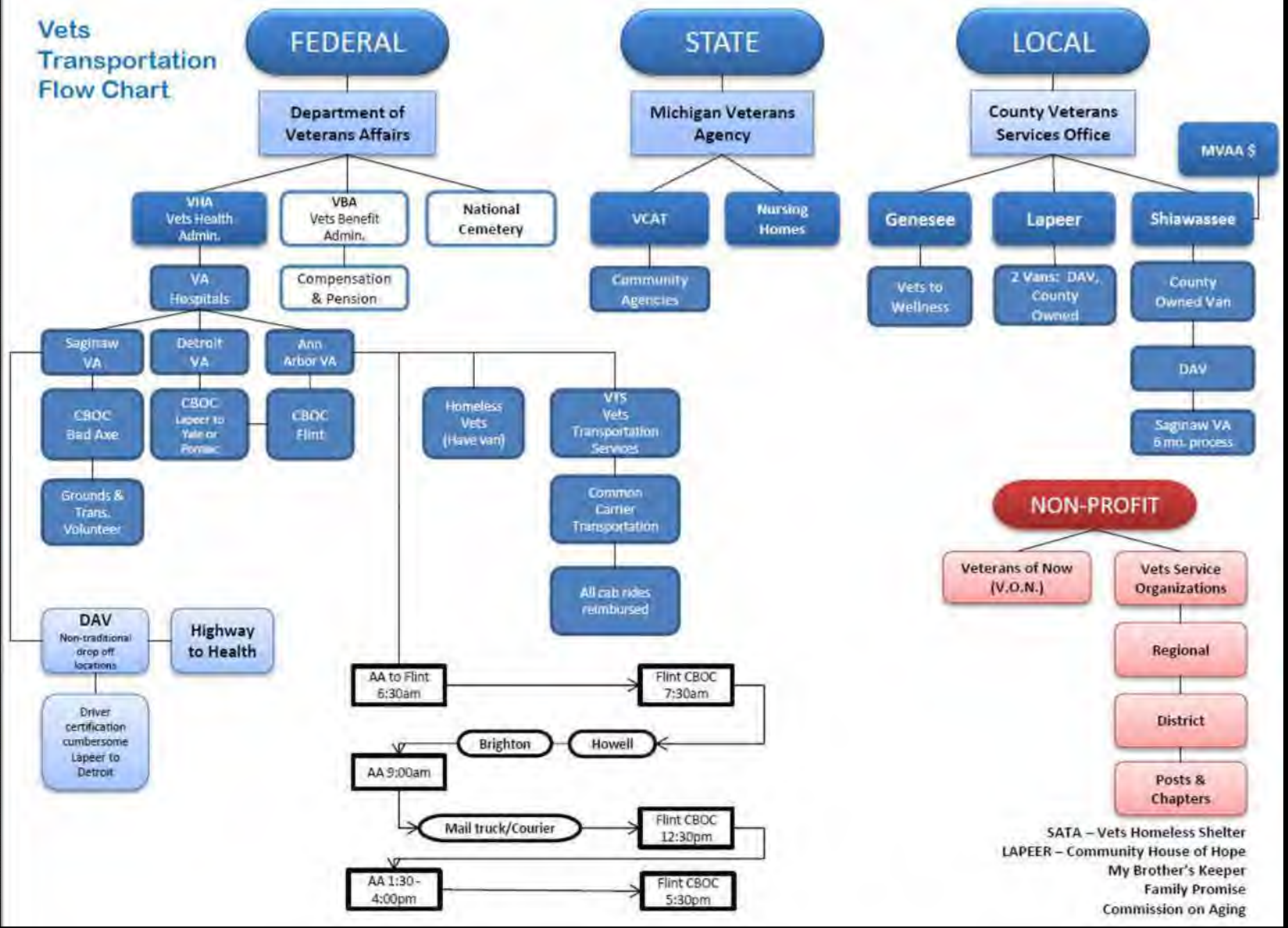
## Opportunities

- The project provided good insight into the potential to attract new riders to public transportation. It created relationships between stakeholders who had never worked together before and it introduced new models of transportation to riders who had never thought beyond using their own vehicle or getting a ride from family members.
- The project team was able to scratch the service on the various levels of funding that are available in both transit and through veteran-connected sources. However, getting these agencies to work together to share or split funding is a challenge that will require significant intervention at the state and federal levels.
- The project provided important insight into the capacity limitations that are felt by rural agencies. As transit agencies are encouraged to pilot or demonstrate “innovative projects” there should be significant consideration to including onsite transit project managers or other additional staff to carry out these projects that are outside of the traditional service models. Potentially, a project manager could be a requirement within the grant application for an innovative project unless the agencies involved can substantially demonstrate they have the staff to carry out the requirements of the program.

## Conclusion

Vets to Wellness was an incredibly positive experience for all the agencies involved. As is demonstrated throughout this report, it allowed the introduction of technology improvements to make the transit systems more efficient. Most importantly, it forged new relationships between counties in mid-Michigan and between myriad of agencies who serve veterans and/or provide transportation services. With a future that provided more direction related to stable, long-term funding streams, Vets to Wellness offered proof of concept that public transportation can be a powerful force in addressing the future needs of the Veteran community.

# Vets Transportation Flow Chart



## Appendix B

### Veterans Outreach – Presentations and Tabling Events

VCAT Region 6 Meeting  
Veterans Stand Down at Catholic Charities  
Genesee County Great Start Collaborative Meeting  
Health Fair Senior Expo  
Fox 66 Health Expo  
Veterans Day Luncheon  
2019 Anniversary Celebration VFW Post 8236  
Veterans Day Coffee Hour  
Durand VFW  
Veterans Summit  
Imlay City Rotary  
Lapeer - VFW  
Lapeer Eagles  
Good Morning Lapeer  
Lapeer Optimist Club  
Lapeer Kiwanis  
Imlay City Lions Club  
Veterans Dinner - Veterans Esteem Team of Lapeer  
American Legion - three different divisions (Women, Men and sons of Veterans)  
Lapeer Family Fun Day  
Hadley Community Church Senior Luncheon  
Lapeer County Community Collaborative  
Lapeer County Commissioners Meeting  
Lapeer County Senior Expo  
Elder Abuse Center  
Forrest Senior Center  
Kearsley Manor  
Clio Chamber of Commerce  
Lockwood of Fenton  
West Flint Business Chamber of Commerce  
Rosehaven Manor  
Sunrise Rotary  
Clio Senior Center  
Flint Height Terrace  
South End Soup Kitchen  
Davison Senior Center  
Krapol Senior Center  
Swartz Creek Senior Center  
Flint Rotary Club  
Macedonia Missionary Love Day for Seniors  
VFW Post 3087  
VFW Post 8236



MTA Satisfaction Survey		Results									
Vets to Wellness (V2W) Survey Questions	V2W Survey Responses	Totals	Percent	Survey #1	Survey #2	Survey #3	Survey #4	Survey #5	Survey #6	Survey #7	Survey #8
1. Are you a veteran?	Yes	14	70%		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	No	6	30%	x							
1a. If no, are you the spouse of a veteran?	Yes	6	30%	x							
	No										
2. Have you used the Vets to Wellness no-cost transportation service offered by the Genesee County Vets Service Office?	Yes	16	80%	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	No	4	20%								
2a. If yes, how many times?	1 - 5	2	10%								
	6 - 10	3	15%		x						
	More than 10 times	12	60%	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
2b. If no, what has kept you from using this no-cost transportation service?	Forgot about the service										
	Family or friends give me a ride										
	I still drive										
	Signed up for future use when I can no longer drive										
	Other:	3	15%								
3. Has the Vets to Wellness service helped to enhance your quality of life?	Yes	17	85%	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	No	1	5%								
3a. If Yes, how has it helped?	I don't have to rely on family and friends	8	40%	x		x			x	x	
	Scheduling a ride is easy	7	35%							x	x
	I get picked up at my door	9	45%			x				x	x
	I don't stress about getting to appointment on time	7	35%							x	
	No cost and convenient	5	25%								
	Other:	7	35%			on time	get to store	thera py appts			Blessi ng
3b. If No, why not?	My appointments are out of V2W working hours	1	5%						x		
	Customer service when calling for a ride										
	Safety concerns										
	Other:	1	5%								
4. Which MTA services have you used?	Big Bus	2	10%				x				x
	Your Ride	10	50%	x	x		x	x		x	
	Rides to Wellness through another agency	3	15%				x				
5. Thinking about all the trips you've taken, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with Rides to Wellness?	Not satisfied at all										
	Somewhat satisfied										
	Satisfied	1	5%								x
	Completely satisfied	17	85%	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
6. Do you use a Smart phone?	Yes	12	60%	x	x		x	x	x		x
Note: If the response is "Yes" ask #7, if "No" go to #8	No	8	40%			x				x	
7. Would you be interested in using an App that would allow you to schedule your rides from your phone, instead of calling to schedule an appointment?	Yes	8	40%	x	x		x	x	x		
	No	9	45%								x
8. What is your gender?	Male	11	55%		x	x	x	x	x		
	Female	8	40%	x							x
9. What is your year of birth?	Year YYYY	1953.7	66.3	1947	1948	1948	1962	1951	1971	1955	1961

Avg Age



Survey Participants (20)																			
Survey #9	Survey #10	Survey #11	Survey #12	Survey #13	Survey #14	Survey #15	Survey #16	Survey #17	Survey #18	Survey #19	Survey #20	Survey #21	Survey #22	Survey #23	Survey #24	Survey #25			
x	x		x			x	x	x	x										
		x		x	x					x	x								
		x		x	x					x	x								
x	x				x	x	x	x		x	x								
		x	x	x					x										
	x										x								
			x				x												
x					x	x		x		x									
		unsur		vet					got										
x	x	e	x	died	x	x	x	x	cat	x	x								
									x										
x	x				x	x													
x	x				x					x									
x	x		x		x					x	x								
x	x				x	x				x	x								
x	x				x			x		x									
			very							go to									
		happy					family			grocer									
							unava			y									
							ilable			store									
									own										
									trans.										
	x		x		x	x				x									
		x	x																
x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x								
x	x								x										
		x	x	x	x			x		x									
x		x	x	x	x		x			x	x								
x	x		x			x	x		x										
		x			x			x											
1979	1961	1943	1949	1949	1942	1968	1948	1942	1985	1931	1934								

## Contact Information

### Project Lead:

Flint Mass Transportation Authority (MTA)  
1401 S. Dort Hwy, Flint MI 48503  
Harmony Lloyd, Director of Planning, Innovation, and External Affairs  
[hlloyd@mtaflint.org](mailto:hlloyd@mtaflint.org)

### Full list of team members:

Greater Lapeer Transportation Authority (GLTA)  
230 S. Monroe St., Lapeer MI 48446  
Kelly Bales, Executive Director  
[kbales@go-glta.org](mailto:kbales@go-glta.org)

Lapeer County Department of Veterans Affairs  
287 W. Nepessing  
Lapeer, MI 48446  
Ed Ronders, Director  
[eronders@lapeercounty.org](mailto:eronders@lapeercounty.org)

Shiawassee Area Transportation Agency  
(SATA)  
180 N. Delaney Road  
Owosso, MI 48867  
Mary Rice, Executive Director  
[mrice@satabus.org](mailto:mrice@satabus.org)

Shiawassee County Veterans Affairs Department  
(SCVAD)  
201 N. Shiawassee Street  
Corunna, MI 48817  
Mike Reed, Director  
Major, U.S. Army (Ret.)  
[mreeve@shiawassee.net](mailto:mreeve@shiawassee.net)

Kevadiya (KVD)  
2001 Centerpoint Pkwy  
Pontiac, MI 48341  
Mark Schwartz, Director of Business Development  
[mark@kevadiya.com](mailto:mark@kevadiya.com)

Veterans Community Action Team (VCAT)  
Prosperity Region 6  
Bruce Freimark, Regional Coordinator  
[freimark@micounties.org](mailto:freimark@micounties.org)

Genesee County Department of Veterans Services  
(DVS)  
1001 Beach Street  
Flint, MI 48502  
Jeanne Thick, Director  
[jthick@co.genesee.mi.us](mailto:jthick@co.genesee.mi.us)

Veterans of Now  
(VON)  
608 W. Court Street  
Flint, MI 48503  
George F. Grundy II, Director  
[veteransofnow@gmail.com](mailto:veteransofnow@gmail.com)

Genesee County Metropolitan Planning  
Commission (GCMPC)  
1001 Beach Street  
Flint, MI 48502  
Derek Bradshaw, Director  
[dbradshaw@co.genesee.mi.us](mailto:dbradshaw@co.genesee.mi.us)

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