

Thank you and welcome Ladies and Gentleman. And, thank you Mr. Smith. My name is Billy Altom and I am the Executive Director of the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living.

It is my pleasure to be here today and to provide information on a topic which affects so many Americans: Transportation, and in particular rural transportation.

The lack of available, affordable and accessible transportation is one of the most significant and persistent problems faced by people with disabilities, people who are elderly and those with low incomes.

This is especially true for individuals who live and work in rural America and is why APRIL has been concerned with accessible and effective rural transportation for well over a decade.

APRIL is a national membership organization dedicated to advancing the rights and responsibilities of people with disabilities in rural America.

We provide leadership and resources on rural independent living through a national network of rural centers for independent living, programs and individuals concerned with the unique aspect of rural independent living.

The goal of APRIL is to work with others to find solutions to common problems and to bring rural issues in independent living into focus on the national level.

Which is why we are so proud to be a part of this collaboration of organizations here today.

I want to start by giving you a brief retrospective of transportation legislation as it pertains to people with disabilities and people who are elderly. Then describe a couple of models (Mobility Management and Voucher Systems) for providing effective transportation options in rural areas. And finally, show the benefits of using inclusive language in what we hope will be an historic piece of legislation.

I want to start by reading a passage for the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1970. It uses some archaic language to address people with disabilities, but I am going to read it verbatim.

*“It is hereby declared to be the national policy that elderly and handicapped persons have the same right as other persons to utilize mass transportation facilities and services;
that special efforts shall be made in the planning and design of mass transportation facilities and services so that the availability to elderly and handicapped persons of mass transportation which they can effectively utilize will be assured;
and that all Federal programs offering assistance in the field of mass transportation (including the programs under this Act) should contain provisions implementing this policy.” Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1970, P.L. 91-453*

Then 20 years later the Americans with Disabilities Act reinforced the Urban Mass Transportation Act by clearly stating that, where public transportation is provided, it must be made accessible for people with disabilities.

With these thoughts in mind, The current Transportation Act – the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) created the New Freedom Program (sec. 5317) to support new public transportation services and public transportation alternatives beyond those required by the ADA, in order to assist individuals with disabilities with their transportation needs.

As we speak, SAFETEA-LU has been extended through December 31st, 2010 as a part of the Hire Act. During this period, Advocates are looking hard at what needs to be changed, what should stay and what needs to be added to the new bill that will truly reflect this precedent, in both spirit and intent.

Now let me describe a couple of models that demonstrate that spirit and intent.

I'll start with **MOBILITY MANAGEMENT**

Mobility management refers to the consideration of all modes of transportation in order to meet the needs of users.

In utilizing the practice of mobility management, communities rely upon a variety of transportation sources in an effort to move rural and small town residents from point A to point B as safely and efficiently as possible.

This is a people-oriented approach that accounts for a rider's age, income level and accessibility needs to determine the best transportation option.

Effective mobility management ensures that residents are familiar with available resources and that communities coordinate transit programs effectively. Customer-focused coordination is essential to ensure that services create sufficient access to jobs, groceries and health care services.

Last month, Easter Seals Transportation Group – Project ACTION (ESPA), the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) and the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) started a project in twenty states to create mobility management independent living coaches who are people with disabilities.

These coaches will educate mobility managers in disability perspectives as they pertain to various forms of transportation. They will also train mobility managers to coordinate and work closely with disability organizations in their respective communities.

In the IL world we have a slogan for this. Nothing about us, without us!

But currently, many mobility plans do not take all modes into account, leaving some residents without options. A comprehensive and flexible mobility management program should include various types of mobility, from carpools and vouchers, intercity and local buses, rail, vanpools, personal vehicles, to walking and biking.

Next let's look at the **Voucher Model**

Vouchers are tickets or coupons that eligible riders give to participating transportation providers in exchange for rides.

In general, voucher programs target those with the greatest need for transportation who cannot use existing transportation services for one or more reasons: for example

They cannot operate a private vehicle because they have a disability that prevents them from doing so, they lack insurance or a driver's license, or they do not own a vehicle

Maybe, they cannot afford to use existing taxi services or those services are not available

Perhaps, they live outside of the fixed-route bus service area

Or, they need to travel outside of the operating hours of fixed-route service

So, how does this voucher system work and who's involved?

A voucher system involves three parties:

1. *The riders* who use public and private transportation services at a fully or partially subsidized rate and pay for those rides with the vouchers
2. *The transportation providers* who, based on previously negotiated arrangements, agree to accept the vouchers or coupons as payment for the trips and submits the coupons to the sponsoring agency for reimbursement. The transportation provider can be a private taxi, human services transportation provider, neighbor, other volunteer, or even a family member.
3. *The community*, through its local agency or agencies that support the subsidized cost of the voucher, determine customer eligibility for the voucher program, provide the vouchers to the customer, and reimburse the transportation providers for trips.

Benefits of a Voucher Program

A voucher program helps customers afford the cost of a trip that allows them to access essential services and destinations. The customer may pay nothing or just a small co-payment for the ride.

Using vouchers means that the customer encounters little hassle in paying for a ride. For example, in some cases, the rider may have to only submit a voucher or check to the transportation provider to receive a ride.

The rider becomes more involved in the process if he or she also chooses the provider, such as when the provider is also a family member, friend, or neighbor.

Being able to rely on voucher-supported services means additional independence for the customer previously dependent on the good will of family members and friends for their personal transportation.

A voucher system allows customers to choose transportation services that match their needs, from the type of vehicle; to the time and day of travel, including evenings and weekends; to the type of service (e.g., door-to-door).

And from the transportation providers perspective, participation in a voucher program allows public transportation providers to increase their ridership, taxis and human services transportation providers to expand their contract revenue, and family members, neighbors, and others to receive reimbursement for trips they may have been funding out of their own pocket.

So here we are, 40 years after initial national policy, and 20 years post-ADA, and minimal or non-existent transit services in rural areas still create serious barriers to employment, accessible health care and full participation in society for people with disabilities.

Lack of public transportation is still one of the most serious, persistent problems reported by people with disabilities who live in rural America. Compared to the resources allocated to urban areas, those allocated for rural public transportation are significantly inequitable. Statistically, 25% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, but only 6% of federal transit funding is allocated to serve them. Many

rural communities (1200 counties with a total population of 37 million people) have no public transit.

And finally we have to move past these us and them scenarios.

How many in this room know someone or has a family member who has a disability?

Knows someone who is elderly?

It reminds me of the Pogo comic strip..We have met the enemy and he is us!

What can we do?

We need to consolidate the silo approach and give transportation providers the flexibility they need in order to serve the entire community. Not just individual segments.

We should, systematically encourage and fund innovative private and public sector models that can address unavailable and/or insufficient rural transportation.

Solutions might include: accessible taxi services; using private drivers, including those with disabilities; vehicle pools similar to those used by intercity bus programs and voucher models administered by community based organizations.

Allocate innovative program funds to support tribal transportation programs that are coordinated with other public transit and community transportation services.

We are all in this together. We hear a lot of talk these days about the principles upon which our country was founded. I ran across this passage the other day written by John Winthrop on his voyage to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630.

He was preparing his shipmates and his family for their arrival in the new country and how they should live their lives to make their new home land truly a city on the hill...to be admired by all other countries.

He said.

“We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.” John Winthrop written onboard the Arbella en route to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630.

I think this still hold true today and we should accept it as a challenge as we move forward in the development our new transportation legislation.

Thank you so much for your time and attention to a topic that means so much too so many.