

Resolving the Transportation Problem in a Rural Community: A Case Study of Robeson County's (USA) Solution to TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families)

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The number one rural problem related to TANF and welfare reform is transportation. Even when national and state economies are robust and when child care is available, welfare recipients continue to struggle with acquiring reliable transportation to and from work. In rural communities, public transportation is virtually nonexistent. In this case study, we examine the key factors that enabled Robeson County (North Carolina, USA) to establish a transportation system for needy citizens. In addition, we discuss unresolved problems and make suggestions for future transportation goals. Web sites that address the issue of rural public transportation are included.

Welfare Reform and Transportation

Human service workers are acutely aware that two structural barriers impede the successful transition from welfare to work: childcare and transportation (Leonard 1998). Although both rural and urban welfare recipients share these problems, they experience them at different levels. In urban areas, childcare is a greater problem than transportation because most urban areas have some form of public transportation. In contrast, most rural areas have no public transportation available (Harbaugh & Smith 1998). Because of the first author's committee work on a welfare reform committee in a rural, low-income county in the southeastern U.S. and because of other research in this area (see Borgren 1998; CTAA 1999; Evens & Chezem 1999; Miller 1997), we concluded that the number one obstacle to moving clients off welfare is lack of reliable transportation. Thus, developing public transportation in rural areas may be an important factor in moving welfare recipients into the paid labor force.

Since the rural county in which the authors live has succeeded in obtaining a public transportation system, this case study investigates two questions:

1) What environmental attributes enabled the county to procure a transportation system?

2) Does the transportation help move welfare recipients into the workforce?

The results of this study demonstrate that social organization factors primarily account for the procurement of Robeson County's transportation system, we believe our research may be applicable to a wider audience than rural counties in the U.S. For example, any rural area trying to obtain public transportation should be able to benefit from knowing what forms of social organization benefit community groups. Moreover, the unresolved problems we discovered may help others make better assessments of clients needs during planning stages of projects.

Data and Methods

Case studies are particularly well suited for evaluating single events or issues (Creswell 1998) such as the "case" of how Robeson County was able to procure a public rural transportation system. Case studies typically include multiple sources of data (Creswell 1998). The data for this case study come from semi-structured interviews with the former and the present transportation directors of The Lumber River Council of Governments (COG), the former and the present CEOs of the Robeson County Church and Community Center (RCCCC), and the Administrative Assistant of RCCCC. We also use archival data

and interview data collected from a focus group of welfare recipients who use the transportation system. While findings from case studies cannot be generalized, they can be used to identify processes and strategies that are successful as well as those that are not in particular kinds of environments.

Obtaining Public Transportation in a Rural Area

The paucity of existing plans for rural transportation make obtaining public transportation in rural areas a daunting task. What works in one area often does not work in other areas because of geographical, social, and political differences. However, with the exception of the first key attribute which relates to geography [i.e., Carolina Bays; see Ross (1993a)], all of the other factors responsible for the successful procurement of a rural transportation system in Robeson County, North Carolina (U.S.) rely on social organization. Although our research does not involve a social movement and, thus, was not initially guided theory, our findings closely align with social movement theory. Thus, our findings indicate that the following social movement research provides a useful starting point for analyzing successful community programs.

Freeman (1983) claims that for social movements to be successful, there must be an existing communication network in place. For example, the Feminist movement relied on existing women's groups, and the Civil Rights movement relied on existing church groups. In this case study, an existing church group banded together with community leaders to form a task force and directed its efforts toward obtaining public transportation. Freeman (1983) also finds that the communication network must be composed of people who are receptive to new ideas. In other words, network members must be willing to consider alternative ways of achieving desired results. Members of the Robeson County task force developed an alternative plan to meet the needs of clients who were falling through the cracks of existing social service agency programs.

Also aligned with social movements theory is our finding that the task force capitalized upon

member's skills as well as working cooperatively with other agencies when those agencies could provide better service than the task force. Research indicates that the most successful social movements use the expertise and leadership skills of their existing networks to achieve the movement's goals (McAdam 1985; McCarthy & Zald 1998). A local Reverend used his leadership skills to organize and head the task force. Task force members with grant writing skills took the initiative to write and obtain grants. When the success of the task force resulted in a work overload, they identified other agencies to handle the administration of the program.

In the following sections, we present our case. First we identify environmental attributes that enabled Robeson County to obtain public transportation. The data for this part of the study come from key staff persons from the transportation system and archival record data. Next we evaluate the effectiveness of the system in regards to welfare recipients. The data for this part of the study come from focus group interviews with welfare recipients.

Environmental Attributes Enabling Robeson County to Obtain Public Transportation

Our research indicates that the following environmental attributes account for Robeson County's success in procuring grant monies from the Department of Transportation and other sources for public transportation.

1. Unique geographical and social characteristics of Robeson County make grantors willing to fund innovative measures aimed at solving social problems.
2. A pre-existing, community assessment system.
3. Energetic staff members with good grant writing skills.
4. Cooperation among agencies and recognition that some agencies are better equipped to accomplish certain goals than others.
5. Social service staff members with superior management skills.

The following sections address each of these factors.

Unique Geographical and Social Characteristics

Robeson County is located in the southeastern North Carolina and is the largest land mass county in the state (949 square miles). The county consists of several small towns but is largely rural and flat. Unique to this region are the Carolina Bays: shallow, swampy geologic depressions that influence housing and transportation patterns (Ross 1993a). Efforts to protect these unique formations create what often appear to outsiders to be haphazard and very inefficient transportation routes.

Robeson County also has several unique social characteristics. According to the 1990 census, Robeson County has a tri-racial population comprised of 49% Native Americans, 25% African Americans, and 36% Whites. Not surprisingly, Robeson County's 200 years history includes some unflattering chapters of racial discrimination, poverty and violence. The significant number of Hispanics who have moved into the area over the past ten years causes us to anticipate the emergence of four large ethnic groups when the 2000 census is counted. Having a predominately minority population increases the probability of successfully procuring grant funding (in the USA).

Poverty demographics also enables Robeson County social service agencies to procure large training, service, and experimental grants to address particular social problems (Ross 1993b). For example, 58% of all children in the county are born out-of-wedlock according to the 1999 figures collected by Robeson County Public Health Department. In addition, Robeson County faces high rates of infant mortality, illiteracy, unemployment, school dropout, and murder. Hence, foundations and other grantors will often fund creative social services and untested intervention strategies. It is particularly evident for transportation grants (Economic Research Service 1998).

Pre-existing Community Assessment System

In 1967, a racially diverse coalition of Robeson County church and community leaders gathered to address social injustice in the county. During this meeting, attendees agreed

to form a task force and elected a local Methodist minister (Rev. Bob Mangum) as its leader. After two years of organizing concerned citizens and raising money, the task force established the Robeson County Church and Community Center (RCCCC) and elected the same minister as Executive Director. The mission of RCCCC was two-fold:

- 1) They determined what social service agencies existed and what problems they were charged with addressing.
- 2) They determined how many social needs were only being partially met or not met at all.

Having some means for assessing the scope of problems allows agencies to determine viable solutions (Seitz 1998; CTAA 1999). Their goal was to look at the overall structure and determine what needs were not being met. Thus, the seeds for an organization structure were planted decades prior to the push for a rural transportation system.

Energetic Staff with Grant Writing Skills

Simply having good assessment is not enough, however. Sorrel (1997) claims successful solutions depend on having mission statements that include a macro focus. McGlynn (1999) adds that success is related to grant writing skills. During the first ten years of its existence, RCCCC functioned somewhat like a think-tank. The board and staff collected and analyzed data and developed many systemic and macro interventions to resolve social problems. One such problem was transportation. In 1976, RCCCC staff found that physically handicapped citizens could not get to the Department of Social Services or to doctor's appointments. RCCCC staff wrote the first successful transportation grant from the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT). The grant included funds for one van, partial servicing of the van, and partial staffing. The grant restricted use of the van to "urgent" needs of the "handicapped."

Their success with the first grant spearheaded an energetic effort by staff members to secure more grants. Between 1985 and 1987, staff members secured additional grants to provide transportation for the handicapped and elderly for non-urgent needs such as routine non-emergency doctor's appointments and paying

bills. By 1990, staff members had procured ten vans and grants that included medical transportation to locations outside of the county. Overtime, the responsibility scheduling, hiring, and maintaining staff for the transportation program became overwhelming.

Cooperation and Recognition Among Agencies

Because of the overwhelming demands of administering a transportation system, RCCCC was unable to fulfill its primary mission statement (see: <http://www.nccumc.org/ministry/rcccc/rcccc.htm>). As a result, RCCCC searched for another agency to administer the transportation program. The Lumber River Council of Governments (COG) agreed to take over the program. COG's primary mission is to identify local and regional needs and to locate resources to fill these needs equitably and effectively. RCCCC transferred all plans, records and nine vans to COG in 1996. COG elected to administer the transportation program through the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) because many, although not all, recipients of the service were elderly.

Superior Management Skills

Agencies that succeed in their missions tend to have staff members who possess superior management skills (Henson 1996; Smith 1997; Sorrell 1997). Under the management skills of the director of the AAA, the transportation program quadrupled in two and one-half years. Through procuring a match funding grant from North Carolina Department of Transportation, the director was able to add ten more vans. Eight of the vans were purchased through matching funds from the county and two used matching funds from the Smart Start Program (a program to assure educational experiences for underprivileged preschoolers). Because of the rapid growth of the transportation program, AAA staff members found themselves serving the needs of the following groups in addition to the elderly.

Medicare patients	Smart Start clients*
sheltered workshop clients	welfare recipients
low wage workers	community mental health patients
kidney dialysis patients	

*USA government sponsored health insurance for the elderly.
 * Smart Start is North Carolina Governor Hunt's special project. Its primary function is to assure early educational experiences to underprivileged preschoolers. It is very much like Head Start.

Consequently, a separate division was established in 1999 to handle the workload and diverse service population.

Effectiveness of System

Through hard work and cooperation among service agencies, Robeson County has been able to establish a transportation system that services approximately 250 clients per day. In this respect, they have succeeded in their mission to identify needs and provide services. How well do the services meet the needs of the clients? According to staff members, their clients rate the services highly. However, not all clients are as satisfied as staff members believe. Through a focus group meeting with welfare recipients, we uncovered some problems that limit the effectiveness of the program (Marson & Powell 2000). The focus group consisted of welfare recipients who had particular difficulty gaining or maintaining independence from the welfare system. Thus, their concerns cannot be generalized.

The focus group included welfare recipients who are trying to obtain and retain jobs who claim that van schedules do not meet their needs. Not only are the vans unable to get the service population to their destinations in a timely manner through the week, they do not run at all over the weekend or on holidays. Several women who had managed to move off welfare through obtaining jobs in fast food restaurants reported that they soon lost their jobs because they could not depend on the van's schedule. The women said that they were often late to work because of van scheduling. They also could not depend on the van's schedule at the end of their work shift. Clients said they were sometimes picked up early from work or had to wait for long periods after their shift was over. We witnessed what the women experience on the day that we paid to have the vans bring them to the University for our focus group interviews.

The women also claimed that lack of access to the vans during evening hours, weekends and holidays made it nearly impossible for them to retain most jobs they can get even if employers were more flexible about arriving late or leaving early. Many of the jobs that low-skilled welfare recipients are able to find in Robeson

County require employees to work evenings, weekends and holidays. While the daytime schedule of the vans serves the needs of clients who need to keep appointments with doctors or state agencies, it is not as effective at meeting the needs of clients who need transportation to and from work.

Part of the scheduling problems result from the fact that the vans are run on an "as needed" basis rather than a regular schedule. For example, people call the transportation office to request service. The vans often service several requests with each trip, and people are picked up so as to meet the needs of as many as possible with no guarantee that any one person's needs will be fully met. For example, if they have eight people to pick up, they will try to pick them up according to their proximity to one another which may mean that some will arrive to appointments early and others, late. While the transportation provides a valuable service to many clients, this type of system works better for those whose livelihood does not depend on them being at a certain place at a certain time. It also works better for those whose appointments are during weekday hours such as stage agency appointments and doctor's appointments.

Discussion and a Look Toward the Future

Several factors enabled Robeson County to develop a rural public transportation system. The task force was formed from pre-existing groups, groups that had highly skilled and highly motivated members. Most areas have community groups with skilled members. Moreover, the task force was willing to look for new solutions to old problems. Although grant monies may not be equally available in all rural areas, groups receptive to new ideas may be able to find other funding sources for transportation. In addition, the willingness of various agencies to work together for the common good of a community helped ensure the success of the program.

However, as we have noted, there are still some problems to be worked out. As with most public services, the transportation system works better for some clients than others. It may have limited value for clients trying to move off from welfare because the types of jobs

that are available do not match the vans' schedules. The first author is currently working with staff members of Department of Social Services on a survey to more accurately gauge the needs, the satisfactions, and the complaints of the clients. This should help identify ways to improve the existing system. Perhaps other groups considering implementing our findings can take into account that workers need more reliable schedules than non-workers and often need expanded schedules.

Looking to the future, we suggest that transportation planners consider light rail in addition to the current systems. The Carman Group (1997) supports this position. Light rail could solve five existing problems.

1) Grant monies are not reliable, and the current political climate seems to be growing more conservative, especially in regards to welfare recipients. To have a successful transportation system in a rural area, travel cannot be limited to recent or present welfare recipients. Smith (1998) shows several economic incentives for public train travel in rural areas.

2) Demographic research (Fuguitt & Beale 1996; Fuguitt, Beale, & Reibel 1991; Johnson & Beale 1998; Johnson, Beale & Turner, F. 1998) shows a clear pattern of migration from urban to rural areas in the U.S. Moreover, the advent of telecommuting opens up the possibility for people to live in rural areas while still holding high-paying, technical jobs.

3) Train travel causes less pollution than other types of transportation (APTA 1999; Small & Kazimi 1995).

4) Wealthy elders in the South (USA) who do not want or cannot drive are not likely to accept bus/van transportation. Vans are difficult to board and disembark for elderly. In their elderly sample, Foster *et al.* (1996) notes that 22 percent indicated they had difficulty getting onto buses.

5) Rail transportation tends to run on fixed schedules. Reliability is a key factor for a public transportation system to be successful.

With greater frequency, rural social workers will acknowledge the urgency of efficient public transportation systems for their clients. Although not their only obstacle, interviewees

said their major obstacle is reliable transportation. Advocacy for public transportation will require a wide variety of information for use by the change agent. Some critical issues are addressed in this paper. Cutting edge issues can be found in the "transportation" and "grants" section of the Rural Social Work Caucus web page at <http://www.uncp.edu/sw/rural>

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