Improving Transportation Options for Older Americans

Seniors face many transportation challenges as they age, and state governments have an important role to play in helping them to overcome those challenges. A companion brief looked at driver’s licensing procedures some states have implemented to ensure seniors are still safe drivers. But there are many other ways to make a difference both for seniors who are still behind the wheel and those who are no longer able to drive. These include policies to make road and pedestrian infrastructure safer, improve access to public transportation options and better coordinate limited transportation resources.

Improving the Infrastructure for Seniors

Maintaining the mobility of older Americans has become a key focus for many state transportation departments, according to a 2012 report from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, or AASHTO, and the nonprofit transportation research organization TRIP. States are making efforts to improve driving and pedestrian facilities, enhance public education and partner with other organizations on a broader approach to maintaining and improving seniors’ mobility, the report found.

Florida, Pennsylvania and Tennessee have formed task forces made up of numerous state organizations with an interest in the quality of life for older people. Such coalitions create and provide oversight to programs aimed at maintaining mobility and safety. Florida’s Department of Transportation, since the early 1990s, has enhanced its surface transportation system to better accommodate older people. The state has incorporated safety design features into road projects such as wider roadway striping, street and guide signs with larger lettering, and countdown pedestrian signals. In addition, the report notes that states are implementing recommendations in a 2001 Federal Highway Administration guide—the “Highway Design Handbook for Older Drivers and Pedestrians.”

AASHTO and TRIP recommend a three-pronged approach to keeping America’s growing population of older drivers mobile and safe:

- Working for passage of a long-term federal surface transportation authorization bill to ensure adequate funds are provided for highway and transit projects to support the safety and mobility of older drivers;
- Fostering partnerships with a wide range of organizations to promote education and training programs for older drivers, as well as evaluating and monitoring “at-risk” older motorists through appropriate licensing requirements and laws and regulations to promote safety of the traveling public; and
- Promoting increasing and improving travel options for older people, such as adding public transit routes, vehicles, facilities and easily accessible stops.

Some have argued, however, that some roadway design features recommended in the AASHTO/TRIP report can actually make senior drivers less safe in other ways or can have consequences for senior pedestrians.

“They throw a few bones to pedestrians, like refuge islands and countdown signals,” wrote Tanya Snyder of the pedestrian/bike/transit infrastructure-oriented blog Streetsblog. “But they must not have been thinking about the safety of those pedestrians when they suggested widening lanes, adding left-turn lanes and making roadway curves more gradual.”

Gary Toth, another writer for Streetsblog, added, “Drivers respond to their environment. Put them on
a stretch of road that is wider, flatter and straighter and they will drive faster. Higher speeds may be okay on controlled-access freeways with no adjacent land uses or pedestrians, where sight distances are near infinite, curves are flat, and opposing roadways are separated by wide medians or center barriers. But those speeds don’t translate well to other environments.”

Toth writes that a Federal Highway Administration website highlighting proven countermeasures offers better planning guidance.

“Three of the top nine recommended measures involve approaches that either slow down vehicles and/or reduce the number of conflicts,” he wrote. “None involve the 1960s approach of making roads wider, straighter and faster.”

Toth argues that in trying to address the needs of older drivers, AASHTO should be recommending—and states should be incorporating—design concepts like roundabouts that slow down speeds to improve the ability of drivers to properly perceive speeds, distances and gaps in traffic.3

Improving Public Transportation Options for Seniors

State governments have an important role to play in ensuring roads are safe and those traveling on them—including seniors—are fit to drive. But what happens when older adults are no longer able to drive? More than one in five (21 percent) Americans age 65 and older do not drive, according to the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership. Declining health, eyesight, physical or mental abilities and other factors can take their toll and prompt a decision to give up the keys as adults get older.4 A 2002 American Journal of Public Health study found that women in their early 70s who stop driving live for an average of 10 years more, and men of the same age group live another six years more.5

Seniors can feel isolated when they have to stop driving. They also may experience a reduced quality of life and economic hardship. Compared with older drivers, older non-drivers in the United States make:
- 15 percent fewer trips to the doctor;
- 59 percent fewer shopping trips and restaurant visits; and
- 65 percent fewer trips for social, family and religious activities.6

Public transportation can help seniors remain mobile when they can no longer drive. Seniors are increasingly turning to public transportation, according to data from the 2009 National Household Travel Survey. Seniors took more than a billion trips on transit in 2009, a 51 percent increase since 2001.7

But a 2011 analysis by the Center for Neighborhood Technology for a Transportation for America report found that by 2015, more than 15.5 million Americans age 65 and older will live in communities where public transportation service is poor or nonexistent. In Atlanta—the worst-ranked large metro area in the report—90 percent of older residents will have poor access to transit.8

Moreover, the future of public transportation funding is in question as Congress continues to debate a new surface transportation authorization bill. Transportation for America cited a number of things it would like to see emerge from such legislation, including:
- Increased, dedicated funding for a variety of forms of public transportation, such as buses, trains, vanpools, specialized transit and ridesharing.
- Support for both operations and maintenance for public transportation services.
- Continued funding from federal motor fuel receipts deposited into the Highway Trust Fund. An authorization bill offered by House Republicans had sought a transition to a system in which public transportation would have to compete for general fund dollars with no guarantees that dollars would be available to fund transit going forward.
- A fair share of any new revenues generated for public transportation.
- Funding and incentives for transit operators, nonprofit organizations and local communities to engage in innovative practices, such as coordination among existing programs and services, mobility management, public-private partnerships, and expansion of outreach and education programs for seniors.
- Funding and incentives for wider deployment of intelligent transportation technologies that have the ability to help make transportation systems more efficient and customer-friendly.
- Efforts to encourage state departments of transportation, metropolitan planning organizations and transit operators to involve seniors and community stakeholders in developing plans for meeting the mobility needs of older adults.
- Continued flexibility for state departments of transportation to use a portion of their highway funds for transit projects and programs.9

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State and Local Senior Transit Initiatives

Despite the concerns about the future of public transportation, plenty of examples from around the country illustrate how states and communities are working to improve senior transit options, including public transit/fixed route services by bus and rail, door-to-door or curb-to-curb paratransit services using mini-buses or small vans which can offer seniors greater flexibility in scheduling, door-through-door escort services for passengers needing extra assistance on either end of their trip and volunteer driver programs often offered through local faith-based and nonprofit organizations.

A transit system in Middlesex County, N.J., uses flexible fixed route buses to provide a vital link in the transportation chain for older adults.

“The challenge is how to efficiently address the growing mobility demands of aging persons in the context of the overall transit network, growing trip demand and limited financial resources,” Steve Fittante, the executive director of Middlesex County Area Transit, said in testimony before Congress last year.

The flexible fixed route buses are both serving local destinations in the county and providing access to other local and regional bus and rail services for the elderly, people with disabilities and those from low-income populations, Fittante told lawmakers. Supported by federal and state funding sources, the routes are operated at lower cost per revenue hour than traditional bus transit services and at a higher efficiency than traditional curb-to-curb paratransit services.

“The result has been a more than doubling of the system efficiency of the (Middlesex County Area Transit) system, while enabling persons without access to an automobile to have greater mobility choices in terms of frequency and the availability of evening and weekend service,” Fittante said.10

A Washington state Department of Transportation program is helping to connect seniors and other riders in small towns and rural communities with major transportation hubs and urban centers. Through the Travel Washington Intercity Bus Program, the state makes transit buses available along four different routes that were previously underserved by transit options. The program contracts private bus operators to provide the transit services. Providers are chosen for each route based on their ability to meet the needs of the people and communities along each one. The state plans to expand the intercity bus network as additional funding becomes available.11

Many older Americans who are unable to drive, too frail to access public transit and without family members around to provide transportation often rely on smaller transportation providers and volunteer drivers in communities where they’re available. States and communities have created hundreds of volunteer driving programs for seniors around the country in recent years. Despite that proliferation, the demand for service is still far greater than program capacity in most instances and communities must seek to balance scarce resources to configure sustainable programs. But such programs introduce unique policy challenges for state officials as well.

“Protecting the safety of riders and drivers and properly insuring a program are both fundamental to the success of a volunteer driving program,” a 2008 report from the National Center for Transit Research found. “Liability and insurance profoundly influence how a program operates.”12 But Georgia and Oregon are the only two states with legislation that explicitly protects volunteer drivers from civil liability stemming from accidents during their volunteer activities.13

In addition, community leaders often don’t have a grasp of either the value of volunteer driving programs or the operational challenges the programs face, the report said.

The center’s report offered a list of things policymakers can do to ensure the success of such programs. They include:

• Considering minimum standards for volunteer screening and training;
• Enacting liability reforms at the state level;
• Limiting volunteer driving program liability for damages; and
• Encouraging the exploration of federal tax deductions for volunteering.14

Coordinating Resources to Manage Senior Mobility

Analysts believe another policy focus in developing public transportation options for seniors should be mobility management, a concept under which a single entity in a community is charged with knowing the entire array of transportation resources. “Mobility management focuses on the individual and identifies the best transportation options, both public and private, for that person’s travel needs,” said Mary Leary, assistant vice president for the Easter Seals Transportation Group, who testified at a 2011 Congressional hearing. “Mobility management services also help to maximize the use of Intelligent Transportation Systems and other technology to enhance mobility and create one-call systems that allow greater ease-of-use for customers. In addition, mobility management includes people with disabilities and older adults in the design of transportation options.”

Leary said mobility management at the local level can help minimize duplication and unnecessary use of federal and state dollars if there are private transportation resources already available.15
“The creation of more programs has resulted in several unintended consequences,” notes the website for United We Ride, a federal interagency initiative aimed at improving the availability, quality and efficient delivery of transportation services for older adults and others. “Transportation services are often fragmented, underutilized, or difficult to navigate, and can be costly because of inconsistent, duplicative, and often restrictive federal and state program rules and regulations. And, in some cases, narrowly focused programs leave service gaps, and transportation services are simply not available to meet certain needs.”

Mobility managers can become an important source of personalized information to help people understand how to use transit services. Florida and Kentucky are among the states that have been praised for their use of mobility managers to coordinate transportation services.

Before Florida began using mobility management, escalating costs, resource inefficiency, fragmentation and duplication of services among numerous human service transportation programs were the norm, according to United We Ride. There were no uniform safety standards, local coordinated planning or accountability for funds spent. Forty-one rural counties in the state had little or no transportation for seniors.

Then, in 1989, Florida’s legislature created the Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged, a state-level policy board, to coordinate transportation services statewide and ensure the cost-effectiveness and qualifications of community transportation coordinators or operators for the transportation disadvantaged. The commission contracts with a community transportation coordinator and planning agency in each county. The coordinators are responsible for the actual arrangement and delivery of transportation services. They can contract with local transportation operators to provide the services.

Today, more than 50 million coordinated trips are provided annually through the coordinated systems. Several multi-county coordinated systems are in place, as well as regional coordinating boards. The commission oversees the Transportation Disadvantaged program across all of the state’s 67 counties and administers the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund, which supports coordination activities and direct services. Analysts say Florida has been successful thanks to leadership from the legislature, governor and state agencies; commitment from county governments, transportation providers and human service agencies; and support from advocates and consumers alike.

Kentucky faced similar issues before the state began to experiment with mobility management in 1998; it was fully operational statewide by 2004. Escalating costs, resource inefficiency and duplicate planning and rate setting were all issues, as were fraud and abuse of non-emergency Medicaid transportation, the need for greater mobility and excessive time spent by caseworkers to manage transportation vendors.

The Kentucky General Assembly established geographical Human Service Transportation District regions. An interagency Coordinated Transportation Advisory Council oversees progress, programs and policy for the regions. State officials have reached out to aging and veterans groups to build partnerships to help make the system work.

The state reported that 3 million public transit trips were provided for the elderly in the 2008 fiscal year. More than 2.6 million human service transportation delivery trips were provided, with costs contained at $55 million.

Transportation Policy & Seniors

The list of transportation policy areas with the potential to impact seniors is long. In a 2011 brief, the AARP Public Policy Institute lays out a number of transportation priorities it believes government policy should focus on.

“Older travelers face substantial challenges in almost all aspects of the surface transportation network,” the brief said. “Therefore, government policy must seek to expand, improve and enhance a wide range of transportation facilities and services that meet needs of older people.”

Among them, the AARP said government should seek to:

- Improve public transportation options and offer services geared to the travel patterns of older users and responsive to their physical problems.
- Expand Americans with Disabilities Act paratransit service and provide supportive services to those who do not qualify to use paratransit, but still have difficulties in traveling or driving.
- Expand door-to-door, door-through-door and volunteer community-based transportation options.
- Increase pedestrian access and facilities and enhance all aspects of the travel chain so that older users can walk safely and securely.
- Develop better driver assessment and training to ensure that older drivers can drive safely longer.
- Modify all aspects of highway design and develop a highway-vehicle system that responds to the challenges older drivers face.
- Implement urban design and land use policies and regulations to create neighborhoods and communities where the use of alternative modes is easier, safer and more secure.

The AARP also argues that the type of revenue
sources used by states to fund transportation can have a big impact on seniors. The fuel excise tax, for example, is a regressive tax—taking a larger share of income from low-income people. General sales taxes are both regressive and unrelated to use of the transportation system, the report contends. Many local transportation revenue sources, from property taxes to development impact fees, have similar problems. AARP argues that increased road tolling and fees based on vehicle miles traveled could prove to be more equitable for older travelers.20

**Overcoming Transportation Challenges**

A number of states are also thinking about the big picture with regards to seniors and transportation. Over the next 20 years, Georgia is expected to see the ninth-largest increase in the country in its population of older adults. State lawmakers in 2008 asked the Georgia Council on Aging to study the potential effects of this population shift on state and local governments, private and nonprofit organizations and to make recommendations for short- and long-term policy actions.

The council noted in its final report, “To meet the demands of the current and future older adult population and to foster long-term economic growth in communities across the state, Georgia must begin to transform her neighborhoods, cities and counties into places where people of all ages and abilities can live throughout their lifetime.”

Shaping communities that allow seniors to live in their own homes and communities as they get older—or to “age in place,” as it is called—requires changes in a number of key policy areas, including transportation, according to the report. Among them:

- Providing alternatives to the car for those who can no longer drive.
- Delivering comprehensive transportation planning and infrastructure that reflects the needs of all people. The council recommended the adoption of a statewide “Complete Streets” policy, which seeks to integrate facilities for all transportation system users into road design.
- Expanding pedestrian infrastructure to encourage walking as a transportation alternative.
- Designing and maintaining roads to address the needs of decreased visibility, limited hearing and reduced reaction time characteristic of older drivers.

The Georgia Council on Aging’s Georgia for a Lifetime initiative seeks to coordinate aging-in-place policies around the state and help communities like Atlanta limit the impact of urban sprawl and congestion for seniors.20

**Conclusion**

Ensuring that seniors can remain mobile and safe in their advancing years will become even more important as the senior population grows in the years ahead. While many challenges remain, there are many ideas, both large and small, being discussed and implemented around the country that are making the infrastructure safer for seniors, increasing their travel options and helping states coordinate scarce resources to provide services more efficiently.