STRATEGIES IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS FOR TRANSPORTATION-DEPENDENT POPULATIONS

Introduction

From the events of September 11, 2001 to the devastation wrought by recent hurricanes in Florida and all along the Gulf Coast, the manner in which plans, procedures, and responses to emergency events are implemented, clearly, can save lives and rebuild communities. The need to safely and efficiently transport people—particularly those for whom community and public transportation is the primary means of mobility—before, during, and after emergency situations, is a crucial consideration.

Many people live independently and have access to personal transportation or are otherwise able to arrange transportation for themselves. In emergency preparedness and response plans, particular attention must be given to individuals who lack this capacity, whether they live independently or in a group setting. Typically, these groups include older adults; persons with disabilities (including physical, auditory, visual, psychiatric, intellectual, learning, and cognitive disabilities); persons living in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, or other residential facilities; and persons without access to personal transportation. Another population of concern is individuals in acute care or inpatient facilities; their needs are being addressed by the Department of Health and Human Services.

In emergency situations, public and community transportation is essential in efforts to evacuate the general public from threatened areas and locate and transport the most vulnerable citizens in a region. Community transportation also serves as a key element of response efforts. The same mobility services that can move vulnerable populations out of harm's way in advance of emergencies can also greatly assist in local recovery efforts by reconnecting people with vital human services, work, school, shopping, and more.

In April 2006, the National Consortium on the Coordination of Human Services Transportation convened a day-long discussion among public and private transportation providers, community organizations, governmental agencies, and national organizations on emergency preparedness transportation. The focus of the panel's discussion was the role that public and community transportation services have had—and can have—in responding to emergency situations, particularly in transporting those individuals that may require assistance during an emergency.

This document builds upon the critical discussions that took place that day and provides an overview of the importance of planning for the transportation of individuals requiring assistance during an emergency. Additionally, it discusses specific strategies that communities have employed to facilitate safe and appropriate transportation, and it uncovers the challenges that remain to improving transportation for these transportation-dependent populations in the event of an emergency situation.

Background

Some older adults; people with physical, hearing, visual, psychiatric, intellectual, learning, and cognitive disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and persons with low incomes—as well as people living in group settings—require specific considerations in transportation planning during emergency situations. Because of expected increases in these populations, this planning will only become more important with time. It is estimated that by 2030 the number of persons over the age of 65 will double—reaching 70 million—with the fastest growing segment of that population being those over the age of 85. Today, a full third of

the older population has disabilities that negatively impact their mobility. In addition, during the 2000 Census, 52 million people identified themselves as living with at least one disability, and 3 million of those individuals reported that transportation challenges result made them unable to leave their homes. Also in that Census, more than 10 million people reported that they do not speak English well or that they do not speak English at all, which is noteworthy because there is a high correlation between persons with limited English proficiency and the use of community and public transportation, particularly during the first years after their arrival in the United States. Language barriers, both written and verbal, may inhibit people from accessing transportation information that is especially critical with regard to emergency evacuation.

With limited or no access to private automobiles, a lack of financial resources, inherent language barriers, and higher probabilities of medical conditions requiring attention and/or medication, the mobility of the populations mentioned above is limited under the best of circumstances. The common transportation challenges of these populations, however, become urgent in an emergency situation. To ensure the safety of their most vulnerable residents, communities must begin planning and coordinating transportation efforts as soon as possible.

The Importance of Planning and Coordination

Advance planning for and coordination of the transportation needs of vulnerable populations significantly contribute to successful emergency responses in which people are transported safely and efficiently away from a threatened or dangerous area. Many communities have developed—or are in the process of developing—Emergency Operations Plans to formalize the elements of emergency response. Including transportation provisions as part of these plans is critical to meeting the service needs of transportation-dependent populations during an emergency. These planning discussions also underscore the resources required for transportation providers and agencies involved in emergency response.

The essential first step in planning for the transportation needs of residents requiring mobility assistance during an emergency is collaboration among a variety of partners. Of particular importance is an established and well-used partner network among transportation interests, the other organizations and agencies involved in emergency response, and a variety of community-based services including advocacy organizations, agencies that serve the specific transportation-dependent populations, employment and training providers, health and human service agencies, and local faith-based organizations. Communities can build strong networks by convening frequent meetings of these partners, and providing updates, conducting drills and exercises to test and refine emergency plans, and coordinating communication mediums such as phone trees and e-mail groups.

Identifying People Needing Transportation Assistance

It is often said that in emergency situations, what you do not know is the most dangerous element in the response equation. Identifying and tracking the locations and needs of transportation-dependent people during emergencies are considerations that require a preemptive community-wide effort. These processes are greatly enhanced when a well-developed partner network is established. Transportation providers, other organizations and agencies involved in emergency response, and a variety of community-based services including advocacy organizations, agencies that serve the specific transportation-dependent populations, employment and training providers, health and human services, and local faith-based organizations may work together in the development of a voluntary, self-identified registry of persons requiring transportation assistance in the event of an emergency. Before an emergency occurs, this would mean establishing information that confirms the locations of—and particularly concentrations of—individuals who require transportation during an evacuation. This type of planning information must include the type of transportation these transportation-dependent people require and where they need to be taken in order to ensure their safety.

By fostering relationships with relevant community stakeholders, transportation providers

often learn first-hand of individual or group needs and are able to pull together a more accurate list of persons needing transportation during an emergency. Establishing relationships with nursing homes, workforce development agencies and One Stop Career Centers, senior centers, residential and non-residential facilities that serve people with disabilities, and homeless shelters, facilitates developing essential information for many communities need to identify transportation needs.

Inseparable from this data collection process is the need to match individual needs with appropriate service provisions, including the availability of accessible vehicles with capacity for wheelchair securement locations, and accounting for the transport of personal caregivers.

Finally, each individual's right to privacy must be considered during this identification and location process. No individual can be required to provide medical or other private information as a prerequisite to receiving transportation or other services during an emergency. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) is intended to protect individuals' privacy during the electronic exchange of medical and financial information to and from "covered entities," (defined in HIPAA law as health care plan, health care clearinghouses, and health insurance providers) and is not meant to impede access to care. Information regarding HIPAA privacy rules and signed authorizations may be obtained through http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/hipaa/decisiontool/tool/auths.html.

Public Involvement and Community Outreach

Once those people in need of mobility in an emergency situation have been identified and located, a process to communicate with them must be established. Communities have developed diverse and innovative methods to improve communication among partner networks and the public prior to—and during— emergencies. Building relationships with groups or representatives of those most likely to be in need of transportation during emergencies has produced effective communication procedures when the emergency actually occurs. Involving older adults, persons with disabilities, and low-income and other transportation-dependent

populations in the development of transportation preparedness and response plans not only spreads knowledge of how to access those services, but also builds confidence and familiarity with them.

The application of various technological tools has also fostered effective communications. The immediacy and widespread use of the internet, e-mail, and other computer-based applications quickly distributes information thru these media during emergencies. However, not all people have access to computers or trust these sources as legitimate, and in some instances information given these formats has indeed been incorrect. To provide greater control and accurate access to information, many communities use corresponding communications methods involving phone, radio, television, closed captioning, and other outlets. Of course, all electronic-based communications media are impacted in a disaster site if power or communication infrastructure is destroyed, so contingency plans for communication in these circumstances are important for transportation-dependent populations.

A well-conceived and executed communications effort is necessary to relay information to the public, particularly with regard to transportation-dependent populations. Information on how, when, and where transportation services will be provided during emergencies should be well known within the community before an emergency occurs. This includes designated route maps and emergency transit stop locations, promoting information hotlines with TTY service, and producing informational materials in various formats including large type, Braille, audio, symbols/pictures, and appropriate languages. In addition, all public information should be provided in language that is easy to understand, avoiding excessive transportation jargon and complex sentences. The existing 211/511 human service telephone information systems that are available in some areas of the United States may serve as a means of conveying evacuation and transportation information in emergency situations.

There will be occurrences when no transportation can reasonably and/or reliably be provided at some point past a critical stage in an emergency. This fact must be communicated as well. The general public, and especially transportation-dependent individuals, their families,

or those who care for them should be informed about the transportation services available in the event of an emergency situation. With accurate and complete information regarding the emergency plan and their transportation options, persons requiring mobility assistance are better able to make informed decisions and evacuate at the earliest possible moment rather than find themselves left behind as transportation availability ceases when the emergency conditions intensify.

Equipment and Vehicle Support

Public and community transportation providers have developed emergency practices that respond to the unique challenges of operating before, during, and after emergencies. Critical issues such as accessible vehicles, appropriate lift and securement equipment, liability coverage, the availability of fuel, regulations addressing the involvement of charter bus companies, or the use of transit or intercity rail cars on non-standard routes or tracks must be addressed in emergencies—especially so with regard to transportation for older adults and persons with disabilities. By structuring and formalizing agreements among partners and suppliers concerning these issues before an emergency takes place, transportation providers can reduce ad-hoc decision making and ensure more reliable, safe, and timely service for vulnerable populations.

These contractual agreements must be in place well in advance of an emergency in order to address the expected volume of need. For example, during one emergency situation it was discovered that the same transportation provider held contracts for the evacuation of multiple facilities and during the actual emergency did not have enough vehicles or drivers to meet all of the agreements. Contingency plans for additional vehicles and personnel must be developed in advance to ensure that all components of contractual agreements can be met simultaneously, if necessary.

Not only are the procedural elements of emergency communication important, the infrastructure necessary to facilitate these connections among responders is equally essential. For example, it is important to have equipment such as radio systems that can operate even when electronic devices fail due to power outages or when centrally located control facilities are not available. So that dispatch remains coordinated in the event of a power and/or computer failure, printed copies of all scheduled trips for a full week ahead should be kept on file. These are occasionally overlooked components of effective emergency communication systems.

When vehicle fleets are threatened by disaster situations, transit operators often relocate their vehicles to safer locations. In addition to protecting the organization's assets, this also ensures that vehicles can be deployed quickly to begin the response effort. Establishing these locations prior to an emergency and having these locations identified within the emergency plan will further enhance emergency efforts.

Transportation providers have also found that fuel to run the vehicles is often in short supply during emergencies. Securing agreements to provide fuel and entering into cooperative agreements with other community agencies that also need a reliable fuel supply, such as police and fire departments, can increase the likelihood of an undisrupted fuel supply. In pre-emergency meetings, public and community transportation operators must ensure that their services are viewed—appropriately—as vital and have access to fuel.

Vehicles that are used to transport persons with disabilities must be fully accessible as per federal guidelines, and agreements should be in place prior to an emergency regarding their locations and availability. In addition, transportation providers must be prepared to accommodate and transport service animals that may accompany some passengers.

Appropriate advance planning, strong community partnerships, contractual agreements ensuring access to necessary equipment and vehicles, identifying and locating transportation-dependent populations, and public involvement and outreach, are all essential strategies to providing safe and efficient transportation for persons requiring mobility assistance in the event of an emergency.

Useful Practices in Providing Transportation during Emergencies

Communities experienced in emergency situations have utilized an array of best practices

to respond to transportation needs and provide mobility services accordingly. These practices not only serve as examples of how specific areas have performed in emergency conditions, they also serve as potential models illustrating responses that work, and those that do not. These examples illustrate the value of advance emergency planning and coordination among agencies, showing how understanding the transportation needs of the community can help address transit-specific issues.

Communities throughout the country have utilized several strategies in crafting functional and responsive plans for the role of transportation services during emergency situations. In summary, these best practices include:

- Clarifying rules and regulations at local, state, and federal levels of government that might otherwise impede effective and efficient mobility for people who are transportation dependent;
- Developing voluntary registries of persons who identify themselves as requiring transportation assistance during an emergency, including the specific nature of their transportation need (e.g. door-to-door service, lift-equipped vehicle, caregiver transportation);
- Utilizing existing 211/511 human service telephone information systems (where available) to relay information to those populations in need of transportation services during an emergency;
- Establishing chains of responsibility to eliminate confusion as to who holds what responsibility once an emergency plan is enacted;
- Understanding the disaster management procedures of federal and state offices;
- Securing agreements on where and when vehicles might be staged and stored during emergency situations, which vehicles are accessible, and specific plans for the transport of persons in need of transportation assistance;
- Building interagency and mutual aid agreements during the planning process that establish resources such as the shared use of accessible vehicles, fuel, scheduling and dispatching data, and the identification of those individuals requiring transportation assistance;
- Considering the impact of personal concerns such as the desire by employees of transportation providers and other responders first to secure the safety of their own loved ones and property;
- Developing funding agreements in advance

to allow services to be deployed immediately during an emergency event, and

- Utilizing quality management practices to continually re-examine actions to determine both successes and inefficiencies in previous response situations, and making changes accordingly. Lessons learned from past efforts are credited by numerous communities with improving their overall emergency plans, and those for transportation as well.

Conclusion: Ongoing Challenges

Just as no two emergencies are the same, neither are the responses. The real challenge is to develop the relationships among key organizations and the best practices that allow for the most effective response by public and community transportation. Although no single solution or best practice might alleviate all concerns, discussion among leaders at all levels of government, community agencies, and populations impacted by emergency conditions will produce innovations and procedures to better address the specific transportation needs of transportation-dependent populations in many communities.

Even as communities make progress in identifying those who require transportation assistance during emergencies, that vital process still remains one of the most vexing challenges in planning for emergencies. The questions of who is located go before an emergency, where they need to go, and where they ultimately went are ones that are not only difficult to answer, but are in perpetual flux. Improvements in this area can best be accomplished by developing and sharing effective methods of collecting data; establishing common and responsive criteria for determining and locating these individuals; creating a system of check-points through which public and community transportation services feed into the broader emergency evacuation/response; and building information-sharing capabilities among agencies at the local level.

Additionally, while many local agencies have some interaction with federal programs, a large number of these are unfamiliar with the culture and procedures of the relevant federal agencies. This disconnect hinders the ability of these local agencies to respond with needed transportation

services during disasters in which federal agencies are involved. Better information about how federally supported programs operate would have enormous benefit in enhancing emergency services involving transportation providers. Improved and clarified circulars and fact sheets from federal agencies and question-and-answer sessions with officials from all levels of government will bring positive developments in this area.

A lack of coordination among transportation providers themselves can present barriers to more effective services. Transit and intercity rail operators, private motor coach companies, paratransit services, ambulance services, school bus networks, and others can—and do—fill important roles in transporting vulnerable populations during and after an emergency. However, due to regulations, frayed relationships, or just communication lapses, confusion, service gaps, or acrimony can result. While transportation providers in numerous communities have overcome these challenges to craft a multi-faceted response for persons in need of transportation assistance during an emergency, others still find these barriers significant.

Because communications is a vital aspect of any emergency response effort, sharing information during emergencies requires dual approaches. First are the relationships among providers, agencies, organizations and individuals that need to share information on emergency plans before and communicate directives and procedures during an actual emergency. Second are the various technologies required to help distribute that information. The benefits and limitations of the available communications media available demand a well-integrated system to most effectively and accurately broadcast information to those in need of assistance as well as those participating in the response effort. An important factor in the communications process is appropriate public education using a variety of formats including large-type, TTY, Braille, audio, symbols/pictures, and various languages.

The more planning done prior to an emergency situation, the more prepared communities are to deal with emergencies and the resulting transportation needs of older adults, persons with disabilities, and those without access to personal transportation. Such planning must include the network of stakeholders, including transportation providers, emergency response personnel and management officials, and a variety of community-based services, including advocacy organizations, agencies that serve the transportation-dependent populations, employment and training providers, health and human service providers, local faith-based organizations, and representatives from those populations most likely to utilize transportation services in the event of an emergency. The collaborative nature of such a network will ensure that every community responds to an emergency by providing efficient and accessible transportation for all of its citizens.

About the National Consortium on Human Services Transportation

The National Consortium on the Coordination of Human Services Transportation is an alliance of national non-profit organizations and associations dedicated to promoting mobility and the delivery of coordinated human services transportation to all individuals with disabilities, persons with low incomes, older adults, and youth. It promotes active and open collaboration among organizations with an interest in coordinating and insuring mobility opportunities for access to health, education, recre-ation, employment and other life sustaining activi-ties. The Consortium conducts research, education, information development and dissemination, tech-nical assistance, and outreach activities to service agencies, transportation providers, policy makers, and the general public.

The Consortium operates under the auspices of the Community Transportation Association of America and includes representatives from associations and organizations with interest in transit and human service issues. Consortium products are based on research related to the coordination of human ser-vices and mobility services. Support for the Consor-tium comes from the U.S Department of Transporta-tion, Federal Transit Administration in collaboration with the Federal Interagency Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility.