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Navigating the Road to Inclusive Transportation Policies

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Abstract

As personal car usage and ownership continue to rise, public transportation usage and access decline. So where does this leave the non-driving population within this shift of transportation dynamics? Within our current transportation systems, a myriad of barriers disproportionately affects individuals with disabilities who are not able to drive cars. A patchwork of numerous funding schemes, stringent regulations that come along with these funding schemes, alongside mismanagement of funds, lack of awareness, and ableist interpretation of federal law collectively contribute to the inadequate transportation options. They are subject to abrupt service interruptions and cancellations, incomplete round-trip assurances due to fluctuating funding, and an extreme difficulty when crossing county lines. Moreover, if someone is not able to advocate for themselves and does not have anybody to do this on their behalf, they would not have guaranteed transportation – further exacerbating the challenge of reaching their destinations. Our current systems do not guarantee that everyone, regardless of ability, is able to get to where they need to go. While this paper focuses on addressing barriers to accessing transportation for individuals with disabilities in Grand Rapids, Michigan and its surrounding townships, the issues and compounding factors that contribute to this phenomenon are systemic, widespread and transcend geographic boundaries.

Introduction

Every Tuesday night, Dan and Dave board the Hope Network bus from their home, *Olivia's Gift*, in Ada Township to get to practice at Kent Intermediate School District for the Grand Rapids Eagles Disabled Sports team. Practices include bocce ball, adaptive track and field, swimming, and many other adaptive sports; they look forward to these practices every

week where they can have fun and connect with friends in the community. However, the bus abruptly stopped servicing clients in January 2023 and riders were notified mere days before the shutdown, leaving them with no time to figure out other options (LaFursey). Without this service, Dan and Dave can't take themselves to join their friends at Eagles practice. Having access to adequate transportation not only allows us to get to necessary destinations like doctors appointments, but to be active members of our community and connect with others outside of our homes. Cutting off transportation is effectively cutting someone off from their community. Unfortunately, many people like Dan and Dave are likely to experience barriers when trying to meet their transportation needs; this scenario does not occur in isolation. There are a multitude of factors that have created these roadblocks, but hope still remains for an equitable and accessible future. Three mile markers can serve as a roadmap to our targeted destination of inclusive transportation policies: first, a clear understanding of the complexity of these roadblocks; second, a dual strategy taking a simultaneous top-down and bottoms up approach; third, inform and influence societal views on disabilities and transportation access.

Analysis of Problem: Identifying Roadblocks

When examining this issue, it is imperative to discuss structural barriers at both smaller and larger levels of government, as well as the history that led to these barriers.

Local and State Level

Micheal Williams, Community Organizer at Kent County Disability Advocates, provided information on this issue at the local level. He organizes various advocacy efforts, but his main interests lie in changing regulation to increase access to transportation. He says that “people with the least access need the most access first” (M. Williams, personal communication, October 27,

2023). Williams was able to provide important information on recent history surrounding transportation funding in the Grand Rapids area.

The Rapid is the most common bus service in Grand Rapids, but individuals with disabilities have issues accessing this service when moving into suburban areas outside of the city. Williams explained that The Rapid used to provide accessible transportation in and around Cascade Township, but local officials thought that their residents were not using this service often enough to justify paying for the service anymore. However, when they tried to buy just the paratransit services, The Rapid refused since this is “their policy.” When Disability Advocates asked for more information about the details regarding this policy, nobody was able to provide the documented policy specific to this use case and/or explain why exactly they could not provide the paratransit services. Eventually, Cascade Township made an agreement with Hope Network, another transportation service, to provide transportation for individuals with disabilities or 65 years or older. Unfortunately, a major reduction in a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant caused a decrease in funding for their services. HUD grants are “seed money” given by the federal government. Organizations must follow federal law by demonstrating that they are using funds to grow and expand their services. Hope Network was not growing and servicing more individuals, consequently their HUD funding decreased by 50 percent from \$150,000 to \$75,000. Additionally, Hope Network was under new leadership and experienced a loss of internal funding at the same time; this created the perfect storm for the abrupt halt in services seen at Olivia’s Gift.

Additionally, funding regulations of individual transportation companies make it extremely difficult for passengers to cross county lines in the greater Grand Rapids area. For example, Hope Network’s funding regulations forbid them from bringing passengers into

Cascade Township from outside county lines. However, they are able to bring people from the inside, outwards. This is done to increase efficiency since the bus picks up multiple people along the way to a particular destination, they do not make round trips one-by-one for each individual person. However, if someone needs to get somewhere outside of Cascade Township, they will have to find another form of transportation to be taken home or be left stranded. Additionally, even if they are able to get a ride to where they need to go, they are not guaranteed a ride back if there is not enough funding for another ride; round trips are not guaranteed.

Federal Level

In 1973, Congress passed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. While this legislation was modelled after various civil rights legislation that prohibits race and sex discrimination, the interpretation of these two types of legislation is drastically different. In her paper “Rethinking Equality and Difference: Disability Discrimination in Public Transportation,” Martha McClusky, a law professor who has extensive experience in economic justice for vulnerable populations, points out that race and sex discrimination law assumes that prejudice is the problem while disability discrimination laws blame physical differences for being the central issue (McCluskey). This ableist interpretation has led to a multitude of issues such as the Department of Transportation concluding that accessibility was an “optional extra task.” Section 504 also is only applicable if courts deem accessibility as an “undue administrative and financial burden and it does not fundamentally alter the nature of the program.” However, McCluskey points out that balancing finances with the issue of lack of an essential resource like transportation is extremely discriminatory. Funding accessible transportation is not an excessive burden; it is a necessary resource. While Section 504 may have been a positive turning point in the disability rights movement, its ableist interpretation over the years has halted its potential for positive change.

Possible Solutions: A Roadmap to Equity

Tackling this issue requires a dual-pronged advocacy strategy, a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach; this entails the formulation of policies by government officials in positions of power to directly confront these barriers (top-down), alongside fostering community engagement and mobilizing grassroots efforts to collectively advocate for transformative change (bottom-up).

Top-Down Tactics

Transitioning from using HUD grants to tax dollars would decrease the risk of a sudden halt in services. HUD grants come from the federal government and must follow certain guidelines for growth. This funding methodology encourages growth, but it is also subject to cuts if the organization is not expanding at the required pace. A gradual shift from HUD grants to using money from various transportation-related taxes for this necessary resource would help avoid the possibility for another abrupt halt in services. While many are initially concerned about a possible increase in taxes, Williams discussed that we already pay taxes on many items related to transportation such as gasoline and rideshare services like Uber; if these funds were managed in a way that demonstrated the necessity of accessible transportation, it could be a potential solution to the issue. Another possible source of finances in the future could be from toll roads. Toll roads are gaining popularity and Governor Whitmer has been cited as saying she is considering introducing them in Michigan to generate funds needed to repair roads (Oosting); taxes from toll roads could also be used to fund accessible transportation. One study analyzed 31 highways in Michigan and found that 14 could become toll roads. Additionally, the introduction of toll roads that cost six cents per mile could raise up to \$1 billion (Oosting). While this would

take years to introduce and officials must determine if toll roads are a good fit and a feasible option, this is an option worth considering.

In addition to remodeling the funding methodologies, rephrasing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act could also help increase access to transportation. Currently, accommodations are made only if it does not fundamentally alter the nature of a given program or create undue administrative and financial burden (McClusky). The current phrasing of Section 504 is focused on just decreasing discrimination, not increasing accessibility. If a service is absolutely necessary, it should not matter if it alters a program. Creating an equitable, humane society and increasing accessibility is never an “undue burden”. The language of this law can be altered to be more specific and state that “essential services such as transportation do not create undue burden because they are absolutely necessary for everyone to have access to, regardless of disability. Programs must either work with individuals to accommodate them or help them access a different program who is making the appropriate accommodations”

Bottom-Up Tactics

Increasing citizen participation in local government and showing that this is a prominent issue that needs to be addressed will help combat this issue. Unfortunately, community participation in smaller levels of government is often low; however, when a relationship between government officials and their community is made, individuals in these positions of power feel a sense of responsibility to their citizens’ needs. Raising awareness in the community, making the issue tangible through real-life stories, and then advocating for change at local government meetings will demonstrate that this is a serious community issue that needs to be addressed.

In addition to making change at the community level, a broader change in how we view disability is necessary. There are two common frameworks for viewing disability: the Individual Model and the Social Model. The Individual Model states that disabilities are impairments that deviate from the norm, which then causes a restriction in activity, leading to a societal disadvantage. This viewpoint shows disability as an individual abnormality, often causing others to be dismissive of another's "individual" problem (Terzi). This model places individuals with disabilities in a socially constructed category, further contributing to the exclusion. In the Social Model of Disability, disability isn't defined as a problem. Instead, it emphasizes the experience that disabled people face in a society riddled with barriers. The structure of our society is the problem, not the individual; it argues for full inclusion. Shifting from using the individual model to the social model will help address barriers in our transportation system. As a society, we need to examine ways we can eliminate barriers to transportation; the difficulties that people with disabilities face are not due to the fact that they have a condition that could prevent them from driving a car, it is because our society is not structured in a way that gives everyone access to transportation.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, individuals with disabilities face many roadblocks in accessing dependable transportation services. A patchwork of numerous funding schemes, stringent regulations that come along with these funding schemes, alongside mismanagement of funds, lack of awareness, and ableist interpretation of federal law collectively contribute to the inadequate transportation options for people with disabilities. They are subject to abrupt service interruptions and cancellations, incomplete round-trip assurances due to fluctuating funding, and crossing county lines is extremely difficult. This issue can be addressed by simultaneously using top-down and

bottom-up approaches. We can transition from using HUD grants to tax dollars from other transportation-related services like rideshares, gasoline, and maybe toll roads in the future. Additionally, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act can be rephrased to increase specificity on the extent of its coverage. Increasing awareness so citizens can be mobilized as active participants in their local governments and advocate for change is also necessary. A broader shift from viewing disability with the Individual Model to the Social Model will allow our society to actively consider ways to be more inclusive.

In summary, three mile markers can serve as a roadmap to our targeted destination of inclusive transportation policies: first, a clear understanding of the complexity of these roadblocks; second, a dual strategy taking a simultaneous top-down and bottoms up approach; third, inform and influence societal views on disabilities and transportation access.

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