

The complexity of providing adequate transportation in rural areas of Manitoba is becoming increasingly recognized as a priority issue to ensure a sustained quality of life for rural seniors. The Transportation Options Network for Seniors (TONS) Rural Subcommittee was formed in December 2008 to address rural transportation options for older adults in Manitoba. The mandate of TONS is to inform and educate Manitobans on transportation options that enhance quality of life and promote age friendly communities.

Recent activities of the Rural Subcommittee include research on the Mobility Disadvantaged Transportation Program (MDTP) and the development of the Community Transportation Toolkit. The Tool Kit and MDTP guidelines are available on the TONS website: www.tonsmb.org

Community Transportation Toolkit

The aim of this research was to examine the opportunities and barriers of operating and accessing a successful handi-van program in rural areas of the province. Many communities in Manitoba have established and operate a Handi-van service to improve accessibility for mobility disadvantaged persons living in rural Manitoba, allowing them to participate fully in community life. Many communities throughout rural Manitoba receive funding provided by the Department of Local Government (formerly Intergovernmental Affairs) through the MDTP to support the provision of Handi-van services. In 2009, the Province will provide annual funding support to 66 municipalities in Manitoba.

Handi-van services are an important resource for older adults in rural Manitoba where fewer and fewer transportation options are available. Services provide an effective and efficient travel option that connects older adults to medical needs as well as to life enhancing activities that may otherwise be neglected. In communities with few transportation resources, Handi-van programs also lend support to families and care givers that currently help meet the essential needs of Manitoba's aging populations.

This Toolkit is meant to inform various groups on how the MDTP guidelines may be implemented in a way that meets the unique and diverse needs of each community, while maintaining the integrity and intention of the MDTP program.

These groups include stakeholders such as:

- Handi-van service providers
- Senior service providers
- Handi-van users
- Municipal governments

The Tool Kit consists of three modules to inform communities as to how best make the guidelines work to the advantage of their locality. These modules include:

Module 1 - Interpreting the MDTP Guidelines: A User-friendly Reader for Communities

This is a guide to the foundations of MDTP funding and will be useful for community members who:

- Are considering establishing a Handi-van service and need to know the basics or;
- Would like to become more informed about, or become involved with an existing Handi-van service

Module 2 - Planning For and Improving Handi-van Service: A Discussion Guide and Checklist

This section will be useful for community members who:

- Would like to make informed decisions as they consider establishing a Handi-van service;
- Are seeking solutions to current challenges in order to enhance a existing Handi-van service;
- Are addressing community changes by preparing for future Handi-van service needs.

Module 3 - A Guide to Community and Regional Engagement: For Stakeholders of Handi-van Services

This section will help engage others in conversations about transportation for mobility disadvantaged community members and will be useful for those who:

- Are considering establishing a Handi-van service and want to ensure it is responsive to community and regional needs;
- Would like to see an existing Handi-van service work with other communities to improve the affordability and accessibility of the service or;
- Are seeking financially viable alternatives to Handi-van where the community is too small or isolated to support its own service.

What does the Handi-van program mean to your community?

Communities are shrinking and essential services like grocery stores and hospitals are continually being relocated to larger centres. Family members and younger people are moving to larger towns and cities, and volunteer involvement is decreasing. This is a growing issue, but also an opportunity to predict and plan for changes in your community.

A community handi-van service must make decisions with vision, thoughtfulness and purpose for both the present and the future. Whether a community is looking to enhance, to establish or to explore a handi-van service, life in rural Manitoba is changing, and all services to citizens, including handi-van service must reflect these changes.

Municipal governments are an important part of handi-van service provision. These bodies are responsible for funding, policy support and sometimes for running the program. Other municipalities within the service area of a handi-van service also have a role to play. Because the provision of accessible transportation can be more of a barrier for small or more isolated communities, the ability of these small municipalities to work with other communities is important. The support that these “extra” municipalities may deliver to another community’s handi-van service can allow for service to continue where it might not otherwise be feasible.

At rural round table discussions, it was discovered that many municipal councils were not very involved in their handi-van programs. Most participants (both government and service providers) saw the value in communicating and connecting with municipal councils.

Connecting with sponsoring municipalities and opening lines of communication may help share the importance of transportation for older adults and begin to address any challenges the handi-van service or wider community may face.

If you are interested in more information on TONS or getting involved in the Rural Subcommittee please contact Lisa Tinley, TONS Coordinator, at 668-6299 or ltinley@shaw.ca