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"Opinion: Doing more to meet senior transportation needs"

Krishna Murthy is executive director of Meadowlink of Wood-Ridge, a non-profit organization that helps to improve access to affordable transportation, reduce traffic congestion and promote economic growth.

ANYONE who has cared for an aging parent or relative understands the importance of senior transportation, even without studying the demographics. There are trips that are necessary "for food shopping and medical appointments " and there are trips that are non-essential yet still important " for entertainment or social needs.

While the facts show that New Jersey's 1.1 million seniors will grow to 1.5 by 2020 " with the greatest percentage increase in those 85 years and older " we know the need is growing just by looking around us at our neighbors, friends and families.

As the generation that built and enjoyed the interstate highway system, popularized diners, attended drive-in movies and fueled fast-food restaurant growth is forced to "give up the keys," the resulting loss of mobility is life-changing. Sadly, this loss can also lead to social isolation and depression.

Unfortunately, this population shift is taking place at precisely the time that funding for senior transportation is in steep decline. Senior transportation is almost exclusively controlled by government agencies "federal, state or local" and these are all under pressure.

In New Jersey, the problem is heightened by the steady drop-off in casino revenue, which for more than 30 years helped to fund senior transportation programs. Funding has declined from \$496.6 million in 2008 to \$363.9 million in 2011. With Atlantic City's monopoly on the East Coast lost forever, the odds favor continued declines.

Funding from foundations is also almost non-existent. In fact, there is evidence that exclusive government funding for any service may actually deter funding by foundations. No matter how sympathetic the cause, donors do not contribute to programs that are exclusively government-funded.

Seek other solutions

Experience teaches that requests for more and more funding will never satisfy the social need. Rather than join the chorus of appeals along

with other worthwhile causes, it may be wiser to look for other solutions.

Having emerged from decades of complacency, General Motors' executive Bob Lutz observed that the auto giant didn't "undergo fundamental change by our own choice. It was forced on us. The wisest people or institutions seldom deduce that change is needed. And if they do, they never muster the courage to act "Like GM, many of us in the senior transportation business believe that change is being forced on us. Now, we must have the courage to act.

Fixed-route transportation systems may work well for commuters in high-density population areas, but most of the seniors we serve do not match those criteria. Further, at age 85, most seniors can't easily climb into a minibus " yet that is the primary vehicle used by counties to serve seniors. A more customized transportation system is needed.

As more policy makers and communities support the concept of "aging in place," transportation will have to be more responsive to the needs of our seniors. No longer can services be limited to medical trips nor can we require two-weeks advance notice to schedule a trip. Services will have to respond in real-time or close to it.

In contrast to the fragmented programs currently run by municipalities and local organizations, we need to plan and coordinate senior transportation on a wider scale, such as on a county or regional basis. Innovation is needed. It's time to reinvent the wheel.

We need to re-think our approach to funding senior transportation as solely a government responsibility. We need to think in terms of a shared responsibility or "transportation partnership" between government and a range of stakeholder groups: riders, caregivers, representatives from local businesses, foundations, civic, church and community groups. The public sector would be expected to continue to provide funding but would be relieved of shouldering the entire burden.

Volunteer drivers can be enlisted and can reduce transportation costs by 50 percent. Volunteers " who are subject to the same standards as paid drivers " may also have a church or civic affiliation that leads them to donate their time. Many drivers in our own senior transportation network are themselves recently retired, younger senior citizens who want to "give back" to older neighbors. Private companies, corporations and foundations often adopt deserving causes and contribute to organizations whose missions align with their own.

Sharing the costs

Riders themselves would share in the cost, which could be indexed to a realistic measure, such as a fare schedule comparable to NJ Transit fares. There would be no free ride, but every ride would be affordable.

By creating transportation partnerships and including people who have a stake in the outcome, we open a new flow of ideas, fueled by their passion, a desire to get things done and the courage to change.

The need for senior citizen transportation is growing by the day. How we address it will test our creativity and speak volumes about our society. Recognizing our common interests as transportation partners now can help put us in the driver's seat by 2020.

"Giving up the keys" doesn't have to mean giving up. After all, the generation that built the interstate highway system deserves better.

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Highlights: Meadowlink