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# RESEARCH FINAL REPORT

# Meeting the Need: A Cross-Sectional Assessment of Transportation Alternatives for Suburban Older Adults


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**ABSTRACT**

The percentage of older adults residing in America's auto-oriented suburbs is projected to grow significantly in the coming decades. When these individuals are no longer able to safely drive themselves, they may seek alternative modes of transportation in order to maintain their independence. In many metro areas, robust public transit exists in the urban core but can be relatively sparse in suburban areas, thus creating a service gap. At the same time, a growing number of elder-service nonprofits have begun to offer transportation services for older clients, leveraging unique staff expertise with elder-care issues in order to fill the service gap. The potential for partnerships between nonprofits and public transit agencies is on the rise, fueled primarily by federal grants and skyrocketing demand for transportation. This dissertation examines the state of affairs in elder-service transportation in the suburbs of three American cities from three perspectives: The elder-service nonprofits innovating programs, the transit agencies partnering with these nonprofits, and the older adults who use these services in order to age in place. The investigation relies on interviews, focus groups, and document analysis as source material. Using a process of axial coding and pattern matching, analysis focuses on the ways in which providers function, partner, and meet the needs of suburban older adults. The results show that these nonprofit innovators are delivering specialized and elder-conscious services that are quite popular with riders, while also often remaining deliberately independent of taxpayer support. Interagency partnerships, although viewed positively by managers in both agency types, are thus limited to short-term contracts that dissipate as the nonprofit matures and secures local funding. Where partnerships do occur, results show a need for simplified reporting of designated outcomes and better information-sharing between agencies. Taken together, the results indicate a rich and varied network of resources being committed to address this critical mobility challenge.

# CHAPTER ONE:

# INTRODUCTION

As the proportion of older adults (those aged 65 and older) living in suburban areas continues to grow, issues of transportation access and safe mobility are emerging as key indicators of older Americans' ability to harmoniously age in place (Rosenbloom, 2004). Whereas many suburban residents may have moved to that location in their younger years, when driving great distances was not seen to be an obstacle, being able to navigate the auto-oriented suburbs in old age can be quite different. Compounding the micro-level difficulties faced by individual older adults is the broader challenge of providing managed alternatives to driving for this population. Suburban land-use typologies often make fixed-route transit an expensive and unfeasible endeavor, and what limited transit options are available in suburbs are generally regarded as sub-optimal options for older adults (Adams-Price, 2013; Hess, 2009). Alternatives to driving are therefore scarce in many suburban areas, which impacts both mobility and quality of life for older adults residing in these areas. It is into this service gap that human service nonprofits have begun to grow as a viable and reputable alternative to both driving and public transportation. An array of internal management practices, financial and service partnerships, and local reputational factors help nonprofits to offer a unique type of service for older adults that is generally more personalized and more appealing than many offerings of public transit agencies (TranSystems et al, 2004). At the same time, an increasingly generous federal funding mechanism has allowed nonprofits of this type to receive federal pass-through grants to provide transportation services for older adults under an interagency partnership or fee-for-service orientation. Many nonprofit agencies are taking advantage of this fortuitous environment, while others are deliberately avoiding partnerships and grants for an assortment of internal reasons that arguably color their service orientation overall.

These interagency relationships based on transportation services for older adults, while growing in number and complexity, remain understudied in the literatures of transportation, gerontology, and nonprofit management. At the same time, this growing diversity of providers – from transit to paratransit to nonprofit organizations – is impacting the older adults who live in these suburban areas and are being drawn toward using one or more of these services in order to maintain their independent mobility. The perceptions of these older adults regarding the shifts in transportation access in their communities are also understudied. As these nonprofit alternatives to public transit grow in scale and influence, questions remain concerning their comparative effectiveness, reputation, and motivations for serving suburban older adults. Thoughtful study is therefore needed in order to better understand the inter-agency relationships, management practices, and client/community expectations that shape how nonprofits and their public-agency peers act to provide transportation to this community in need.

**Problem Statement**

A core functional obstacle for this population and this geographic context is the generally accepted belief that traditional fixed-route transit options are not feasible for individuals residing in suburban environments (Rosenbloom, 2004; Murray and Wu, 2003). Development and population densities are quite low in suburban areas, meaning residents are often located a considerable distance from the more popular destinations in the region. In addition, low population densities tend to limit the number of riders that can be efficiently served by a transit mode that operates on a fixed route and schedule (Cevallos et al, 2010). Another critical issue in this area is the growing demand for transportation services among older adults living in suburban areas, and the general inability of existing programs and providers to meet the demand. Traditional public transit agencies are constrained by the functional limitations of suburbia, as mentioned above, but

they must also contend with funding limitations, uneven customer-service training standards, and a public reputation that can be quite negative among suburban residents who have limited experience with public transit (Murray and Wu, 2003). This crisis of reputation often leads to a trust gap between public transit agencies and their existing and potential older-adult clients. Even in places where services are available and cost-effective, ridership may be limited due to an agency's poor reputation in a given neighborhood or age cohort. Stepping into this trust gap among suburban older adults is the nonprofit sector, specifically those nonprofits engaged in social services for older adults. These nonprofits are providing an increasing share of transportation services for this population, and doing so with a public reputation that is generally one of trust and integrity (Kim, 2011). Given the relatively recent rise of older adult populations in suburban areas, coupled with the relatively young age of many nonprofit transportation programs serving them, the issue of how the three stakeholders – public agencies, nonprofit agencies, and the clients they serve – perceive issues of trust and reliability is as yet understudied in the literature.

**Conceptual Framework**

A core issue at the heart of any investigation into transportation programs is the concept of mobility, and how the users of a transportation program might perceive themselves as more or less in control of their ability to move from place to place. The general consensus among planners is that older adults conceptualize mobility chiefly through the lens of automobiles and driving (Cevallos et al, 2010). Older adults therefore generally prefer to drive themselves and make their own direct decisions about transportation. For those who can no longer safely drive themselves, many are likely to choose a transportation provider that best speaks to their individualistic conception of mobility and independent choice (Kim, 2011). However, given the structural limitations of fixed-route public transit (higher labor costs, specialized vehicles, route-planning

challenges, etc.), public transit agencies are rather unlikely to be able to provide the sort of individualized service that older adults desire (Rosenbloom, 2004). Herein lies the opportunity for nonprofits to provide a more palatable and specialized transportation service to this population. According to Merrett (2001), Transportation nonprofits often have a host of advantages over public transit agencies, including the following:

- Lower staff and equipment costs
- Closer ties to medical providers and peer nonprofits
- Reliance on neighborhood-based, often unpaid drivers
- Motivated by altruism and service rather than profit or legal obligation
- Focused on client needs and better equipped to respond to individuals' requests
- In general, a more positive reputation in the community

The concept of altruism in nonprofit management has been a central argument for why nonprofits tend to have a more positive reputation for trustworthiness and reliability. Studies have shown that nonprofit managers often hew closer to the stewardship theory of management than to agency theory (Van Puyvelde et al, 2012; Brown, 2005), suggesting an inherent altruism that aids in nonprofits' accountability and community reputation. The practical application of this positive reputation – social capital – is arguably a stronger driver of a nonprofit program's ridership than its objective performance measures. Existing theory on social capital and social trust (Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995) can explain some degree of the public's tendency to trust that which is familiar to them, as well as that which is recommended by trusted peers. In the case of transportation services for older adults, social trust theory suggests that even a sub-optimal mode choice (many older adults would most prefer to drive, after all) can be made more palatable if well-regarded by peers and run by reputable staff. In essence, a rider's perception of a transportation provider – whether as a trusted and committed nonprofit or as an unfamiliar and bureaucratic public agency – directly shapes his or her willingness to use that service to a far greater degree than whatever information he or she might have on the services' various measures of performance,

such as on-time reliability, operating costs, and scheduling. A vital part of the concept of perception is familiarity, and older adults' choices are arguably influenced by their life experiences and knowledge of specific institutions and organizations in their community. What they use depends significantly on what they are aware of, what they have experienced, and what their friends and neighbors have said about their own experiences. As mentioned previously, the specific perceptions that suburban older adults harbor regarding transportation services in their communities remains largely understudied from a planning perspective, and gaining a better understanding of the clients' perspective on transportation is essential to the growth of this topic in the literature as well as in transportation practice.

This project endeavors to establish footholds in three specific areas of focus on this topic: The internal culture and practices of elder-service nonprofits engaged in the provision of transportation services, the nature and outlook of the various partnerships between public transit agencies and elder-service nonprofits, and finally the perceptions and experiences of older adults who reside in suburban areas and utilize one or more of these services as a supplement to or replacement for driving themselves. The body of this dissertation is therefore an assemblage of three distinct yet interrelated research projects exploring these issues.

**General Literature Review**

Although the three essay-length chapters each possess a specific review of the literature most germane to that particular investigation, there are a few key points of consensus in the broader literature that inform and sustain the project as a whole. A prime factor the demand for transportation services in suburban environments is the issue of driving and auto-dependence in an environment designed explicitly for auto usage. The vast majority of older adults living in suburban areas drive themselves, and this age cohort is even less likely to use suburban-based

public transit than suburbanites of younger ages (Adler and Rottunda, 2006; Choi et al, 2012). Driving is therefore the dominant and preferred means of transportation, and alternative modes must be prepared to serve a small (though growing) segment of the suburban populace. Studies have shown that when suburban older adults have had to forsake their preference for driving and rely on others for transportation, they greatly prefer to utilize a mode that closely resembles driving themselves (such as riding in someone's automobile) as opposed to something more visually different like a bus or taxicab (Donorfio et al, 2009; Whelan et al, 2006). Older adults also value continuity and familiarity in their service providers, preferring to ride with friends or relatives or to use a service that sends the same driver and same vehicle for all trips (Kim, 2011). These preferences account for some degree of nonprofits' success at providing transportation in suburbia, as many of them utilize personal automobiles and assign drivers to specific clients. Still, organized alternatives to driving are generally scarce in suburbia (Coughlin, 2001; 2009), and services that might exist tend to be poorly marketed to at-risk clients (Trilling and Eberhard, 2004). Traditional, fixed-route transit is seen in the literature as poorly-suited to operate in suburbia, and the degree of adaptation required to transform a fixed-route transit network into the sort of door-to-door, personalized service often desired/required by older adults is arguably not feasible (Hess, 2009).

It is this feasibility gap that nonprofit transportation providers have been successfully able to address in ways that public transit agencies cannot. Generally speaking, nonprofits are more flexible than government agencies in terms of management and policies, finances, and client service and route planning (Koffman, 2004; Adams-Price, 2013). In the realm of social service provision more broadly, nonprofits have long been equipped to supplement or even replace government providers, while also operating in sectors that for-profit entities avoid due to regulations, bureaucracy, and lack of direct profitability (Feiock and Jang, 2009; Hansmann,

1980). The public sector has taken notice, and nonprofits have been called upon to serve specific needs of elderly and disabled clients in a given community, especially regarding transportation and wellness (Jenkins et al, 2010; Schlossberg, 2004; Cahalan and Renne, 2007). Nonprofit organizations are therefore a productive and frequent provider of transportation services in urban areas, and suburban areas in particular, making a study of their performance and reputation all the more timely and relevant for the literature.

**Internal staff cultural practices influence transportation operations.** The literature on nonprofits as providers of public services has thus far focused on one of two areas of analysis: Comparative and quantitative performance indicators (and whether nonprofits perform at the level of public agencies), as well as analyses of the general nature of nonprofit organizations and the ways in which their unique mission and social standing directly influences their ability to perform. While an analysis of the performance of nonprofit transportation providers is indeed essential to understanding the role of nonprofits in older adult transportation, few nonprofits track ridership figures to a sufficient degree to enable rigorous analysis. On the question of nonprofits' nature, however, established findings are indeed available and informative for this project. There is broad consensus that nonprofits are designed to guard against self-interested profit-seeking among staff and leaders (Feiock and Jang, 2009), and are often entrusted with municipal service contracts (such as transportation) because they are regarded as both trustworthy and cost-efficient (Jang, 2005). They are also insulated from traditional market forces by virtue of receiving the bulk of their funding from long-term government contracts rather than direct fares from clients or local tax revenues, and this is acutely true for nonprofits operating under transportation grants from government agencies (TranSystems et al, 2004). In terms of function, nonprofit transportation providers are often more flexible in admin/routes/costs (Koffman, 2004; Adams-Price, 2013) than

public providers, due chiefly to public agencies' legal obligation to serve fixed routes and specific neighborhoods in a timely manner. Nonprofits are generally under no such obligation from a government entity, and can therefore operate services as funding and client needs dictate. A third and final thread from the literature that relates to this study is that of staffing in nonprofit versus public providers. In general, nonprofit employees have tended to report greater job satisfaction and loyalty to their employer's mission and clients than those employees working in the public sector (Borzaga and Tortia, 2006; Benz, 2005). This suggests that staff motivation is likely to be a central factor in a transportation nonprofit's overall performance and stature in the community. Staff who are committed to the mission of serving older adults likely perceive their agency's role differently from staff at a public agency who are directed to serve clients of all ages. This explicit commitment to a specific population may also influence the ways in which the nonprofit providers train staff and volunteers to provide specialized services. While staff expertise generally varies by agency, Austin (2003) argues that many nonprofits enhance or alter their staff training in the pursuit of funder stipulations or mission expansion. The validity of Austin's claims as they might relate specifically to elder-service nonprofits that provide transportation services were tested over the course of this investigation.

**Public-nonprofit partnerships are growing in scale and complexity.** A key driver of nonprofits' expansion into transportation service has been the rapid growth in federal funding and regulatory guidance in favor of interagency partnerships between public transit agencies and nonprofits focused on serving elderly and/or disabled clients. The growing complexity of these interagency relationships remains ripe for study, and is explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Due to the rise in federal funding for partnerships and fee-for-service contracting, agencies of both types have forged closer ties with one another both to serve their older clients as

well as to have lasting access to a growing pool of federal resources (Rosenbloom, 1988; NADTC, 2017). In addition, transit agencies face an additional political pressure to partner and/or contract transportation services due to skyrocketing demand for specialized transportation services at a reduced cost (Koffman et al, 2004). The service environment is thus ripe for formal partnerships and contractual agreements between providers of different types, and these relationships must be explored and defined in real terms if academics are to comprehend the origins, nature, and outcomes of them.

**Transportation nonprofits leverage public trust to provide services.** A vital concept in the literature of human service nonprofits is that of trust, both at the individual and social/community level. In the context of transportation services for older adults, trust can be defined as the knowledge or feeling that one's travel desires and needs will be understood and addressed, that one's schedule will be maintained, and one's safety guaranteed. Butler and Cantrell (1984) equate this type of trust with competence, integrity, consistency, and openness. Public trust is a vital component of nonprofits working in a social-welfare context. Beyond Hansmann's (1980) economic conceptualizations of nonprofits' trustworthiness is the sociological observation that contracts are sustained by a "presumed reliability" that the parties will perform as agreed (Giddens, 1990; Anheier and Kendall, 2000). In that sense, trust between an older adult and his or her transportation provider is as much about the emotional expectations as it is the tangible service agreement(s). Providers are aware of this factor among their clients. Trust and social capital have been identified as key indicators of provider's success, and public and nonprofit agencies sometimes form formal or informal alliances to leverage one another's trust (Huxham and Vangen, 1996; Austin, 2010). In general, however, the evidence suggests that nonprofits have been more successful at generating feelings of trust from the general public than their public-sector peers

(Lambright et al, 2009; Gulati, 1995). This is especially true for members of the public who utilize the services of both a nonprofit and a public agency (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Anheier and Kendall, 2002). To get to the root of trust and perception among riders, this study therefore focuses on those older adults who use one or both services regularly and have a richer opinion of their options. Frequent users of transportation services are susceptible to what Zucker (1986) terms "process-based trust," which suggests that their current opinion of a provider's abilities and services is dependent upon the sum of their experiences – positive and negative – with that provider. Their opinion and level of trust is also arguably shaped by the experiences of their peers who use the same services.

**Speaking to three literatures.** Taken together, the three essays contribute findings and support to a broader array of literature that rests at the intersection of transportation, gerontology, and nonprofit management. By examining the state of practice in those agencies providing transportation service to suburban older adults, this project contributes documentary evidence of best practices to all three literatures. By exploring the frequency and nature of partnerships between public transit agencies and elder-service nonprofits, this project illustrates many of the quirks and commonalities inherent in these two very different agency types when working together or in competition to provide a specialized and rather unique service to older adults. Finally, by exploring the perspective of older adults who reside in suburban areas and use one or more of these transportation services in their daily independent lives, the project adds a much-needed user's perspective to the existing literature of transportation and nonprofit performance. The three sub-projects contained within this dissertation thus aim to address the same broad gap in the literature, but from three distinct directions that fully address the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the issue of mobility for suburban older adults.

## Case Selection Methodology

This study explores the transportation programs on offer in the suburbs of three American cities. All three metropolitan areas are suited for this project because all three are large metropolitan statistical areas (MSA's) that are dominated by suburban land uses, beset by heavy automobile traffic, and feature a mass transit system that is scarcely used by suburban residents. In addition, all three regions have robust and visible ties between local governments and area nonprofits, indicating an atmosphere of alliances and burden-sharing.

Interview participants in the three metro areas requested, and were granted, anonymity during this project. This was done to preserve their existing interagency relationships, avoid political embarrassment, and encourage the respondents to speak frankly without fear of reprisal or damaged relationships. The three essays refer to these metro areas by pseudonym: "Brookside," "Chapman Falls," and "Lovell." In addition, no specific agencies are named.

**The three-essay model.** The three-essay model has grown in popularity in recent years as an alternative format to the traditional monograph dissertation. This format lends itself to research undertakings such as this, as it contains three interconnected and semi-sequential projects under a singular theme and purpose. While each essay (or chapter) informs the next in the sequence, each has its own design, research questions, and implications for a distinct literature and audience. The first essay in the sequence (Chapter Two) assesses and compares the public and nonprofit transportation providers in three American metropolitan areas, focusing chiefly on administrative traits, marketing practices, and staff culture at both public and nonprofit transportation agencies. The second essay (Chapter Three) focuses on the nature of interagency partnerships between the two – how they are formed, maintained, and perceived by individuals on both sides of the relationship. The third and final essay (Chapter Four) investigates the user's perspective of the

various transportation options available to older adults, exploring individual older adults' perceptions of these modes as well as their general preferences when planning a trip.

**Essay One: Assessment and Comparison of Providers**

The first essay (Chapter Two) explores the administrative practices, operational capabilities, and objective performance of selected nonprofit and public transportation providers in the three selected metropolitan areas. It speaks to a growing literature on management practices in transportation providers. The study is comparative and qualitative in nature, and explores the providers' motivations, training, management backgrounds, and staff capabilities. The specific research question is as follows: How do nonprofit transportation providers in these three metro areas perform compared to their public-transit counterparts, and what unique administrative, operational, or other practices influence their performance?

Data for this study came primarily from the providers themselves. A total of eleven agencies were investigated, eight of them elder-services nonprofits and three of them public transit agencies chartered to serve a specific geographic area. The study chiefly focused on issues of staff motivation and training, and managers' impressions of their agency's work and reputation in the community. Links between staff background/training and agency performance were also explored in interviews.

The interviews were transcribed and coded through a process of axial coding and pattern matching of direct quotes to existing themes in the literature, particularly those related to nonprofit motivation, client satisfaction, and the performance/effectiveness of transportation programs being offered. The focus here was on how these nonprofits marketed themselves to older adults and the community, as well as the degree to which they explicitly outlined their role as a transportation provider both in concert with, and in effective competition with, public transit agencies. Examining

these materials helped to better flesh out the nonprofits' vision and self-defined role as transportation providers.

**Essay Two: Partnerships among Providers**

The second essay (Chapter Three) builds on the first by examining the nature of interagency partnerships and relations between public transit agencies and their nonprofit peers. It uses information gleaned from the same eleven providers interviewed for the first essay (eight nonprofit and three public agencies), focusing specifically on how managers at both types of agency view their interagency partnerships and relations with others. In addition, marketing materials and annual reports were examined for verbiage that described these interagency partnerships to funders or the general public, in order to ascertain whether any differences exist between how an agency's managers might feel about a partnership and the language used in that agency's marketing materials to describe the partnership. The tone of this piece is largely qualitative, being based around the perceptions and experiences of individual interview subjects. The research question for this second investigation asks how and why nonprofit transportation providers partner with other organizations, and how the partnerships are sought, classified, and perceived by program administrators on both sides of the relationship.

Data for this investigation are derived chiefly from interview notes gathered for Essay One, as those interviews were structured to include questions relevant to both studies. Secondary source materials (annual reports, marketing materials, and website verbiage) were provided to the author by interview subjects at all eleven agencies. The analysis utilized similar techniques to Essay One, again relying on axial coding as well as focused coding in order to draw findings from the raw interview transcripts. Marketing materials and reports provided by the agencies were similarly

examined and coded, in order to better flesh out the internal as well as external ways these partnerships are classified and portrayed.

**Essay Three: Client and Community Perceptions of Providers**

The third essay (Chapter Four) explores this same ecosystem of transportation providers in these same three metro areas, but from the perspective of clients and users of the various transportation services. Its findings and insights contribute to the rather undeveloped literature on older adults' perceptions of mobility and transportation options, and user-side impressions of transit choice more broadly. This study is structured to be entirely qualitative in nature, and focused solely on how older adults who use these services felt about various aspects of transportation – driving themselves, using transit, paratransit, and using a nonprofit service – as well as what they thought about the suitability and performance of both public transit and nonprofit transportation programs in their communities. The research question framing this second project investigates older adults' perceptions of the full "transportation menu" of mode choices in their community, and what hard and soft factors influenced their perceptions. Discussions with participants explored the roots of suburban older adults' trust in providers, as well as the roots of their perceptions of both public and nonprofit agencies.

The methodology for this study was anchored by focus groups made up of older adults (generally those aged 55 and older) who have used some combination of nonprofit transportation, transit, paratransit, and driving within the past year. Participants were drawn from the client lists of the transportation nonprofits interviewed for essays one and two. They were encouraged to bring spouses, neighbors, or anyone of an appropriate age and mobility standard who might have insights relevant to the study, so as to create a more heterogeneous focus group experience. The groups were shown a list of emotional sentiments about the various attributes of transportation ("I feel

safe using this mode," "this mode helps me remain independent," etc.), and asked to state the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement for each of four modes (driving, transit, paratransit, and nonprofit transportation). The emotional sentiment quotes were organized by subject area (affordability, accessibility, etc.), and groups were encouraged to discuss their feelings and rankings within each subject area. A total of six focus groups – two in each of the three metro areas – were conducted in January of 2018. Participants' perceptions of transportation services – in particular, their thoughts on trust, reliability, and reputation of the public and nonprofit transportation options in their community – formed this study's unit of analysis. By focusing on those individuals who make some habitual usage of one or more of the available services, the study was able to capture comparisons, rich descriptions, and personal experiences of transportation clients.

The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, with recurring sentiments and points of particular consensus or controversy noted in the analysis. The group discussions were semi-structured, and participants were encouraged to build on one another's impressions and experiences. The groups were designed to be composed chiefly of older adults who use multiple services from their "transportation menu," but most of the groups featured at least one peer or caregiver who was not familiar with either paratransit or the nonprofit transportation program used by the rest of the group. Codes for analysis were drawn primarily from the arguments and sentiments shared most expressly across groups (all groups expressed a strong preference for driving/riding in a car over using any other mode, for example). Additional codes and findings resulted from the groups' rankings of the various emotional statements read to them in the structured portion of the exercise.

## A Note on Format

The following three chapters of this document represent the three distinct essays (or sub-projects) that constitute this document's contribution to literature and practice. Each contains its own fully-formed structure and investigation, including research questions, relevant literature review, methodology and design, tables and figures, and findings and implications for practice. Each represents a distinct and functionally independent investigation of one portion of the broader dissertation project. Following these three essay-length chapters is a conclusion of the project as a whole, with lessons for practice and scholarship gleaned from all three sub-projects.

# CHAPTER TWO:

# NONPROFITS AS TRANSPORTATION PROVIDERS

As the proportion of older adults (those aged 65 and older) living in suburban areas continues to grow, issues of transportation access and safe mobility are emerging as key indicators of older Americans' ability to harmoniously age in place (Rosenbloom, 2001). Whereas many suburban residents may have moved to that location in their younger years, when driving great distances was not seen to be an obstacle, being able to navigate the auto-oriented suburbs in old age can be quite different. The aging process can impair a driver's senses, neurological responses, and spatial reasoning and sense of direction, all of which can lead to impaired driving. Compounding the difficulties faced by individual older adults is the broader challenge of providing managed alternatives to driving for this population. Suburban land-use typologies often make fixed-route transit an expensive and unfeasible endeavor, and the public transit options that tend to be available in suburbs are generally regarded as sub-optimal for older adults, due to limited scheduling, higher average fares, and vast distances between points of interest (Adams-Price, 2013). It is into this service gap that elder-service nonprofits have begun to provide a safe and more personalized means of transportation for these clients in this geographic context. An array of internal management practices and external reputational factors are helping nonprofits to offer a unique type of service for older adults that is generally more client-focused than many offerings of public transit agencies (TranSystems et al, 2004). As these nonprofit alternatives to transit grow in scale and influence, questions remain concerning their comparative effectiveness, reputation, and motivations for serving suburban older adults. Thoughtful study is therefore needed in order to better understand the inter-agency relationships, management practices, and client/community

expectations that shape how nonprofits and their public-agency peers act to provide transportation to this community in need.

This chapter explores the state of practice for a number of elder-service nonprofits that provide either group transportation (generally operating on a fixed schedule and route) or demand-response transportation (generally door-to-door transportation for an individual or a small party) to older adults in a given service area. Using in-depth interviews and a content analysis of agency documents and marketing materials, the author finds several indications that nonprofits operating in this context hold a host of strong views about their operations, possess a rather nimble and minimalistic staff structure, and operate with an eye toward client satisfaction rather than volume of clients or service area. Results also indicate that the interaction between a nonprofit's stated mission and the expectations of its potential government funders is not always positive or mutually-beneficial, and many of the nonprofits studied hold staunchly anti-government views based on negative funding experiences in the past. The findings suggest that in the realm of transportation services for suburban older adults, the relationship between nonprofits and government is often colorful and fraught with negative impressions that make this application of public-nonprofit interaction ripe for deeper study.

**Background**

The exploration of elder-service nonprofits that provide transportation services to their clients in a given metro area must include some understanding of both the nonprofit perspective as well as the transportation planning perspective. Whereas transportation planning often occurs at a macro-level "systems" perspective, and is generally focused on broader issues of congestion and commute patterns, infrastructure finance, and economic activity in a given area (Cervero, 1998), nonprofits tend to focus on the micro-level "user" perspective that is generally based on the

various physical, social, and emotional needs of their individual clients (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2010). In contrast to the generally quantifiable metrics of public transportation service (such as ridership, vehicle miles travelled, and costs per rider), elder-service nonprofits are often focused on delivering social benefits (such as socialization and aging in place) that are often intangible and "challenging…to oversee and control" (Feiock and Jang, 2009). Thus, any investigation into the performance of nonprofits providing transportation services must be kept apprised of these intangibles. It must also be firmly established that nonprofit providers tend to measure performance and success in ways that can greatly differ from traditional public transit agencies. This holds true even in cases where a nonprofit receives direct government funding to provide transportation services for designated clients (Poister, 2003).

Besides the social-welfare mission that motivates many nonprofits to engage in a given program such as transportation service, cultural and political shifts in favor of service contracting (the outsourcing of certain government functions to for-profit and nonprofit entities) have added a fresh motivation for nonprofits to expand operations into new areas that were formerly the domain of local government (Feiock and Yang, 2009; Schmid, 2003). The rise in contracting has generated a robust new source of funding for many nonprofits, albeit one with numerous stipulations and limitations that can greatly influence a recipient's operations and staff culture over time (Kennedy and Bielefeld, 2002). The issue of how nonprofits are shaped by the proverbial strings attached to this funding source has been debated at length in the literature (Ferris, 1998; Gooden, 1998), and is documented in this study as well. Socially, nonprofits also gain community visibility and social capital by offering a new service in addition to – or in many cases, in lieu of – existing government-run services (Feiock and Yang, 2009).

Nonprofits enter the realm of public-service provision for a host of reasons that varies greatly depending on local context and program needs and abilities. In the case of elder-service nonprofits that provide transportation to a largely suburban clientele, Heterogeneity theory (Anheier, 2014) explains how and why nonprofit organizations enter the field to act as "gap-fillers." They seek to provide a service that public agencies cannot or will not – in this case, transportation access in a region generally devoid of fixed-route transportation options. However, as their operations grow, many of these nonprofits must seek financial or institutional support, often from government agencies, to endure. Once it reaches such a transition point, the transportation nonprofit has effectively evolved beyond gap-filling and has become an influential player on the community-service stage, both desiring of and in many ways worthy of taxpayer support as an entity that provides a public service that government agencies cannot. This process of nonprofit evolution is not unique to transportation service (Weisbrod, 1975), but each of the nonprofits studied in this project can be placed somewhere on the evolutionary timeline between gap-filling startup and well-connected civic powerhouse. A visual representation of this timeline, including descriptions of each stage's influence on the organizational culture, its management, its funding outlook, and its implications for transportation services, is included as Figure 2.1.

The nonprofits investigated for this study operate at different points along this path, but growth patterns in operations (gold), management (blue), and funding (green) appear consistent across the various providers. For example, those still in "start-up stage" struggle with questions of funding and mission scope, whereas the more mature providers face issues in retaining staff and juggling the demands of clients and funders/board members. The orange category in Figure 2.1 describes the general state of these programs' transportation offerings at the various stages. As explored below, these nonprofits exhibit key external and internal traits as they transition from one

stage to the next, and each transition offers some fundamental alterations to the organization's operations, culture, and reputation in the community.

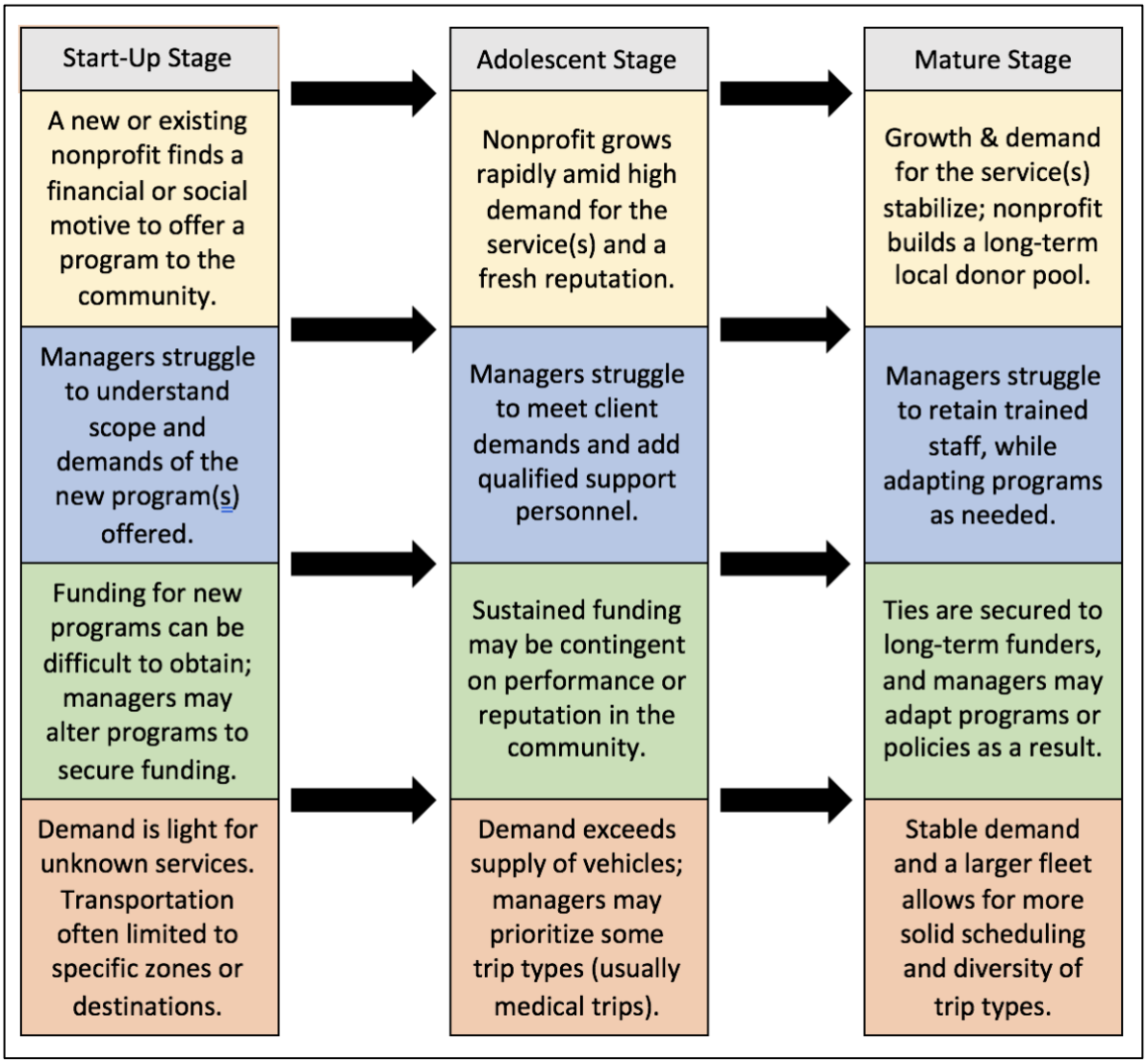


**Figure 2.1: Stages of Development for Transportation Nonprofits**

A community's support for its local nonprofit sector is another key variable in both case selection and the growth of community-based nonprofits. The three metro areas featured in this project each feature suburban areas home to considerable wealth and civic activity that sustains local nonprofits, and interview subjects operating in these areas all made some note of their respective communities being generous with donations, volunteer efforts, or both. This supports

the consensus in the nonprofit literature that affluent communities tend to have a greater civic capacity for volunteering and nonprofit funding (Bielefeld, 2000; Wolpert, 1993). Only one of the nonprofits investigated for this project serves an explicitly low-income client base, whereas the other seven serve clients without regard to income level or location within their designated service area. Still, given the degree of local support that all observed agencies reportedly receive, it stands to reason that these agencies' existence and growth have been due at least in part to local community capacity and direct financial support.

While nonprofits remain the central focus of this study, the issue of transportation in suburban areas would be incomplete without some exploration of traditional, public transit agencies. In many communities, the crucial challenge for public transit agencies is providing what Coughlin and D'Ambrosio (2012) term the "serious needs of the few." Whereas a majority of older adults continue to drive themselves well into their retirement years (Rosenbloom, 2001), those who are no longer able to do so tend to need significantly personalized and hands-on assistance with their mobility. These needs can include more individualized service and routing, door-through-door assistance, and a unique model of client-provider communication that requires far more interaction than that of fixed-route transit. The ability of public transit agencies to adapt services in order to meet these needs is generally limited by funding, policy, or operational constraints that prevent widespread adoption of specialized services that meet the needs of one age group in one geographic context (Hess, 2009). This presents a service gap in many communities that nonprofits have emerged to fill, and it is within this gap that this study finds its purpose.

Providing transportation services either in concert with – or in competition with – the public sector poses great risks and rewards for nonprofits. The growth made possible by grants and financial support may entice nonprofits to enter the realm, but issues of bureaucracy, data

management, and mission creep may cause nonprofits to alter missions or decline public funding altogether. The specifics of this decision-making process among nonprofit managers has not been adequately studied in the context of transportation for older adults. Also, given the increasingly complex relationship between government agencies and nonprofit providers and contractors (also deemed "contractor culture"), and given the often-stark differences between how these two agency types operate, view themselves, and interact with the general public, richer study of provider culture is needed. Nonprofits that provide a service historically reserved for the public sector are quite likely to present a unique addition to the transportation menu that differs markedly from the community's existing public transportation offerings. The provider-focused causes and client-focused impacts of this new format are as yet understudied in both the transportation and nonprofit management literatures. The central proposition of this study, therefore, is that these nonprofit organizations have a unique combination of skills, internal culture, and community connectivity that permit them to operate in a setting where public transit agencies cannot or do not wish to operate. They are able to leverage specialized training and expertise, a generally positive reputation, and a nimble administrative flexibility in order to provide a uniquely client-focused brand of transportation and mobility support to clients in urban and suburban areas.

**Methodology and Case Selection**

This study investigates a two-stage question: How do elder-serving nonprofits engaged in transportation programs provide their services, and what unique administrative and staff-cultural practices influence their operations?

Eight nonprofit transportation providers, in three American metropolitan areas, served as the focus of this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the opinions and data provided by program managers, these individual nonprofits and their metro areas are not named in this study. All eight

providers had an explicit focus on serving older adults, and all of them were either dedicated solely to transportation services, or considered their transportation offerings to play a dominant role in their broader operations. The author selected the three metro areas based on a confluence of factors: First, each metro area hosts a considerably suburbanized population that is generally dependent on automobiles and driving for transportation. Second, these three metro areas have visible and multi-modal transit networks, though all three networks focus chiefly on their urban core and offer limited fixed-route services to suburban areas. Third, this selection of metro areas offers diversity of geography and climate – two are below the frost line and have generally mild winters, while the third is located in the Upper Midwest and must contend with harsher winters that may influence older adults' travel behavior during those months.

After a wider process of direct solicitation via email correspondence, representatives from eight nonprofits agreed to be interviewed and documented for this project. A total of eleven phone interviews were conducted with senior management at each of the eight nonprofits. Participants were chiefly executive directors and program founders, with two board members also interviewed. These interviews consisted of an agreed-upon set of questions and topics, and were structured as an open-ended discussion of key issues facing these organizations. A listing of the questions is included as Appendix A. The resulting discussions lasted over 90 minutes each, with a few approaching two hours in length. Subjects were generally willing to discuss the history and mission of their organizations, as well as the broader state of transportation for older adults in their communities and nationwide. The interviews were recorded, and the notes analyzed using axial coding and pattern matching of direct quotes to existing themes in the literature, particularly those related to nonprofit motivation, client satisfaction, and the performance/effectiveness of transportation programs being offered. In addition to interviews, the study also examined written

marketing materials and annual reports from these nonprofits, again with a focus on pattern matching and the identification of key concepts and recurring themes. The focus here was on how these nonprofits marketed themselves to older adults and the community, as well as the degree to which they explicitly outlined their role as a transportation provider both in concert with, and in effective competition with, public transit agencies. Examining these materials helped to better flesh out the nonprofits' vision and self-defined role as transportation providers.

Subjects requested, and were granted, anonymity as sources of information for this project. Individuals in two of the three metro areas had specific concerns about their comments being published or construed in a way that might jeopardize their agency's funding or partnerships. As a result, all interview subjects were granted anonymity and informed of this prior to the interviews taking place. To further protect their confidentiality, the three metro areas have been given pseudonyms: Chapman Falls (Midwest), Lovell (Southwest), and Brookside (Southeast). Such measures of confidentiality are sometimes necessary in qualitative work (Kaiser, 2009), particularly when the sources and locations could easily be identified by the reader via a process of deductive disclosure (Tolich, 2004; Ellis, 1995). The potential for a nonprofit's financial and community relationships to be damaged by the publication of critical remarks is of grave concern, and the author deemed the preservation of confidentiality to be a reasonable adjustment to the project. In keeping with the spirit of qualitative research advanced by Weiss (1994) and Kaiser (2009), the lessons learned from the interviews have been preserved as the core of this study, even as names and locations have been changed to ensure participant confidentiality.

**Results**

The interviews with nonprofit managers, coupled with a review of agencies' annual reports, marketing materials, and financial documents, produced several notable findings that demonstrate

the ways in which these organizations confirm or confound the consensus on nonprofits as providers of public services. The findings are discussed throughout the following section as a series of themed tables and supporting descriptions, ranging from shared to contextually-specific characteristics. Table 2.1 illustrates the basic operational traits of the eight studied nonprofits, including their position on the Stages of Development outlined in Figure 2.1, their stated geographic service area, and the type of vehicle they use to provide transportation services. As Table 2.1 indicates, the eight nonprofit providers are at a mix of development stages. One notable linkage here is the connection between agency development and vehicles used for transportation. Established providers are more likely to utilize larger vehicles owned by their organization, while younger and "start-up" providers are more likely to rely on cars owned and operated by volunteers.

In the interviews, subjects gave a range of explanations for why their agency utilized the vehicles they did. Motivations ranged from a desire to ensure safe transportation by owning the vehicles and employing the drivers, to a need to keep costs low by leveraging volunteer assets. This diversity mirrors the findings of the broader nonprofit literature, wherein some nonprofits act to directly control their operations even at cost, while others act to reduce overhead and rely on in-kind resources wherever possible. One provider in Lovell operates a program that is explicitly for medical transportation, and is bound by funder stipulations to use only vehicles it owns. Another notable general finding from Table 2.1 is the near-ubiquity of designated service areas for these providers. All but one of the providers operates within a specific municipal boundary, county line, or combination of ZIP codes. This speaks to the explicit "community" focus of these organizations, and several respondents noted in interviews that the focus on specific areas is often a financial necessity, but also provides the benefit of enhanced ties between the agency and the community or neighborhoods it serves.

**Table 2.1: Selected Operational Characteristics of Transportation Nonprofits**

| | Stage of Organizational Development | | | Geography Served | | | Type(s) of Vehicle Used | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nonprofit Provider | “Start-up" | "Adolescent" | "Mature" | Specific ZIP Codes | Specific Cities or Counties | No Service Area Restriction | Private Car (owned by volunteer) | Agency-Owned Car | Bus or Van |
| Chapman Falls One | | | X | | X | | | | X |
| Chapman Falls Two | | | X | | X | | | | X |
| Chapman Falls Three | X | | | X | | | X | | |
| Lovell One | | | X | | X | | | | X |
| Lovell Two | | X | | | X | | X | | |
| Brookside One | X | | | X | | | X | | |
| Brookside Two | X | | | | | X | | X | |
| Brookside Three | | X | | X | | | | | X |

**Nonprofit managers desire mission adherence more than secured funding.** Over the course of the interviews, a recurring theme of resistance to burdensome external funders became apparent. Some providers were at first hesitant to speak out against the various government agencies (at the federal, state, and local level) who often fund transportation programs such as theirs. Once granted anonymity by the author, many of their comments became more pointed and critical. Five of the eight agencies explicitly avoid government funding, chiefly on operational grounds, though two providers noted a specific conflict between their faith-based mission and the "open to the public" stipulations of government funding. These two providers offer services only to active congregants of their specific religious faiths, and they felt it would be counter to their internal mission to serve the general public, as the government grants in question evidently required. Several other managers told stories of how their agencies had once accepted government funding in the past, but they or their boards of directors found the data-collection and reporting requirements attached to the funds to be not worth the amount their agencies received. One provider in the Midwest explained how his agency spent nearly $20,000 on additional staff time and office technology just to accurately account for his agency's spending of a $130,000 grant. Another manager spoke of how a two-week delay in submitting his agency's end-of-cycle grant report (for the first government grant they had ever received) led to threats of a lawsuit from state officials, after which his board of directors refused to apply for any further monies from their state. In many cases, respondents noted their generous local funders enable them to forego external funding in favor of pursuing their existing mission. Both providers in Chapman Falls receive large recurring grants from the endowed foundation of a deceased local philanthropist, and one of the providers in Lovell has been able to operate for nearly two years due almost solely to a bequest

left to them by a longtime client. Table 2.2 illustrates the full distribution of these providers' regard for government funding and grants.

**Table 2.2: Providers' Community Mission and Relations with Government Funders**

| | Stance on Government Funding | | | Primary Mission as a Nonprofit | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nonprofit Provider | Accepts Govt. Funding | Explicitly Avoids Govt. Funding | No Stated Position on Govt. Funding | Social Services for Older Adults | Medical Services for Older Adults | Transportation for Older Adults |
| Chapman Falls One | | X | | X | | |
| Chapman Falls Two | | X | | X | | |
| Chapman Falls Three | | | X | | | X |
| Lovell One | | X | | | | X |
| Lovell Two | | X | | X | | |
| Brookside One | X | | | | | X |
| Brookside Two | X | | | | X | |
| Brookside Three | | X | | | | X |

The link between donor support and nonprofit mission is only briefly touched upon in this study, though in the cases of these nonprofits, it helps to clarify both how these providers feel about onerous government funding, as well as how they are able to stay in operation without the support of government funders. These providers view themselves as liberated from a burdensome and bureaucratic system, and most expressed no lasting regrets at their stance against government funding. An additional layer of this general resistance to accepting government funding is these providers' strong support of their existing mission(s) as community nonprofits. A classification of the providers' stated missions is also illustrated in Table 2.2. Half of the providers are primarily focused on issues other than transportation for their clientele of older adults. Most of this number are general social-service organizations whose portfolios include programs in health and wellness, spirituality, aging independently, and "neighborhood support" for older residents. Providers focused on these more general issues of health and social service tend to be more established or

“mature” nonprofits, and those providers with an explicit focus on transportation tend to be in the “start-up” stage. This suggests older-adult transportation as a dedicated nonprofit function is a relatively new phenomenon, with established elder-service nonprofits maintaining their broader focus on quality-of-life issues, while newer nonprofits emerge specifically to offer tailored transportation services. The issue of provider culture being resistant to government funding has the potential to hinder local governments’ efforts to outsource some transportation programming to nonprofits such as these. If government funding is viewed as onerous and not worth the bureaucratic hassle, then public transit agencies in many metro areas will have a hard time finding lasting partners in the nonprofit sector who can help them to better serve their transportation-impaired older adult populations.

**Providers’ central focus is on client service and quality of life.** In keeping with the literature on nonprofit motivations and community relations, all eight of the providers in this study possess an explicit focus on customer service and client satisfaction, broadly defined. These organizations understand the role they play in providing services and support to a vulnerable population such as older adults, and this is reflected in their publications and marketing materials. Websites and informational pamphlets for nearly all of the providers featured verbiage regarding the specific needs of older adults and the concerns that they or their loved ones might have about transportation and independent living. Phrases such as “safer than driving” and “transportation on your terms and your schedule” peppered these promotional materials. “Quality of life” was another key term in the documents, both in mission statements and in advertisements aimed at potential clients. The concept was also explored at length in all of the interviews. In those providers with a dedicated focus on transportation services, this adherence to service bore firm linkages between clients’ having access to transportation and having an improved quality of life. The culture of those

providers understood and marketed their transportation offerings as a means of offering a vital service that can save lives (in the case of medical transportation) and "make life worth living" (in the case of transportation to and from shopping, worship, and social events). The word "dignity" was also used in several of the interviews. When pressed by the author to expand on that concept, respondents explained that in their particular city (which turned out to be a shared opinion across all three metro areas), public transit is seen as an undignified means of transportation that cannot or does not wish to cater to individual riders' needs. These providers perceive public transit to be slow, dangerous, and disinterested in the vulnerabilities of older adults. The aspect of these opinions that most closely mirrors the broader nonprofit literature is the belief among many of these nonprofit managers that their programs are by design more "in touch" with the needs of older adults in their communities. The nonprofit literature often focuses on comparative "embeddedness" of nonprofits versus government actors (Rymsza and Zimmer, 2004; Kramer, 2000), and this arguably holds up among transportation-providing nonprofits who are attuned not merely to their communities' traffic and transportation issues, but also to their older clients' personal needs, preferences, and desired destinations.

**Providers' positive reputation, and unpopular competition, lead to growth.** In keeping with the providers' shared adherence to client service and direct community engagement, the interview subjects felt strongly that their organizations had a positive reputation not only among their own members and clients but also among the broader community. One made repeated references to her organization being "a breath of fresh air for people who are just fed-up with having no options." A provider in the Lovell was particularly proud of his organization's efforts to persuade at-risk older drivers to drive less and rely more on rides from providers like his, which to him has the dual benefit of making transportation safer as well as reducing traffic congestion in

his famously gridlocked metro area. The newest of the eight providers, which developed after a lengthy neighborhood-scale effort to organize volunteers and funds, is reportedly a point of pride for its region of the suburbs, and has received positive press in local and regional media. These providers often rely on positive word-of-mouth and personal referrals to build a client base (Wood, 2017), and this is especially true of nonprofits that operate independent of government social-welfare systems and associated referral networks (Van Slyke, 2006). The link between community reputation and growth in demand was not uniformly strong across respondents, with some interview subjects describing a faster spread of referrals in their community than others. In the case of the two faith-based nonprofits, community reputation is inexorably linked to the providers' respective denominational affiliations. In the case of the one provider dedicated to medical transportation, referrals come "almost entirely" from doctor's offices and satisfied customers who refer their friends. Client referrals and personal testimonials account for some of these providers' growth among older adult populations, and this speaks to their social capital as community-oriented nonprofits, but a majority of interview subjects also implied (or stated plainly) that a great deal of the demand for their services is driven by the lack of suitable transportation offerings in a given area or community. Providers in two of the three metro areas spoke with unanimous disdain for their respective public transit agencies, describing difficulties and horror stories passed along to them by frustrated clients who had tried the various transit and paratransit options available to them and found them inadequate or worse. Program managers spoke of public transit in rather pessimistic tones, using terminology such as "out-of-touch," "dangerous," and "a drop in the bucket for suburban seniors." The general attitude expressed in these discussions was one of disappointment in public transit agencies – and a quiet pride that one's own nonprofit is clearly offering a viable and more desirable alternative. Demand for transportation services was high for

most providers in the study. Six of the eight claimed to have full schedule books and greater demand for rides than supply of vehicles and drivers. Of the remaining two, one (a faith-based provider) serves a roughly fixed pool of clients, and the eighth provider is still in the early "start-up" stage and attracting a base of repeat clients. For several of these providers, the first and simplest answer to the question of why demand is so strong is some variation of "because no one else is out there doing this job." As documented by Rosenbloom (2001), Choi et al (2012), and Kostyniuk and Shope (2003), demand for transportation services for older adults far outstrips the supply of it, particularly in auto-oriented suburbs and metropolitan areas. The sense that these nonprofits are therefore filling a vast service gap is borne out directly in the literature, and demonstrates a frank awareness of the challenges facing these providers in this context.

**Managers are trained in social work or nursing, rarely planning or management.** Embeddedness and ties to client needs are likely also a result of the staff makeup and general work histories of program managers. As indicated by Table 2.3, management positions at these organizations are dominated by those holding either a social work or nursing/medical background. Of the two managers not possessing a background in nursing/medicine or social work, one was a retired commercial banker who was also their organization's founder, while the other had worked in office management. Both noted their personal experiences with older adults as a motivator in holding their positions, and felt that personal experience and "enduring compassion for the elderly" more than made up for any formal education in social work, gerontology, or transportation planning. The dearth of trained transportation planners in management roles of transportation-service nonprofits has been documented elsewhere in recent studies (Wood et al, 2016), but no evidence yet suggests the lack of planning knowledge is a hindrance to operations.

**Table 2.3: Selected Staff Characteristics of Transportation Nonprofits**

| | Educational/Career Background of Senior Staff | | | Percentage of Board Members over Age 65 | | | Driver Pay Structure | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nonprofit Provider | Background in Social Work or Gerontology | Background in Medicine or Nursing | Background in Business or Another Field | 0 - 25% | 26 - 50% | Over 50% | Paid Drivers | Volunteer Drivers |
| Chapman Falls One | | X | | | X | | X | |
| Chapman Falls Two | | X | | | X | | X | |
| Chapman Falls Three | | | X | | | X | | X |
| Lovell One | X | | | | | X | | X |
| Lovell Two | | | X | | | X | | X |
| Brookside One | X | | | | | X | X | |
| Brookside Two | | X | | X | | | X | |
| Brookside Three | X | | | | X | | | X |

**Providers' boards of directors are often intentionally dominated by retirees.** Another common feature of these elder-service nonprofits is the heavy representation of retirees and older adults (those aged 65 or older) on their boards of directors. Interview subjects were asked whether their organization's board has a specific quota for older adults, or if there were any other formal or informal practice leading to a consistent presence of older adults on their board. Subjects were then asked to estimate the percentage of their board of directors who were roughly aged 65 or older. For legal and ethical purposes, the specific ages of board members were not investigated or documented by the author, and this informal estimate serves as a "best guess" for this data point. Seven of the eight mentioned having older adults make up at least 25% of their board membership, with four of those seven estimating that over half of their board is made up of individuals aged 65 and older. The eighth organization, a medical transportation provider, has a board made up of medical professionals, none of whom were estimated to be over 65 years of age. The reasons for this varied. Three of the seven have dedicated age-related quotas in their bylaws stipulating a certain percentage of board membership (33% at one and 50% at the other two) be at least age 60. The remaining four had no written requirement or quota, but still featured several retirement-age board members due to circumstance or individuals' desire to volunteer with this specific cause. Most of these interview subjects spoke about the willingness of their older board members to act as advocates for older adults in their communities, which mirrors evidence from the nonprofit literature that board members with personal ties to a nonprofit's services or target audience tend to have a particularly strong motivation to join a board and remain active on it (Inglis and Cleave; 2006; Inglis, 1994). This commitment, as explored in broader measures of nonprofit management, has been shown to increase organizational effectiveness and social capital among clients and donors (Preston and Brown, 2004).

**Driver compensation methods are mixed, and volunteers are difficult to attract.** The issue of driver compensation – including rates of pay, scheduled hours, classification as employees, and financial or non-financial remuneration – emerged as a complex one in this study. Initially, interview subjects were asked only if their organization relied on paid or volunteer drivers. However, the first two managers to be interviewed gave expansive remarks on the issue that led subsequent interviews to ask more detailed questions about the various layers of employment and compensation among these nonprofit providers. Table 2.3 includes a panel describing the agency drivers' paid versus volunteer status. Among the four studied agencies that pay their drivers, three utilize formally-employed drivers who operate vehicles owned by the agency and are paid through traditional time-and-wage processes. The fourth pays its drivers a token cash stipend from a federal program designed to provide a source of income for qualifying retirees who wish to volunteer their time and vehicles for an effort such as this. While the drivers of this fourth agency are not formal employees of the agency, their efforts are compensated financially, and they are thus classified as "paid drivers" in this study. Among the four agencies that rely on unpaid/volunteer drivers, two are the aforementioned faith-based organizations whose volunteers contribute time and resources for spiritual reasons. Another agency, nicknamed "Chapman Falls Three," is a neighborhood-level start-up that lacks funds to pay its drivers.

For those transportation providers that rely on volunteer drivers, issues of volunteer recruitment and retention weigh on the minds of managers. As documented in other studies of volunteer recruitment within the transportation sector (Wood et al, 2016) and in the broader nonprofit realm (Clary et al, 1992; Hager and Brudney, 2015), the difficulty in recruiting volunteers for nonprofit operations varies greatly based on factors of location, program type, individuals targeted and served, and the willingness of nonprofits to expend resources on volunteer

recruitment, training, and retention. Two of the four agencies relying on volunteers are in the "start-up" stage, and are therefore less likely to have the funds or management expertise to devote to managing volunteers in this manner. The other two are "mature" organizations with experience managing volunteers, yet long-term problems with retention persist for both of them. Findings in the literature on volunteer management in nonprofits suggest organizations such as these should devote financial and administrative resources specifically to recruiting and keeping volunteers, lest a lack of reliable drivers hinder operations. The evidence put forth over the course of this study – that those nonprofits relying on volunteers to operate their core transportation services have a mixed record of success in attracting and retaining reliable volunteers – suggests that transportation-related nonprofits face the same human resource challenges as nonprofits devoted to other aspects of social service in cities and suburbs. It further suggests that the solutions proposed in the broader nonprofit management literature may lead to improved outcomes in a transportation-specific context.

No matter their compensation model, all eight leaders affirmed that their drivers and client service personnel receive training dedicated to serving the unique needs and desires of older adults. This training generally begins at orientation for new hires, and is supplemented across the agency on a regular basis. In the case of one agency, monthly customer service meetings are held. The ubiquity of specialized training in these agencies – along with direct quotes indicating it – demonstrates these providers' dedication to understanding the needs of older clients and making it readily apparent to clients that their personnel understand and respect these needs. Agency training was another point of pride for most interview subjects, who again compared their operations to their public-sector peers and argued that their more focused and specialized model is

a major selling point for a nonprofit transportation program compared to a "less personalized" mass transit system.

**Discussion**

The central proposition of this study – that nonprofits feature a unique staff culture and administrative flexibility that enables them to provide uniquely client-focused transportation services for suburban older adults – was generally borne out by the findings from interviews and document review. The granting of anonymity in all discussions was especially helpful in convincing interview subjects to speak more freely about the state of public transit in their communities. While these views were closely-held by the subjects, many were based on secondhand knowledge or negative experiences had by clients or neighbors. The focus of the analysis, however, remained tied to the nonprofits themselves. Still, the interviews together provided a rich exploration of the universe of nonprofit transportation providers, and make a sound contribution to a rather limited literature.

The operational norms of these providers are in many ways similar to the demand-response programs offered by public transit agencies. The nonprofits use smaller vehicles (usually a car, minivan, or small bus), focus on specific geographic areas of service, and offer individualized scheduling based on a client's specific origin and destination. Demand-response public transit operates all three of these. The main distinction in operations between nonprofit transportation and public transportation is in the realm of client satisfaction and quality-of-life preservation. All of the nonprofits studied in this project adhere to a steadfast code of service that places each client's needs, wishes, and perceptions at the forefront of their transportation program. For a host of reasons discussed in the transit literature, client satisfaction at the individual level is often not possible or not pursued by major public transit providers. It is not, and cannot feasibly be, the

highest priority for those providers. Nonprofit transportation providers are aware of this cultural difference, and regularly point to it as the quintessential difference between their programs and those offered by public agencies. They are uniquely aware of the needs and desires of suburban older adults – due chiefly to their staff expertise and experience with elders – and this awareness defines them as providers of transportation services.

The managers of nonprofit transportation agencies pride themselves on being more client-driven in daily practice, but also tend to extend this interpersonal focus to community and donor relations. Discussions about finances and funding often centered on the organizations' long-standing ties to local donors and foundations that had supported their efforts for some time. Maintaining a positive relationship with local funders, and community-based fundraising in general, is arguably a more intensive undertaking for a locally-oriented nonprofit than applying for funding through a formal bureaucratic agency such as the U.S. Department of Transportation. Still, these nonprofits prize how their networking and reputation-building have paid off for them. The hesitance on the part of many of these nonprofits to pursue government funding is another angle of administrative uniqueness compared to public transit agencies. These providers (and their boards of directors) prefer to pursue local funding opportunities and maintain their existing mission rather than pursue potentially larger government grants that might alter their mission or administrative structure. In the short term, this may influence their operations to remain relatively lean, but these particular providers are accepting of that limitation if it means their long-term community mission remains intact and focused on the issues and clients they wish to serve. This belief, when it occurs among nonprofit managers, is indicative of the unique culture of nonprofits in the transportation sphere.

In addition to operations and administrative practices, this study's research question and guiding premise included some exploration of the staff culture at these organizations, particularly the ways in which their unique practices might influence their provision of transportation services. A review of interview notes and annual reports (provided by six of the eight agencies) paints a picture of a staff culture steeped in individualized personal care and respectful treatment of older adults. Not only does this concept dominate their marketing materials and reports, but it is also the most prominent guiding principle in their staffing decisions. In addition, most of the studied nonprofits have a board of directors with a sizeable percentage (if not a majority) of members being generally aged 65 or older. These providers value client satisfaction and dignity virtually as highly as they value driver safety and ethical management practices, given the volume of effort many of them expend in training and retraining all personnel in how to best meet the needs and desires of older clients. While this study did not examine the staff-cultural practices of large public transit agencies, and no direct comparison can be made as to which agency format is objectively "better" at relating to older clients, the fact that these nonprofits go to such explicit and deliberate lengths to foster a culture of understanding and dignity for their older clients indicates a sincere effort on their part to meet the need.

**Conclusion**

The author sought to identify some of the administrative and cultural practices that distinguished nonprofit transportation providers from their public-transit peers, and to begin to place some of these unique practices and beliefs into the broader understanding of transportation services for older adults. The nonprofits investigated in this study were each unique in their own ways, but shared several key beliefs and practices that demonstrate a noteworthy independence from traditional public transit agencies studied in existing research. Providers are firmly and

formally dedicated to client satisfaction and personal service, and are aware that their public-sector peers operate differently. They value their mission and community ties, and will tend to adhere to an existing mission rather than alter it in the pursuit of additional external funding. These nonprofits generally have a staff trained in nursing or social work rather than urban planning or management. Their staff culture focuses chiefly on client service and human interaction, with less of a structured focus on planning-related tasks such as mapping, long-range planning, or vehicle load management. And while their service areas and financial states vary widely across the sample pool, providers large and small remain focused on maintaining quality-of-life for their existing clients rather than pursuing growth strategies that might expand both their client base and donor base. When pressed on this notion, most managers interviewed stated an explicit priority in their organizations to serve existing clients before pursuing new ones.

This low-growth strategy, if borne out more generally across a larger sample, suggests local nonprofits may not be equipped or willing to fully fill the service gap for suburban older adults who may no longer drive, but who live beyond the reach of fixed-route public transit. In addition, the steadfast opposition many of these nonprofits have to receiving government funding or expanding their programs to serve a wider base of clients may also limit their potential as a solution for many suburban areas. However, in areas where nonprofit transportation is a viable and available option for suburban older adults, these agencies' tendency to put clients first and focus on micro-level desires and preferences would make them a useful and in-demand alternative to driving or public transit.

This study represents a general introduction to nonprofit transportation providers for older adults residing in suburbs of American metropolitan areas, but deeper exploration of these and other findings is needed in order for a more mature literature to develop and inform policy and

practice. Providers in additional metro areas must be included in future studies, to better affirm or refute the consensus of the eight profiled in this study. In addition, a longitudinal study of one or more of these providers over a span of time would provide greater insights into how these nonprofits grow and evolve over time, and whether their steadfast beliefs and missions are maintained or transformed as their operations mature. Future studies must also incorporate the views of the clients themselves, so as to better ascertain how these "client first" attitudes are actually perceived by older adults who use the services. Finally, greater study is needed regarding the ties (both formal and informal) between nonprofit providers and their public-agency peers. While managers' opinions of public transit tended to be strong in this study, an exploration of the public sector's role – and its' managers' opinions of the situation – would contribute to a richer understanding of the issues and interactions at hand. The role of nonprofits as providers of transportation services for suburban older adults will continue to grow over time, and this novel intersection of nonprofits, gerontology, and transportation management is worthy of continued study and discussion in the affected literatures.

# CHAPTER THREE:

# PARTNERSHIPS AMONG TRANSPORTATION PROVIDERS

As the proportion of older adults (those aged 65 and older) living in suburban areas continues to grow, issues of transportation access and safe mobility are emerging as key indicators of older Americans' ability to harmoniously age in place (Rosenbloom, 1988; 2001). Whereas many suburban residents may have moved to that location in their younger years, when driving great distances was not seen to be an obstacle, being able to navigate the auto-oriented suburbs in old age can be quite different. The aging process can impair a driver's senses, neurological responses, and spatial reasoning and sense of direction, all of which can lead to impaired driving. Compounding the difficulties faced by individual older adults is the broader challenge of providing managed alternatives to driving for this population. Suburban land-use typologies often make fixed-route transit an expensive and unfeasible endeavor, and the public transit options that tend to be available in suburbs are generally regarded as sub-optimal for older adults due to limited scheduling, higher average fares, and vast distances between points of interest (Adams-Price, 2013; Koffman, 2004). It is into this service gap that elder-service nonprofits have begun to provide a safe and more personalized means of transportation for those older adults in need (Beverly Foundation, 2001; Burkhardt, 2000). At the same time, public transit agencies have made efforts to resolve the service gap by way of augmenting existing paratransit services to be more adaptable or focused on older adults (Koffman et al, 2004). These two agency types are therefore engaged in a very similar process of improving mobility for older adults, and while neither has yet fully resolved the mobility gap alone, opportunities exist for partnerships between the two types that leverage each side's strengths to achieve a more effective outcome for both agencies as well as their base of older adult clients.

Federal grant programs have helped to drive demand for interagency partnerships between public transit agencies and nonprofits, though the details of specific partnerships and their impacts on older adult mobility are as yet understudied in the literature on either nonprofit management or transportation services. These interagency relationships take many forms in everyday practice, ranging from informal service alliances to formal partnerships, competitive grants, and fee-for-service contracts wherein the nonprofit provides a designated service for the transit agency in exchange for funding at an agreed-upon rate. The financial aspects of these contract-based relationships are tracked by federal funding agencies, and some recipients track ridership and mileage data. Thus, some quantitative analysis can be conducted based on expenditures and general productivity.

Despite this, little effort has been expended either by funders or academic investigators into the impacts of these contract-based relationships on the managers who administer the programs on either side of the contract. This interagency relationship – its structure, longevity, and potential to affect productive change over time – is critical to the discussion of transportation for older adults. This is especially true given both the growth of fee-for-service contracting as a means of delivering public services and given the rapid growth in the population of older adults in need of specialized transportation services. A positive relationship – where transit officials respect the expertise of nonprofit managers and nonprofit managers appreciate the funding and guidance of public agencies – has the potential to address the critical mobility gaps facing suburban older adults. Conversely, a negative relationship – where transit officials view nonprofit managers as competitors or a waste of resources and nonprofit managers view partnerships as burdensome or pointless – will arguably allow mobility gaps and inefficiencies in the transportation system to persist, even as the nation in general continues to age and need more and more assistance with

transportation. Interactions between these two agency types will play an essential role in allowing suburban older adults to maintain independent lives, and it is therefore critical that the literature gain a richer understanding of how and why they interact, and how their partnerships and collaborations affect the mobility of suburban older adults.

This chapter explores these partnerships from the perspective of the agency managers, with a specific focus on partnership formation, classification/structure, and general outlook from the perspective of managers engaged in the partnerships. Both nonprofits and public transit agencies have been engaged in transporting older adults for decades (Burkhardt, 2000), but little has been documented regarding how managers of the two agency types interact, and how these partnerships impact operations and the provision of services. By exploring and documenting the ways in which these individuals view their programs, their counterparts' programs, and their active and recent partnerships with the same, this chapter contributes to a small but growing literature on nonprofits as viable providers of transportation services for vulnerable populations.

## Background

Relations and partnerships between elder-serving nonprofits and public transit agencies have evolved in type and complexity over the past five decades (Rosenbloom, 1988; Koffman et al, 2004). A growing federal commitment to encouraging and funding these partnerships has motivated providers to collaborate, as has a growing demand for specialized services at a reduced cost. These forces have brought the two provider types into greater sync, especially when a formal partnership exists.

**Origins and motivations of interagency partnerships.** The origins of contracting and formal partnerships between public transit agencies and elder-serving nonprofits in the United States date to the period between the creation of Medicare in 1965 and the first federal

appropriation for elder-specific transportation grants in 1975 (Rosenbloom, 1988). Transportation for older adults was identified as a key component of elder care in the initial Medicare policy directives, but contracts and grants in those early years focused more explicitly on social welfare and direct access to care rather than transportation specifically (NADTC, 2017). To more directly address the transportation needs of older adults and the disabled, the federal government established the Section 5310 (§5310) program to distribute federal funding to state and local transportation agencies, as well as nonprofits. The primary purpose of these grants was to cover capital costs for both public and nonprofit providers expanding into serving older adults and persons with disabilities (Rosenbloom, 1988; Koffman et al, 2004). In 2012, federal legislation expanded the program to cover both capital and operating expenses for qualifying agencies and nonprofits (FTA, 2014). As explained in FTA directives to grant applicants (2017), these formula-based funds are transferred from the federal government to state governments and major-city transit agencies, who are permitted to distribute the funds based on local needs. A local funding match is required of each grantee, and recently funded projects include travel training, volunteer driver programs, improved signage at transit stops, and improved paratransit service. A sampling of common §5310 projects is included as Figure 3.1.

According to program officials interviewed in this project, grants and fee-for-service contracts made possible by the §5310 program make up the bulk of what providers consider "partnership activity" between nonprofits and public transit agencies. The nature of these financial ties has evolved since 1975 (Freund & Vine, 2010), but few studies have explored how the interagency relationship is shaped and defined by the transfer of funds or a formal fee-for-service contract. Therefore, while the source of funding that secures these partnerships has cemented over time, its impacts on interagency relations is as yet understudied. Interagency alliances and

"community partnerships" exist in many metro areas, and many are described anecdotally in the interviews of this project. However, these interactions generally lack a paper trail or a formal/legal interaction, and are thus more difficult to track or analyze scientifically. Still, these informal ties play a role in interagency cooperation and civic culture (Anheier, 2009; Boris & Krehely, 2002) that helps to shape relations among the various transportation providers in a given community (Merrett, 2001; Bryson, 2011; Wood et al, 2016).

| Programs Funded by §5310 Grants | Description |
|---|---|
| Contracted Transportation Service | A nonprofit transports clients using volunteer drivers and vehicles owned by either the nonprofit or driver |
| New Vehicle Purchase | A transit agency or nonprofit purchases vehicles suitable for transporting older adults and/or persons with disabilities |
| Travel Training | A transit agency or nonprofit trains older adults how to use transit/paratransit |
| Mobility Management | A transit agency or nonprofit coordinates transportation on an as-needed basis for designated older adults |
| Infrastructure Adaptation | A transit agency modifies sidewalks, bus stops, and crosswalks to aid in accessibility and walkability |

*Source: Federal Transit Administration, 2014; 2017.*

**Figure 3.1: Selected Transportation Programs Eligible for §5310 Funding**

**Form and function of interagency partnerships.** The shape that these government-nonprofit partnerships take in everyday practice is therefore a key element in understanding the nature of the partnerships. The term "partnership" can encompass a range of relationship formats, from informal community alliances to formal relationships involving contracts and fee-for-service arrangements (Salamon, 1995). The literature on partnerships among nonprofits tends to focus on contracting and formal partnership agreements rather than informal partnerships among nonprofits who may work in the same field or locale but who don't have formal or legal ties constituting a documentable partnership (Gazley and Brudney, 2007; Shaw, 2003). This study therefore focuses

on partnerships identified by interview subjects as formal or financial in nature, as these relationships generally include a greater emphasis on documentary evidence, financial transactions and contracts, and a paper trail that can be traced back to the start of the partnership. In the case of fee-for-service contracts, a vertical relationship between funder and recipient is implied. However, in this project as well as in the broader literature on nonprofits, such a relationship still constitutes a "partnership" in the eyes of many nonprofit and public-sector managers (Shaw, 2003). For partnerships involving §5310 funding, parties agree on both the geography and rider demographic to be served, in order to expand offerings or fill service gaps faced by the transit agency (Koffman et al, 2004). In the three metro areas examined in this study, the §5310 contracts function as either a supplement or a substitute for fixed-route and paratransit services provided by the transit agency. The partnership or contract thus provides different benefits to the two parties: Transit agencies gain additional capacity to serve new and existing riders, and nonprofits gain a stable funding source and broader community exposure.

**Administration, oversight, and review of interagency partnerships.** Oversight of these contracts and partnerships is limited, with little formal guidance from federal authorities as to how the interagency relationships should ideally function or how financial partnerships should perform beyond basic federal guidelines (Koffman et al, 2004). The §5310 program relies on states and local metropolitan planning organizations (MPO's) to audit expenditures and performance as they see fit (FTA, 2017) The Federal Transit Administration stipulates that states and local MPO's submit annual reports on expenditures and project status, but audits of performance and/or expenditures are not required by the FTA, nor is there presently a mechanism in place to encourage entities to perform audits (FTA, 2014). Individual nonprofits and their local funders are therefore left to audit and evaluate programs as they are able and willing to do so (Moxham, 2009; Talbot,

2005). It is generally accepted in the literature that partnerships involving contracts and fee-for-service arrangements allow both parties to examine performance and alter/terminate the contract at the next available opportunity (Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Poister, 2008; Radin, 2006). In all three cases of this study, oversight of transportation grants given to nonprofits is conducted solely by the distributing transit agency, and in all three cases, transit managers reported conducting some form of performance checking (though not "auditing") at least once each year for each active grant to a nonprofit. The effects of this performance checking process on the interagency relationship vary by case, and have implications for the future state of relations between the two agency types. Specific impacts are discussed in the results section of this chapter.

**Outlook for interagency partnerships as a policy solution.** The future prospects for contract-based partnerships remain positive, though the literature finds a few areas of concern, and this can impede academic understanding of the partnerships' possible benefits. The funding mechanism that has enabled so many of these partnerships has been functional since the mid-1970's, however systems to evaluate the impacts of these partnerships on providers and clients are lacking. In terms of quantitative performance evaluation, the impact of partnerships on transit ridership is arguably easier to track via count data and financial reports, and major public transit agencies do track such data. However, the impact of partnerships on the performance and capacity of the nonprofits themselves can be harder to quantify, as much of the impact occurs internally over time, and benefits are often qualitative and personal in nature. There is also no mechanism in place to track client satisfaction or health outcomes linked directly to the provision of transportation services. Despite the lack of reliable auditing or program-evaluation measures that might illustrate the objective costs and benefits of these partnerships, the appeal of sustained funding and the high demand for services continues to attract nonprofits to §5310 funding. The

consensus in the nonprofit literature is that partnerships and contracting lead to rapid growth, innovation, and professionalization among the employees of nonprofits (Smith, 2011; Smith and Lipsky, 1993), but long-term partnerships with government funders often impedes a nonprofit's flexibility and robs their leaders of the agency to make independent, locally-focused decisions. How this process impacts nonprofits in the realm of transportation is as yet unknown. Still, the sustained increase in the number of independent older adults will continue to fuel demand for more transportation services and related partnerships between transit agencies and nonprofits, and the impacts of these partnerships on nonprofit practices and management must be explored as these programs grow.

The central proposition of this study, therefore, is that nonprofits partner for a host of reasons, from financial need to administrative efficiency to the furtherance of client satisfaction. Parties engaged in these partnerships, no matter their structure or nature, are likely to view them as productive ways to grow their organizations and their program offerings.

**Methodology and Case Selection**

This study investigates two linked research questions: First, how and why do nonprofit transportation providers partner with government agencies? And second, how are these partnerships sought, classified, and perceived by administrators on both sides of the partnership?

The study focused on the management personnel of eight nonprofits and three public transportation agencies, operating in three American metropolitan areas. Due to the sensitive nature of the opinions and data provided by program managers, individual agencies and participants are not named in this study. The author selected the three metro areas based on a confluence of factors: First, each metro area hosts a considerably suburbanized population that is generally dependent on automobiles and driving for transportation. Second, these three metro areas

have visible and multi-modal transit networks, though all three networks focus chiefly on their urban core and offer limited fixed-route services to suburban areas. Third, this selection of metro areas offers diversity of geography and climate – two are in the Sun Belt and have generally mild winters, while the third is located in the Midwest and must contend with harsher winters that may influence older adults' travel behavior during those months. Within these three metro areas, the eight nonprofits were selected based on their explicit focus on serving older adults, and all of them were either dedicated solely to transportation services or considered their transportation offerings to play a dominant role in their broader operations. The public transportation agencies were chosen based on their status as the chief providers of current or former partnerships with the eight nonprofits in their respective cities.

After a wider process of direct solicitation via email correspondence, representatives from eight nonprofits agreed to be interviewed and documented for this project. Each city's public transit agency was also contacted, and representatives from all three agreed to a similar investigative treatment. A total of fourteen phone interviews were conducted with senior management at the eight nonprofits and three public agencies. Participants from nonprofits were chiefly executive directors and program founders, with two board members also interviewed. For the public agency interviews, two program managers and one public relations officer were interviewed. All of the interviews consisted of an agreed-upon set of questions and topics, and were structured as an open-ended discussion of key issues facing these organizations. A listing of the questions is included as Appendix A. The resulting discussions lasted over 90 minutes each, with a few approaching two hours in length. Subjects were generally willing to discuss the history and mission of their organizations, as well as the broader state of transportation for older adults in their communities and nationwide. Experiences with grants, partnerships, and shared marketing

strategies were also covered. The interviews were recorded, and the notes analyzed using axial coding and pattern matching of direct quotes to existing themes in the literature, particularly those related to nonprofit motivation, financial performance and grantsmanship, client satisfaction, and the performance/effectiveness of transportation programs being offered. An illustration of the coding process is included as Figure 3.2.

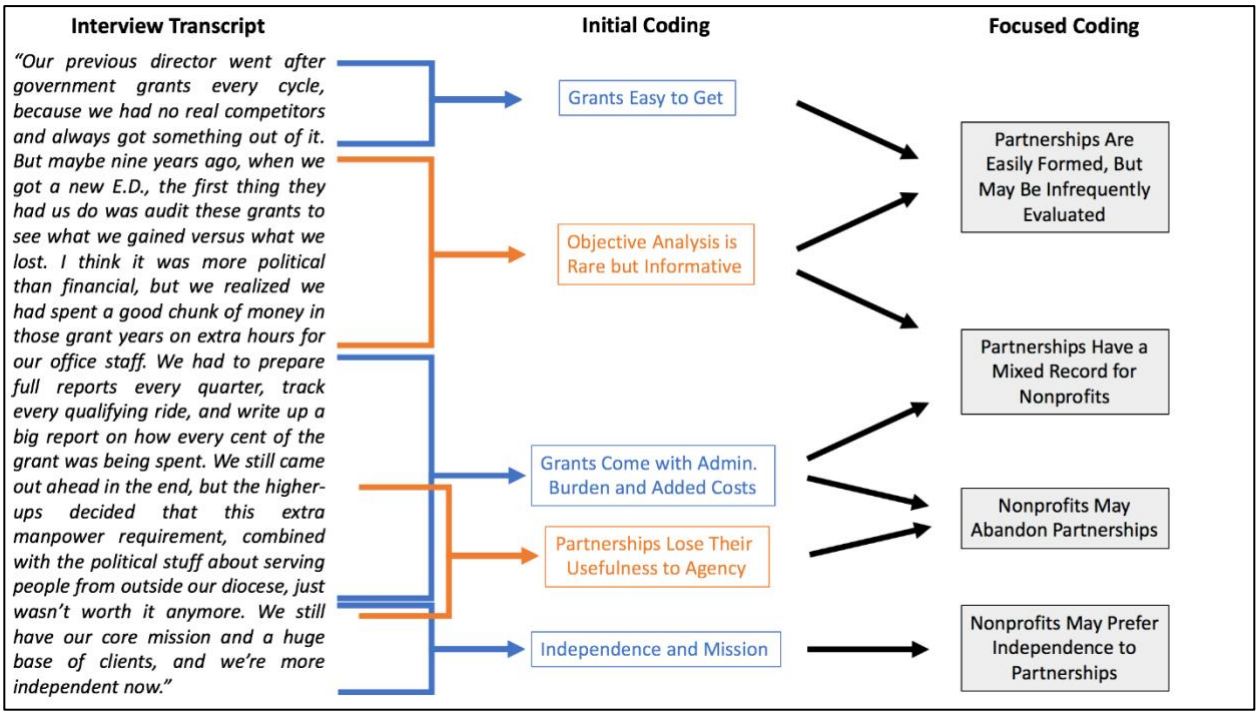


**Figure 3.2: Illustration of Coding Process from Interview Transcript**

Given the iterative nature of coding interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016), the examples of initial codes illustrated in Figure 3.2 were gathered from each full transcript and cross-referenced/compiled into a first round of generally open-ended codes. The initial codes were then organized into loose thematic codes using a process known as *Pattern Coding*, wherein similar sentiments and observations are grouped according to their strongest similarity. From there, a process of theme-building took place as the grouped codes were folded yet again into more

focused, but still open-ended, themes. This process of *Focused Coding*, as defined by Saldaña, is particularly useful in path-breaking qualitative studies where categories and patterns are either loosely-defined or totally open-ended, as in grounded theory.

This coding structure was further repeated with the agencies' annual reports and marketing materials, as they were made available for analysis, albeit with a specific unit of analysis determined beforehand. The focus of coding the marketing materials was on how these two agency types marketed themselves to older adults and the community, as well as the degree to which they explicitly outlined their role as a transportation provider both in concert with, and in effective competition with, public transit agencies. The focus of coding annual reports was on how the agencies communicated their mission, partnerships, funding, and productivity to their boards of directors and the general public. Examining these materials helped to better flesh out the nonprofits' vision and self-defined role as transportation providers.

Subjects requested, and were granted, anonymity as sources of information for this project. Nonprofit interviewees in two of the three metro areas had specific concerns about their comments being published or construed in a way that might jeopardize their agency's funding or partnerships. As a result, all interview subjects were granted anonymity and informed of this prior to the interviews taking place. To further protect their confidentiality, the three metro areas (situated in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwestern United States) have been given pseudonyms: Brookside, Lovell, and Chapman Falls. Such measures of confidentiality are sometimes necessary in qualitative work (Kaiser, 2009), particularly when the sources and locations could easily be identified by the reader via a process of deductive disclosure (Tolich, 2004; Ellis, 1995). The potential for a nonprofit's financial and community relationships to be damaged by the publication of critical remarks is of grave concern, and the author deemed the preservation of respondents'

confidentiality to be a reasonable adjustment to the project. A similar concern overshadows the relationships that public transit agencies have with active nonprofits in their respective communities. In keeping with the spirit of qualitative research advanced by Weiss (1994) and Kaiser (2009), the lessons learned from the interviews, agency documents, and supplemental materials have been preserved as the core of this study, even as names and locations have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

**Results**

The interview process yielded a range of anecdotes and insights regarding the nature of the interagency partnerships currently in place between elder-serving nonprofits their local public transit agencies. The data-gathering process began with interviews, and supplemental materials were provided by each interview subject as needed and requested by the author. Among the nonprofit managers, a substantial number of personal stories and workplace experiences were shared over the course of the interviews. Representatives from the public transit agencies were less colorful in their anecdotes, but nonetheless provided substantial information for the project. The color and tone of these anecdotes are preserved throughout this section in the form of direct quotes offered by interview subjects. While a host of substantive findings have emerged from this study, many of them indicate a sharp divide between transit officials and nonprofit officials – the two parties see these partnerships and contracting relationships in starkly different terms. The specifics of these differences of opinion are explored below, with linked policy implications discussed in a subsequent section.

**Partnership orientations are vertical, with no laterally-engaged pairs of equals.** In the partnerships investigated in this study, relationships between nonprofits and public transit agencies were of a vertical orientation – a “funder/recipient” model. Interview subjects from both agency

types described their respective relationships in this manner. In several cases, it was emphasized that the public transit agency is the dominant actor in the relationship, distributing funds and setting the terms of the grants and contracts. To quote from the interview with one transit manager in Chapman Falls, "Federal transportation funding flows through our agency and down through our grantees. We are the designated transportation providers, and we have a responsibility to ensure that money is spent on transportation and nothing else." Transit officials expressed a general sentiment that contracting of services has the potential to improve existing transportation offerings by more efficiently serving a broader base of clients, although data on ridership that includes both transit and nonprofit transportation modes was not made readily available for this investigation. They further described themselves as stewards of taxpayer funds and trained experts in the realm of transportation, while nonprofit officials tended to stress their role as client advocates who presently accept (or at one time did accept) public funding to provide transportation service to their client base of older adults. This conforms to the existing consensus on fee-for-service contracting among nonprofits, wherein each party in a contract recognizes their respective role and purpose, but both parties understand that the agency providing the funds is legally and administratively in command of the relationship.

**Contracts and performance are not evaluated by health or gerontology experts.** Although §5310 funds are dedicated to serving older adults and persons with disabilities, the funding structure makes no accommodation for third-party auditing by an entity trained in health or gerontology/geriatrics. Funds are awarded based on terms that each state or MPO sets internally, and performance/outcomes measurement is also conducted as each body sees fit. The three public transit agencies studied in this project do not require their §5310 recipients to be evaluated by anyone with expertise on aging, frailty, or physical/mental impairment. Funds are awarded based

solely on the strength of each agency's application, with special consideration given to agencies with existing ties or stature in the community. While the three public transit agencies do require annual reports from each of their §5310 recipients, none of them requires recipients to provide objective performance measures indicating the funds have indeed served the targeted populations or contributed to their overall health or wellbeing. The funds are simply awarded and spent on qualifying activities.

**Transit managers see partnerships as draining already-scarce resources.** These managers expressed, in various terms, a general concern that their agency's share of §5310 funding is spread too thin among their agencies as well as their nonprofit grantees, leading to a situation where neither party has sufficient funding to provide their desired level of service to older or disabled clients. One official expressed the following sentiment in her interview:

> [Transit agencies] are allowed to keep their pot of §5310 funds in-house if they want to, but there's always an expectation from the higher-ups that some of it will go to the nonprofits. That's fine, and they do amazing work, but it also sort of keeps us stuck. We can't fix paratransit like people want us to if we're handing out half our 5310 money to other agencies. We're stuck.

All three transit agencies offer paratransit service to qualifying residents, and paratransit service is generally the primary destination for §5310 funds that remain within a transit agency's coffers. The sentiment expressed by the Chapman Falls transit manager above illustrates how transit agencies contend with paratransit service that is in great demand, but often ill-equipped to fully meet the needs of all clients. This is indeed a root cause of the mobility gap for older adults in cities – that door-to-door transit is lacking or overburdened – and is part of the justification for giving out §5310 grants in the first place. But this transit-side argument suggests a belief that the

flaws of paratransit may never be resolved if agencies are forced to share this particular allotment of funding with area nonprofits. Despite this, transit officials noted the sustained pressure their agencies are under to engage more partners, diversify transportation offerings, and serve more clients region-wide. This view of nonprofits as both qualified grantees and competitors for scarce financial resources, if borne out among transit agencies nationwide, represents a potential source of tension in transit-nonprofit partnerships, particularly in those metro areas where paratransit service is regarded poorly by riders and political pressure to partner with nongovernmental agencies is high.

**Mature nonprofits view partnerships as cumbersome and not worth the effort.** Nonprofit managers who considered their agencies to be established and stable (and in general, having existed for at least a decade) viewed the prospect of contracts and partnerships with transit agencies to be difficult, overbearing, and generally not worth the effort or administrative expense of pursuing or executing. A nonprofit manager in Lovell had the following to say about her agency's negative experience with government grants:

> We ended up spending $28,000 the first year just on the time and labor it took to fill out all the application paperwork and write the reports. And the grant we got was maybe twice that amount.

As the quote above indicates, there were many anecdotes in the interviews where these experienced nonprofit managers felt the bureaucracy and added paperwork of a financial partnership detracted from – or even negated entirely – the financial benefit of having the partnership in the first place. Subjects in Chapman Falls and Lovell expressed particular frustration with the paperwork and report-writing involved in keeping the funding agency apprised of expenditures and operations on a quarterly or annual basis. Despite the lack of reporting

requirements laid out in the §5310 program nationally, agencies in the three case cities did in fact report their programming to the local transit agency either quarterly or annually. Respondents pointed out that this required time from their existing staff, thus cutting into the nonprofit's operations. An elder-services nonprofit in Chapman Falls mentioned an additional hardship in having to train staff members to utilize an advanced Excel template provided by their funding agency as a means of tracking ridership and financial data as closely as feasible. The difficulties in working with this template system were a motivating factor in that nonprofit eventually declining to reapply for grants from that government funder. These requirements, while neither unprecedented nor unexpected on the part of the nonprofits, detract from the benefits of receiving financial support, and in the case of established nonprofits deeply engaged in transportation programs, the funding boost is often not worth the added administrative burden. In fact, three of the eight agencies fitting that description had ceased pursuit of §5310 funding explicitly because the bureaucratic process – from writing a grant application to reporting outcomes in one form or another – was deemed by agency leaders to be more costly than beneficial to their operations.

**Newer nonprofits – and less-experienced managers – view partnerships positively.** In direct contradiction to their more established peers, the managers of newer or younger nonprofits interviewed tended to view partnerships and government grants in a positive and constructive manner. These managers tended to be newer to the realm of nonprofit management in general, and were also managing freshly-established nonprofits devoted to elder-care and transportation for older adults specifically. The founder and executive director of one such upstart nonprofit in Brookside was pleased that his agency received a grant he deemed helpful, and said the following in his interview:

> I was amazed to get a [§5310] grant in my first year. It was our first government grant, and may have been what kept us going between our start date and our first big round of donations. I barely knew what it was, but I'm glad we qualified for one.

Among this group of individuals, and the nonprofits they represented, the consensus was that external aid – particularly structured aid from government sources – lent much-needed structure and professionalization to their nascent organizations. This conforms to the literature noted earlier in this document, as the agencies needing professionalization tend to view the imposition of bureaucracy and additional training in a positive light. This benefit is in addition to the more direct benefit of secured funding for equipment, operations, and services for older adults and/or persons with disabilities. The difference of opinion documented here, if borne out by subsequent studies of the broader national nonprofit ecosystem, would seem to confirm the maturity-spectrum conceptualization laid out previously – specifically, nonprofits engaged in transportation services tend to be more professionally accepting of government grants in their early stages, and less so as the nonprofit matures.

**Nonprofit managers value mission over security of long-term funding.** Two of the eight elder-serving nonprofits, both based in Chapman Falls, identified themselves as faith-based organizations. Interview subjects from both expressed a general opposition to accepting government funding or oversight of their transportation offerings on moral grounds. In one case, the objection stemmed from a hesitance to serve clients outside of their faith, as the transit agency in their region required of all grant recipients. In the other case, quoted below, the objections were internal and based more on philosophical grounds and a desire to remain free from political influence. The manager from this particular nonprofit, in Lovell, spoke frankly about her faith-

based organization's policy on government aid, and the operational costs and benefits of having such a policy in place:

> We serve the congregations of our member churches, and the families that attend our services and accept our faith and our way of life. Grants from the state or federal government would get us more reliable buses, but our board and deacons feel that accepting that money would violate our covenant to serve our own faith in our own way. There's a deep discomfort here with taking taxpayer money and accepting more government oversight of our programs.

This concern about spiritual conflict regarding mission and serving the public is supported by evidence from the federal Section 5310 guidance, which stipulates that no transportation program funded via this program shall discriminate on the basis of religion, among other federally-protected classes (FTA, 2014). Among the other elder-serving nonprofits who had some objection/hesitance to partnerships involving contracts with government agencies, issues were more specific but still strongly-held. Another nonprofit in Lovell, which chiefly provides medical support services to older adults in the region, was approached by state authorities to consider using §5310 funding to launch a new program specifically for older-adult transportation. The representative interviewed explained that the idea was seriously explored by the nonprofit's board of directors, but they ultimately decided to decline the idea and adhere to their existing service mission. This nonprofit had already engaged partnerships and grants involving public health agencies and an area medical complex, but the prospect of a transportation partnership was vetoed. Those nonprofits engaged in non-transportation programs (such as social services, meals-on-wheels, and medical support services) were less inclined to supplement their programming with new transportation offerings, even if the funding to do so were provided by the transit authorities.

This stands in contradiction to the recent consensus in the nonprofit literature suggesting that the pursuit of grant dollars in a competitive marketplace leads many nonprofits to compromise their mission, disrupt longtime donor relationships, and misrepresent their programming in communications with potential sources of funding (Dolnicar et al, 2007; Jonker et al, 2009; Irvine et al, 2009). As explored above, if this split holds true across a larger sample of transportation-oriented nonprofits, it would represent a confirmed rebuke of the conventional wisdom on mission creep in nonprofit organizations. In addition, if the attitude of self-directed growth (from programs and a tone set by individual boards and managers) rather than grant-directed growth (from funders and partners) persists, it would suggest an element of strategic confidence in many of these nonprofits as they consider whether and how to enter into partnerships with other agencies and government funders.

**Discussion**

The richness of experiences – and diversity of opinions – surrounding partnerships between elder-serving nonprofits and public transit agencies indicates a realm of government-nonprofit relations primed for deeper study on a national scale. The insights gleaned from this project's interviews are essential to a better understanding of the nature of these interagency partnerships, and also provoke several insightful implications and directives for practice as these partnerships and contracts grow in number, scale, and complexity across the United States. Nevertheless, workable findings based on this study's research questions remain of paramount importance. A summary table of how the partnerships in the three metro areas form, operate, and are perceived is included below as Table 3.1. The subsequent discussion centers on the research questions of this study as a guiding structure for further analysis and classification of these partnerships within these three metropolitan areas.

**Table 3.1: Summary of Nonprofit-Transit Partnerships in Three Metropolitan Areas**

| Base Criteria | Brookside | Lovell | Chapman Falls |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Motivation for Partnerships** | Explicit directive from regional MPO to collaborate with nonprofits | Initiative from regional transit board, combined with §5310 grant availability | Explicit directive from regional MPO to collaborate with nonprofits |
| **Form/Classification of Partnerships** | Vertical – Grants and contracted services | Blended – Mix of grants and service partnerships | Blended – Mix of grants and service partnerships |
| **Nonprofit Perceptions of Partnerships** | Generally viewed as an opportunity for agency growth | Generally viewed as an intrusion into politics and mission | Generally viewed as bureaucratic and unnecessary |
| **Transit Agency Perceptions of Partnerships** | Viewed as a low-cost means of expanding transportation service | Viewed as useful in some neighborhoods, less so in others | Viewed positively, but also as competition for §5310 funding |
| **Maturity Status of Transportation Nonprofits** | Region dominated by startup nonprofits | Region dominated by established, faith-based nonprofits | Region dominated by established nonprofits of mixed origins |

**Motivations for partnerships.** In Brookside and Chapman Falls, transit agency officials mentioned being compelled to seek partnerships with nonprofits due to a directive from regional planning authorities to foster better ties with area nonprofits. Similarly, transit managers in Lovell were directed to form partnerships with elder-service nonprofits in order to more effectively distribute the region's §5310 allotment. The top-down origins of these partnerships are thus to some degree financially-motivated. The §5310 program remains the chief source of public funding for transportation programs intended for older adults and the disabled, and federal funding is scheduled to be increased by 15% each year until the next transportation omnibus legislation is crafted in or around 2020 (FTA, 2017). The eligibility for §5310 funds has also expanded, allowing monies to be spent not only on direct transportation services, but also on mobility management,

sidewalk improvements, and training to help vulnerable populations grow comfortable using transit. Elder-serving nonprofits are primed to be the chief beneficiaries of this program growth, and partnerships enhanced by formal contracts and financial arrangements will further cement interagency ties. These results thus indicate that interagency transportation partnerships are often formed by public transit agencies, acting at the behest of funders and regional planning authorities seeking to foster a more collaborative service environment.

**Form and classification of partnerships.** While issues of funding are prominent in these partnerships, two of the three case cities showed evidence of a "blended" model of both vertical financial ties and horizontal collaboration. Still, in all three cases, nonprofit managers expressed frustration with feeling dominated by current or past partners in transit agencies. This suggests a rather prominent example of information asymmetry impeding the collaborative process. Transit agencies are able to more effectively set the terms of transportation contracts not merely because they control the funding, but also because their personnel are generally considered better trained in matters of transportation planning and operations. This expertise is invaluable to the partnership. However, it must not remain solely on one half of the relationship. Nonprofits seeking to build long-term transportation programs in their own right must acquire training in these matters, and/or specialized staff who already possess training in urban planning, logistics, or trip scheduling. Not only would this expanded expertise allow the nonprofits to provide a higher quality of transportation services to their clients, it would also improve the professional and communitywide stature of nonprofits on the receiving end of grants. This could, in time, lead to some shifting in the "funder-grantee" relationship into something less vertical and more mutually supportive.

**Nonprofit perceptions of partnerships.** The perceptions of these partnerships among nonprofit managers have been documented throughout this chapter, and represent a diverse array

of views ranging from eager acceptance to seasoned disdain. It is here that views and outlooks diverge across the three metropolitan areas. In Brookside, elder-service nonprofit managers interviewed saw partnerships as a chance to grow their agency in clout and funding. Their view fits what Smith and Lipsky noted about interagency partnerships providing guidance and professionalization to inexperienced nonprofits. The nonprofits in Lovell held a starkly different view of partnerships with government agencies, generally seeing them as a negative political or moral influence on their organizations. While these views were strongly held, the influence of politics and faith-government interaction is prominent in their verbiage and arguably would not be shared by secular nonprofits in the same metro area. Future studies of interagency partnerships must therefore take into account the nonprofit agency's religious orientation and explicit mission language when interpreting the expressed feelings of managers. The case of Chapman Falls provides an illustration of a similar distrust of government-led partnerships, though based chiefly on bureaucratic rather than spiritual grounds. Nonprofit managers in that city viewed government partnerships and grants as burdensome, complex, and generally unnecessary to their broader mission of providing social services for older adults. It must be noted in this case, however, that both agencies interviewed in that region benefitted from major philanthropic support from local donors, and managers noted a generally limited "need" for government grants as a form of revenue. The issue of local funding that is secure and predictable over the long term has the potential to color these nonprofit managers' outlook on interagency partnerships and contracts, however richer study of other regions with generous local donors is needed before conclusions may be drawn on the matter.

**Transit agency perceptions of partnerships.** The opposite angle of this relationship study, that of how transit agency managers perceive their partnerships with nonprofits, provided a

significant contrast to the views expressed by nonprofit managers. The partnerships were generally viewed positively by this group of professionals, with some context-specific caveats. Transit managers in Brookside saw partnerships chiefly as a means of reducing costs while also improving transit connectivity in suburban areas. Grants to nonprofits in the region were said to be more cost-effective than expanding paratransit service to the same areas, and published materials from the transit agency said the same. In Lovell, transit managers offered a geographically nuanced opinion of their existing and potential partnerships with elder-service nonprofits, explaining that such a partnership would work better in some parts of their service area than in others. The differences were said to be a matter of socioeconomic status as well as geography, with certain suburban areas judged by these managers to contain older adults more willing than their cross-town counterparts to accept a ride from transit or a volunteer driver rather than to simply drive themselves. These managers noted no professional or personal reservations about contracting services with faith-based nonprofits, suggesting the reluctance of faith-based nonprofits in this city to partner with government agencies may indeed be based on a one-sided dislike. Complexity in the perception of partnerships also occurred in the interviews with Chapman Falls transit officials. In that case, the transit manager spoke optimistically about the future prospects for interagency partnerships in that region, but later in the same interview expressed a concern that the drive to contract transportation services via the §5310 program also represents a drain on the transit agency's operating and capital funds, leaving them less equipped to address the gaps in their own transit and paratransit services internally. When pressed to expand on this, the manager explained that while the §5310 program was crafted with the explicit goal of closing the mobility gaps facing older adults and persons with disabilities, he felt confident that his public transit agency could close its own service gaps more effectively than an outside party might. And by engaging in the contracting-out of services in

certain areas of the region, the transit agency was thus deprived of the needed funds to hire drivers, purchase vehicles, and organize more efficient routing systems to address older adult mobility needs. Taken together, this assortment of views on the ways in which nonprofit partners do (or do not) help transit agencies accomplish their mission illustrates a different set of perceptions than that which is generally felt by the managers interviewed in this study. This divergence speaks to the multi-dimensional nature of these interagency partnerships, and serves as a fresh reminder that complexity and subjectivity are a *sine qua non* in relationships between individuals of different experiences and missions.

**Maturity status of transportation nonprofits.** As discussed in a previous chapter, nonprofits operating transportation programs face shifting push/pull factors as they mature from the "start-up" stage through "adolescence" and into "maturity." Professional standards and expertise are different across this lifespan, as is the funding environment, the nonprofit's political connections, and its supply/demand of transportation programs. As the interview findings have indicated for this project, there is a marked divergence of opinion on the utility and appeal of government contracting and financial partnerships among nonprofits of varying stages of maturity. For various reasons, newer nonprofits in this study (clustered chiefly in Brookside) tended to view funding from public transit agencies as a welcome resource. Meanwhile, more established nonprofits (in Chapman Falls and Lovell) had several reasons why they were hesitant or even flatly unwilling to seek taxpayer funding in the form of grants and fees.

For public agencies to navigate and eventually overcome this difference in opinion going forward, effort must be made to tailor interagency communications to suit a specific nonprofit's maturity status and general stature within the community. A one-size-fits-all approach has arguably not worked in this context. In dealing with startup nonprofits interested in transportation

contracting, transit agencies and funders should stress the growth potential inherent in these partnerships. A young agency may find the prospect of stable funding and assistance with establishing a long-term financial and operations plan attractive to their long-term goals. The leadership of a more established and firmly-funded agency, however, may prefer to be treated as experienced experts in the realm of elder care who effectively may not need the extra funds as badly. For these agencies, the prospect of funding-plus-bureaucracy may not be appealing. If funders wish to foster a long-term relationship with agencies such as this, they will need to do a more nuanced job in convincing confident nonprofits that the relationship provides benefits not only to the two partner agencies, but also to their shared base of clients. Rather than marketing the contract-based partnership as merely a source of funds that can help an agency in need, they must better link the partnership to its potential and actual outcomes in the community. They must do so in a way that convinces the leadership of a nonprofit that the partnership and contract being offered is worth the extra time and effort on their part. In any case, a more nuanced and flexible approach to interagency communication will arguably address both the feelings of verticality ("funders and grantees") and the feeling among experienced managers that these contracts are too costly, complex, or politically sensitive to be viable for their organization and clients. A better process, from the federal program through to the "middle man" state and regional agencies and on to the nonprofits receiving grants, is needed to ensure these partnerships continue to evolve in a constructive manner that more effectively addresses the mobility and wellbeing concerns of older adults in America.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how and why nonprofit transportation providers partner with other organizations (chiefly public transit agencies), and how those partnerships are

organized and viewed by managers of both organization types involved. What began as a general investigation of a broadly-defined concept evolved into a focus on government-funded contracting via a single dominant transportation grant program – the §5310 program administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation. Each program manager provided a wealth of informative content and colorful opinions on the nature and appeal of these contract-based partnerships, and the most general consensus to emerge was one of complexity and three-dimensional relationship orientations. The vertical orientation of the "funder-grantee" relationship was understood and accepted as accurate by both agency types involved, and while representatives from both camps expressed a wish to be more collaborative and supportive, little appetite was expressed in the interviews for a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between grant funders and grant recipients. The prospect of a lengthy and comprehensive reform effort struck many interviewees as complicated and ultimately, in the words of one administrator, "such a mess that [federal funders] won't know who to blame when it falls apart." The strongest and most negative views regarding these partnerships came from senior managers of established nonprofits, while their colleagues in start-up nonprofits generally held an opposing view and expressed gratitude for having access to partnerships that enhanced their offerings. Thus, the study documented a link between a nonprofit's age and stature (and staff professionalization), and its leadership's view of the usefulness of contract-based partnerships with public agencies.

If this link to a nonprofit's stature and professionalization can be further documented in a larger sample of providers, it would contribute a new layer to the literature's existing understanding of nonprofit-government relations in the context of partnerships and contracting. Far from assuming uniform acceptance of financial support, this revised model suggests that providers exist on a spectrum of capability, community stature, and confidence as independent

actors addressing an unresolved mobility gap. As the need for transportation services for older adults will likely continue to outpace transit agencies' ability to meet the demand, the need for service partnerships and contracts with qualifying nonprofits will only grow in scale and urgency. In this case, funding agencies must accept that their potential nonprofit partners may not necessarily deem the benefit of added funding to be worth the costs of added administrative or labor burden. In seeking to address the mobility gaps facing older adults in their service areas with all due haste, they must therefore be prepared to tailor their outreach to better engage potential partners and grant recipients.

The reforms suggested in the Discussion section of this chapter generally involve an increased cost of either funds or administrative burden, potentially adding to an already stressed component of the relationship. However, if the costs are justified on efficiency grounds – and if the reforms lead to a net increase in productivity or a measurable benefit to older clients – then funding agencies could arguably insist on the reforms as beneficial to both clients and providers. Essential to this element of reform, however, is the inclusion of grant recipients as stakeholders. Rather than merely imposing top-down reforms on political or efficiency grounds, funders at the federal and regional level must engage their grantee partners in a collaborative reform effort that improves efficiencies and outcomes for all parties, and treats the grant recipients as genuine partners of solid stature rather than simply as beneficiaries of federal largesse.

The study's findings provided a diversity of opinion and style not initially accounted for in the author's basic proposition that nonprofit managers would view these partnerships positively. This diversity does, however, contribute to better understanding the nature of nonprofits as providers of a public service (transportation) in the public sphere. As the literature on this topic continues to mature and establish workable findings for practice, the linkages between a

nonprofit's capabilities, community stature, and overall confidence as a voice on urban transportation issues will generate additional insights and solutions for a system in need of rapid reform and expansion.

Studies exploring the nuances of transportation, gerontology, and government contracting, as this one has, constitute a novel contribution to the literature on nonprofit-government relations, however much work remains to be done. Most critically, the findings on vertically-oriented partnerships and the emergent diversity of viewpoints based on agency/management stature and expertise must be explored in additional metropolitan areas. Another critical element in need of additional examination is the lack of oversight of these programs by health or geriatric-medicine experts – and whether this lack of oversight is both universal and quantifiably detrimental to the productivity of these elder-serving partnerships. Adding such a layer of oversight to the existing contract relationship would arguably add some cost and complexity to the arrangement, but if some measurable improvement results from the change, political pressure may compel the change anyway. A wider survey pool of public agencies and elder-serving nonprofits would also help to better understand current efforts at the local level to overcome the stated bureaucratic burdens of fee-for-service contracting. If agencies are innovating ways to make this relationship simpler and more productive, this must be documented for the literature. The relationship between nonprofits and transit agencies shows no sign of waning in intensity or demand, and studies documenting these interactions – their benefits as well as their drawbacks, will be vital to pursuing a transportation agenda that serves older clients while also addressing issues of health, well-being, and efficient stewardship of tax dollars.

# CHAPTER FOUR:

# THE USER'S PERSPECTIVE

As the proportion of older adults (those aged 65 and older) living in suburban areas continues to grow, issues of transportation access and safe mobility are emerging as key indicators of older Americans' ability to harmoniously age in place (Rosenbloom, 2001). Whereas many suburban residents may have moved to that location in their younger years, when driving great distances was not seen to be an obstacle, being able to navigate the auto-oriented suburbs in old age can be quite different. The aging process can impair a driver's senses, neurological responses, and spatial reasoning and sense of direction, all of which can lead to impaired driving (Carp, 1988; Peel et al, 2005). Compounding the difficulties faced by individual older adults is the broader challenge of providing managed alternatives to driving for this population. Suburban land-use typologies often make fixed-route transit an expensive and unfeasible endeavor, and the public transit options that tend to be available in suburbs are generally regarded as sub-optimal for older adults due to limited scheduling, higher average fares, and vast distances between points of interest (Adams-Price, 2013). It is into this service gap that elder-service nonprofits have begun to provide a safe and more personalized means of transportation for these clients in this geographic context. An array of internal management practices and external reputational factors are helping nonprofits to offer a unique type of service for older adults that is generally more client-focused than many offerings of public transit agencies (Webber et al, 2010). As these nonprofit alternatives to transit grow in scale and influence, questions remain concerning their comparative effectiveness, community reputation, and motivations for serving suburban older adults. The issue of client perception and customer satisfaction is of particular importance when comparing nonprofit and public transportation.

Studies exploring the needs, desires, and perceptions of elder users of transportation services are relatively sparse or limited in scale (see Kostyniuk and Shope, 2003, and Choi et al, 2012). In addition, studies exploring the specific role and impact of elder-service nonprofits on transportation for suburban older adults are effectively nonexistent given those programs' relative youth and limited scope. It is therefore not documented in the literature how these nonprofit-managed transportation programs are seen or valued by older adults, or whether programs designed and funded to enhance the mobility of older adults deliver any measurable or perceived improvement in elder mobility.

This chapter explores the perspective of suburban older adults who use some combination of transit, paratransit, driving, and nonprofit-managed transportation for their everyday transportation needs. Using a verification-type focus group format, the author finds several points of consensus among older adults who share at least some familiarity with both public transportation and those programs operated by nonprofit elder-service agencies. Results indicate many older adults are keenly aware of operational and administrative differences between the two service formats, and many also harbor a strong personal preference for the nonprofit options over the public ones. The findings suggest that these nonprofit-managed transportation programs hold significant social capital among suburban older adults, and are well-positioned to leverage their staff expertise and community ties to offer a viable and popular transportation program that operates either in concert with, or in direct competition with, public transit and driving.

**Background**

The issue of transportation services for older adults is one of increasing interest in the transportation literature, yet many questions remain unanswered. Studies exploring the role of driving and traditional public transit as modes of older adult transportation are growing in number

and complexity (Burkhardt, 2003; Clarke et al, 2008; Choi et al, 2012), but still missing are studies that explore the menu of transportation options from the perspective of the clients themselves. Burkhardt (2003) developed a metric for assessing and tracking rider satisfaction with driving and transit, however the recent growth in nonprofit-operated transportation programs was not a part of that study and arguably must be explored. Given the substantial percentage of older adults residing in suburban areas with poor linkages to traditional transit (Adams-Price, 2013; Beverly Foundation, 2001), and given transportation's direct links to the health and wellbeing of older adults (Webber et al, 2010; Peel et al, 2005; Whelan et al, 2006), this issue is of critical importance to a growing literature on older adults' choices, preferences, and options regarding transportation and mobility in their communities.

**Mobility options for suburban older adults.** A core concept in individual transportation choice (or lack of choice) is that of mobility, and how the users of a transportation program might perceive themselves as more or less in control of their ability to move from place to place. The consensus among planners is that older adults conceptualize mobility chiefly through the lens of automobiles and driving (Cevallos et al, 2010; Hess, 2009). Older adults therefore generally prefer to drive themselves and make their own direct decisions about transportation. For those who can no longer safely drive themselves, many are likely to choose a transportation provider that best speaks to their individualistic conception of mobility and independent choice (Kim, 2011). However, given the structural limitations of fixed-route public transit (higher labor costs, specialized vehicles, route-planning challenges, etc.), public transit agencies are generally unable to provide the sort of individualized service that older adults desire (Rosenbloom, 2004). Paratransit (or "door-to-door" transportation") service is required by law to be offered to qualifying public transit customers (Koffman, 2004), however these programs have been documented as

being inadequate, expensive to operate (Adams-Price, 2013; Koffman and Salstrom, 2001; Hess, 2009), and generally unpopular with older adult riders (Wood et al, 2017). Given the generally poor availability of fixed-route transit in suburban areas, coupled with the widely-held skepticism and mixed availability of paratransit among older adults (Coughlin, 2009), the personal automobile remains the dominant form of transportation for suburban older adults (Burkhardt, 2003).

**Mobility as an indicator of quality of life.** Rosenbloom (2004) classifies older adult mobility chiefly as an older individual's ability to engage in one or more means of transporting themselves from place to place as independent members of the community. Beyond the physical/medical capability to leave one's home, mobility in a planning context is defined as having attainable and useful access to one or more modes of transportation (Coughlin and Proulx, 2012). It is therefore by extension that access to mobility equates to a general access to essential services in one's community – medical care, grocery shopping, worship activities, socialization, and so forth. Carp (1988) links mobility with independence more directly than Rosenbloom, arguing that personal mobility lies at the heart of independent action for older adults, and is a vital part of an elder's ability to regulate self-care. Given the essential nature of access to transportation and mobility services in ensuring independence and a stable quality of life for older adults, investigation is needed into the degree to which providers of transportation services are not only present in the areas where older adults most need them, but also willing and able to provide services in a manner that older adults find appealing and trustworthy.

**Nonprofit transportation as mobility enhancement.** While access to multiple reliable transportation options is arguably essential to maintaining older adults' independence and quality of life, not all modes are equally available to all older adults. This is true particularly in suburban areas, where fixed-route transit is generally scarce or structured around the travel needs and times

of commuters (Hess, 2009). In addition, although paratransit services are offered ostensibly to serve those individuals living beyond the reach of fixed-route transit, the aforementioned shortcomings documented in the literature indicate this mode is also ill-equipped to meet the needs of the full array of suburban older adult riders. Thus, a service gap is present between what is needed and what is offered by public transit entities. Facing a crisis of mobility among their non-driving suburban clients – and invigorated by generous federal transportation subsidies through the Section 5310 Program – many elder-serving nonprofits in American metro areas have launched transportation programs of their own (FTA, 2017; Burkhardt, 2000). These programs generally leverage internal expertise with aging issues to organize client-focused transportation programs that work as a supplement or replacement for driving and public transit (Merritt, 2001; Beverly Foundation, 2001). And as previous chapters of this dissertation have noted, these nonprofit programs are forming partnerships and funding relationships with public transit agencies and local governments in order to add structure and professionalization to their efforts. Significant growth among this type of provider is occurring, but richer study of nonprofits' role in transportation – particularly their influence and support among older adults – is needed in order to more effectively gauge their long-term viability as a supplement to existing options.

**Rider assessments of older adult transportation programs.** A recurring theme in the literature is the rationale that an older adult's usage of a given transportation alternative relies on two components: The availability and visibility of that alternative within the individual's community, as well as the individual's views, desires, and perceptions of said alternative. Studies examining these two components have produced mixed results, yet provide key insights for future research. A landmark study by Coughlin (2001) utilized focus groups of individuals over the age of 75 to explore concepts of mobility and independence as they relate to older adults' ability to

drive themselves. Respondents placed a high value on auto ownership and the ability to drive as a hallmark of independence in old age, and almost unanimously felt that driving themselves was preferable to all alternatives. However, the groups expressed openness to alternatives involving riding in an automobile rather than a bus. The study noted differences in perceptions of transit between urban older adults (who were accustomed to transit and walking, and thus more comfortable not driving) and suburban older adults (who were not). Similar findings were documented by Kostyniuk and Shope (2003), who surveyed older adults in Michigan and found they were generally unfamiliar with transportation alternatives and distrustful of "bureaucratic" government agencies. In addition, the authors found that respondents distrusted transit specifically and held a strong preference for either driving themselves or taking a ride in a known person's vehicle. As with Burkhardt (2003), no dimension was added for the role of nonprofit transportation programs in the analysis of preferences.

The evidence from this literature on older adults' transportation preferences suggests that the transportation attributes most desired by older adults (reliability, individual choice, and high-quality customer service) are some of the same attributes that nonprofit transportation providers interviewed in previous chapters of this dissertation identify as providing in abundance. They are also arguably similar to the attributes desired by working-age users of transit (Cervero, 1998). However, the existing lack of significant formal study into how the users of these nonprofit-run transportation programs perceive them – or whether the riders notice any measurable difference in quality of service – makes this particular area one in need of exploration and study.

It is into this knowledge cap that this study finds its purpose. The central proposition of this project is that older adults wishing to use a mode other than driving, and who have access to both public transit and nonprofit-managed transportation, are likely to choose the nonprofit-

managed mode. This choice is sure to be based on factors such as customer service, community reputation, and friendliness of staff. This preference is likely to endure even if the nonprofit options are more expensive, more complex, or less available.

**Methodology**

A two-part research question forms the core of this study: What are suburban older adults' perceptions of the various transportation options available to them (driving, transit, paratransit, and nonprofit-managed transportation), and how do these perceptions shape older adults' transportation choices?

This study centered on the impressions of suburban older adults in a focus group format. These groups were organized with the assistance of nonprofit gatekeepers in the three metropolitan areas, and were structured to incorporate a diverse set of transportation users. Per Barbour and Kitzinger (1998), a gatekeeper is defined as an individual whose proximity to a study population makes them well-suited to act as a facilitator and point of contact for a qualitative researcher. In this case, nonprofit managers acted as gatekeepers for the author, disseminating information and helping to organize focus group meetings. The process of selection, discussion, and analysis is outlined in the following sections, and includes a description of the primary system of measuring and quantifying client impressions regarding the various modes of transportation available to them.

This study focused on the older-adult clients of eight elder-service nonprofits in three American metropolitan areas. All eight nonprofits provide transportation services for clients, either as their chief mission or as a significant portion of their catalogue of offerings. Due to the sensitive nature of the opinions and data provided, individual agencies and participants are not named in this study. The three metro areas have been given pseudonyms: Brookside, Chapman Falls, and Lovell. The author selected the three metro areas based on a confluence of factors: First, each

metro area hosts a considerably suburbanized population that is generally dependent on automobiles and driving for transportation. Second, these three metro areas have visible and multi-modal transit networks, though all three networks focus chiefly on their urban core and offer limited fixed-route services to suburban areas. Within these three metro areas, the eight nonprofits were selected based on their explicit focus on serving older adults, and all of them were either dedicated solely to transportation services or considered their transportation offerings to play a dominant role in their broader operations. Willing program managers agreed to be interviewed as part of a related study, and were subsequently asked to help organize focus groups of their clients, effectively serving as gatekeepers for this population of transportation users.

**Focus group structure and composition.** Two focus groups were conducted in each of the three metro areas throughout January of 2018. The groups included a mix of both those who use the modes in question and those who do not. This mixed approach to focus group composition reflects the consensus in the focus group literature regarding the efficacy of heterogeneous groups in providing a wider array of opinions and insights on a given topic (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998; McLafferty, 2004). Focus groups were scheduled to occur during both a scheduled lunch and a morning or afternoon coffee and socialization period. Present at each focus group were gatekeepers from the local elder-service nonprofits as well as the author. Consent forms were distributed and collected prior to the discussion. In addition, a half-page survey of demographic questions was attached to the consent form, in order to better ground each group's inputs in both age cohort and urban geography. A deeper analysis of these demographic details is presented later in this section. Attendance at each of the six focus groups varied by metro area and time of day, as well as some variation accounting for winter weather delays in one of the three cities. Table 4.1 describes each of the six groups in more detail.

**Table 4.1: Selected Characteristics of Focus Groups in Three Metropolitan Areas**

| Location of Focus Group | Description of Metropolitan Area Studied | Time of Focus Group | Users of Both Transit and Nonprofit Transportation | Users of Either Transit or Nonprofit Transportation | Users of Neither Transit nor Nonprofit Transportation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brookside | Suburban-dominant metro area in the Southeastern U.S., with generally auto-dependent older adults | Lunch | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| | | Morning | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Lovell | Suburban-dominant metro area in the Southwestern U.S., with generally transit-dependent older adults | Lunch | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| | | Afternoon | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| Chapman Falls | Metro area in the Midwestern U.S. with a mix of transit- and auto-dependent older adults | Lunch | 6 | 0 | 1 |
| | | Afternoon | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| **Total Participants** | | | 29 | 12 | 9 |

**Participant recruitment.** The focus group participants were recruited with the direct assistance of nonprofit agency gatekeepers in each of the three metro areas. The managers solicited participants via their client email lists or in person at events organized by the nonprofits and assisted with the moderation of focus groups. In four cases newsletters were used to advertise the focus groups. The scheduling was based around existing lunch and social gatherings at facilities already engaged in hosting such events, both with the intention of attracting the most potential group participants as well as providing a base incentive for participation. This had the additional benefit of reducing the scheduling and cost burden for the author. Participants were encouraged to bring a spouse or friend to the focus group, in order to add a non-user's perspective to the groups. Only a handful of participants ultimately met this criterion – most attendees were in fact users of the nonprofit services and/or transit services. The only stated requirement of attendees was that they "hold views on transportation in the community," and use at least one of the following modes: Driving, transit, paratransit, and nonprofit transportation.

**Focus group demographics.** The six focus groups featured older adults from a broad demographic profile, and while the makeup of each group was organic and a function of which older adults chose to attend the event, the resulting diversity of personalities, habits, and preferences led to several rich and colorful discussions in all three cities. The brief demographic survey attached to the consent form allowed for the collection of some basic information on age, residential location typology, driving status, and general transportation habits. A copy of the survey is included as Appendix D. All participants completed these forms prior to or during the focus group discussions, many with the assistance of the author or local gatekeeper. A summary of these data is presented in Table 4.2, and the implications for this demographic makeup are discussed in greater depth in the Findings section.

**Table 4.2: Selected Demographics of Focus Group Participants**

| Characteristic | | Brookside | Lovell | Chapman Falls |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Median Age Range | | 70-74 | 75-79 | 70-74 |
| Gender Balance | | | | |
| | Female | 76% | 59% | 50% |
| | Male | 24% | 41% | 50% |
| Neighborhood Type | | | | |
| | Urban | 71% | 47% | 37% |
| | Suburban | 29% | 53% | 63% |
| Driving Status | | | | |
| | Driver | 35% | 12% | 19% |
| | Non-Driver | 65% | 88% | 81% |
| Most Frequently Used Mode | | | | |
| | Automobile | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| | Transit | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| | Paratransit | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| | Nonprofit Transportation | 9 | 9 | 10 |
| Frequency of Trips outside the Home | | | | |
| | Daily | 6 | 4 | 4 |
| | Several per Week | 2 | 8 | 1 |
| | Once a Week | 8 | 5 | 7 |
| | Several per Month | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| | Monthly | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The data presented in Table 4.2 present a few noteworthy outcomes. For example, the Lovell groups skewed somewhat older than in the other two cities. This is arguably due to the one of Lovell's focus groups took place in an assisted living facility. In addition, the gender mix of the Brookside focus groups was far less balanced than in the other two cities. There is no known structural reason for this occurrence, and the author and Brookside gatekeeper attributed the presence of so many female participants to mere happenstance and self-selection. Finally,

participants in Brookside self-selected their neighborhood type as being predominantly "urban." The survey form gave no definition for "urban" or "suburban," and participants were left to determine for themselves whether they lived in an urban or suburban area.

**Focus group procedures.** The focus groups proceeded based on standard practices laid out by Krueger (2002), with processes and steps laid out for participants at the start. The focus groups were hosted at a mix of senior centers, a public library, and an assisted living facility. All six focus groups took place on the same day as pre-arranged activities at those facilities, allowing participants to take part without disruption to their existing routines and travel schedules. The author moderated all groups, with varying degrees of assistance from nonprofit managers who organized the events and assisted in communicating with some participants. The purpose of the focus groups was explained to the participants, as well as the intended uses of the information gathered from the groups. Members were promised anonymity of both name and city of residence, and empowered to speak frankly about their experiences as a means of educating the public as well as potentially improving the transportation situation of other older adults like themselves. The author also spoke briefly about his own work history as a scholar of older adult issues in transportation. Each focus group was recorded (audio only), and the group was informed of this ahead of time. Members were reminded to speak one at a time, to be frank in their input, and to be somewhat brief in order to keep the schedule moving. Each group was limited to 90 minutes due to room scheduling and the gatekeepers' time commitments.

**The Burkhardt Metric of transportation assessment for older adults.** A landmark study of older adults' transportation preferences, undertaken by Burkhardt in 2002, forms a methodological anchor for this study. Burkhardt's study involved adapting a set of eight predetermined transportation attributes into grounded, declarative statements that focus groups of

older adults might find agreeable or disagreeable. While that study focused only on transit and paratransit as alternatives to driving, this project adds a new dimension to assess perceptions and performance of nonprofit transportation options for older adults. In addition, a dimension on driving has been expanded from Burkhardt's original structure. A full description of the eight transportation attributes, along with specific measures and sample statements of affirmation, is included as Appendix E.

**Data collection process.** Appendix E was shown to the focus group participants as part of a two-step verification and analysis process. First, participants were asked the degree to which they agreed with the statements of affirmation on the right-hand side of the table. Individual feelings of agreement/disagreement were recorded and will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter. In addition to affirming or refuting the existing sentiments in the table, participants were asked if any major feelings or perceptions were not currently featured on the table. Whenever an individual argued for a specific new measure or sentiment to be added to (or removed from) the table, the rest of the group was asked to agree or disagree. These discussions were generally brief, but allowed for an open process. This process of consensus building helped to verify the accuracy and completeness of the metric, while also solidifying individual feelings about how each of the modes in question (driving, transit, paratransit, and nonprofit transportation) performed across the eight broad categories. Finally, the element of expression allowed individual older adults to tell stories of particularly memorable experiences with one or more of these modes of transportation. These experiences were often related to those shared by others in the group, and provided not only rich descriptions of events and perceptions, but also a relatable context in which the entire group could conceptualize and assess the state of transportation in their metro area. While individual anecdotes were not coded as a part of this project's analytical process, they proved invaluable to

building consensus in each of the focus groups and showcasing personal experiences with transit, and were therefore an essential part of this semi-structured effort.

**Limitations of methodology.** The focus groups were organized with considerable assistance from local gatekeepers, and although the author is grateful for their invaluable support, their prominent presence in this process – from advertising the focus groups to helping to select participants to being in the room during the focus groups – arguably had some impact on the makeup and deliberations of the focus groups. As will be discussed in subsequent sections, many in the focus groups were hesitant to criticize nonprofit transportation programs in their community, and this may have been due to some degree to the presence of a nonprofit program manager in the room at the time of the discussion. The author asked the nonprofit manager at each of the six focus groups to verbally reassure participants that their opinions would not be used against them and would not affect their eligibility for nonprofit transportation services. Still, the possibility remains that some participants hesitated to criticize a program whose manager was in the room. In addition, many of the focus group participants entered the meeting already acquainted with one another. While fully random participant selection is deemed ideal for focus group composition (Morgan, 1997), this project involved individuals residing a great distance from the author's home institution. Thus, for efficiency and ease of access, the author chose a purposive or "curated" approach to participant recruitment based around known users of the transportation services in question. The prevailing structural risks to this approach are twofold: First, it represents a nonrandom sample that is more susceptible to gatekeeper bias or self-selection bias. Second, among participants who knew each other before the group, the issue of social desirability bias in responses may have occurred. This type of bias in focus group responses has been defined as individuals answering questions in a manner that avoids taking offensive or embarrassing stands

on delicate social issues (Fisher, 1993; Grimm, 2010). For example, a participant may self-censor his or her views on public transit riders if those views contain stereotypes or other socially undesirable notions. The question of whether social desirability bias was present in some responses is impossible to answer within the confines of this project, however its potential existence and influence must be accounted for in this analysis.

**Results**

Individuals in all six focus groups were shown the Burkhardt metric (Appendix E), and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the sample statement attached to each concept and measure. Sentiments were compiled across the six groups into Table 4.3, with points of particular contention or elaboration identified with bold text. The author visually observed the attitudes of focus group participants as each topic was discussed, and their body language, energy level, and tone of voice were documented to determine the level of consensus, agreement, or contention regarding a particular point of discussion. As Table 4.3 indicates, the groups had a range of opinions about the various measures of transportation. In order to measure the strength of consensus on a given statement or sentiment, the author observed the degree to which group participants nodded, gestured, or engaged with the conversation either physically or verbally. Topics engendering vigorous nodding, emotive statements, and broad agreement/disagreement were classified as having a more rigorous and sound consensus among participants. While many of these general perceptions and opinions matched Burkhardt's original findings, the addition of a column for nonprofit transportation produced fresh comparisons and strong opinions for many. The most striking points of consensus are discussed in the following section.

**Older adults perceive nonprofit transportation to be just as connected to community nodes and amenities as private autos.** Participants in all six focus groups felt that nonprofit

transportation options offered a level of mobility and physical connectivity matching that of private automobiles and driving. Whereas transit operates on fixed routes, private cars and nonprofit-owned vehicles are free to travel to and from any point within a region, lending substantial "door-to-door" connectivity and personal convenience for older riders. Scheduling trips is also generally more flexible and rider-driven, again somewhat mirroring the experience of owning an automobile. The consensus in these groups was that fixed-route transit was too dependent on routes and bus stops, and while paratransit operates on an explicitly "door-to-door" model in all three metro areas, group members generally deemed it less connective than services using private autos. To quote one blunt participant in a Chapman Falls focus group: "They use the same cars and same roads as the rest of us, so why wouldn't they go everywhere that one of our cars could take us?" Participants in the Lovell and Chapman Falls groups discussed needing to occasionally travel beyond the formal service area of their local transit or paratransit agency (for example, across state lines) and being turned down for long-distance rides by that agency. At the same time, their local elder-service nonprofits were willing to commit to the trip.

This similarity between private automobiles and nonprofit-driven vehicles is precisely what nonprofit managers hope to see, according to their statements in interviews. A major selling point of these nonprofit options over transit is the flexibility and connectivity that only a "regular car" can offer, and this point was brought up in virtually every interview with a nonprofit manager. Those officials deliberately structure their operations and marketing materials to showcase the flexibility and ease-of-access offered by passenger automobiles, and the fact that focus group participants are noticing the advantages of passenger automobiles operated by nonprofits indicates that those marketing efforts are leading to more attractive services.

**Table 4.3: Assessments of Transportation Modes by Older Adults**

| Concept | Specific Measures | Driving | Transit | Paratransit | Nonprofit Transportation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ACCEPTABILITY | | | | | |
| | This Mode is Reliable | Agree | Strongly Disagree | **Strongly Disagree** | Agree |
| | This Mode has Great Connectivity | **Strongly Agree** | Strongly Disagree | Agree | **Strongly Agree** |
| | This Mode is Safe from Crime | Disagree | Disagree | Disagree | Agree |
| | I Like Telling Peers I Use This Mode | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | **Disagree** |
| | The Vehicles are of High Quality | Agree | Disagree | Disagree | Agree |
| | The Service is of High Quality | N/A | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | I Trust This Mode | Agree | Disagree | Disagree | **Strongly Agree** |
| ACCESSIBILITY | | | | | |
| | The Vehicles are Easy to Use | Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Agree |
| | The Personnel are Helpful | N/A | Disagree | Disagree | **Strongly Agree** |
| | It is Easy to Plan Trips | Agree | Agree | **Strongly Disagree** | Agree |
| ADAPTABILITY | | | | | |
| | This Mode Protects me from Bad Weather | Strongly Agree | Disagree | Agree | Agree |
| | Schedules are Flexible | Strongly Agree | Disagree | **Strongly Disagree** | Agree |
| | This Mode Allows Special Requests/Changes | Strongly Agree | Disagree | Disagree | Agree |
| AVAILABILITY | | | | | |
| | This Mode Covers the Geography I Need | Strongly Agree | Disagree | Agree | Agree |
| | Service is Frequent and Waits are Minimal | Strongly Agree | Disagree | **Strongly Disagree** | **Disagree** |
| AFFORDABILITY | | | | | |
| | This Mode is Affordable | Disagree | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | This Mode is Not Time-Consuming | Agree | Disagree | **Strongly Disagree** | Agree |
| | This Mode is Not a Burden to Others | Agree | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| ACHIEVEMENTS | | | | | |
| | This Mode Improves my Daily Life | **Strongly Agree** | Agree | Agree | **Strongly Agree** |
| | This Mode Helps Me Drive Less | N/A | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | This Mode Improves my Health/Wellness | Agree | Agree | Agree | Agree |

***Bold font indicates points of particularly vocal consensus among the six focus groups***

**Many participants hesitate to tell friends/family they use the nonprofit service.** The issue of image consciousness when using transit or paratransit services has been examined from the perspective of transit-using teenagers (Cain, 2006) and working-age social media consumers (Schweitzer, 2014), but little is known about whether older adults perceive transit to be socially acceptable or publicly embarrassing to use. Because one's feelings of social visibility can arguably influence one's decision to use a given mode of transportation, the question of "being seen while using this mode" was added to the focus group discussion set. Focus group participants felt most confident telling their friends they drove themselves for transportation, and felt less comfortable telling people they used paratransit or nonprofit transportation. An individual in one of the Lovell focus groups explained this phenomenon in her own words:

> If I told my daughter I took the bus to church, she'd scold me for doing something so dangerous. But if I told her I let the church drive me to services, and then to the store on Monday, she'd scold me for not asking her to drive me. She thinks churches have better things to do.

This notion of personal guilt for using certain transportation services persisted among several participants in several of the focus groups. Upon reflection and elaboration, several individuals explained that they perceived paratransit to be "special-needs" transit that able-bodied seniors would not need. In addition, as indicated by the quote above, some felt that using the nonprofit's services would in some way deprive others of help that may have been more badly-needed elsewhere. While the perception that paratransit exists for "special needs" older adults is based on evidence and written policies regarding paratransit clients, the latter perception about nonprofit services being a zero-sum game may be more problematic if borne out across a wider sample. It may also, in the case of the quote above, lead some to massage their conversations

regarding transportation choices out of fear of embarrassment or social shame for "taking advantage." If older adults perceive themselves as taking advantage of a finite resource, whether accurate or not, they may hesitate to use the service or encourage their peers to do so. This would affect image and ridership potential for the nonprofit program, and would be a marketing obstacle for nonprofits to overcome.

Personal guilt and hesitation appeared to the author to be strongest in Chapman Falls, the Midwestern city. A pair of participants at one of that city's focus groups explained that the local culture regarding charity and outside help was shaped generations ago, when that region was settled by northern European pioneers who prided themselves on self-sufficiency and a strong work ethic. To this pair, and to those in the group who ultimately agreed with their assertion, the acceptance of "charity" for something that most independent adults can do for themselves is something that a lot of older people in that region are uncomfortable admitting to friends and loved ones. The author took this concept to the focus groups in Lovell, which occurred after those in Chapman Falls, and asked participants if a similar vein of self-sufficiency existed in that region's culture. Participants agreed with the sentiment, but seemed to the author to be less emotionally attached to the concept than the older adults in Chapman Falls. This suggests some degree of regional variation in the concept of pride and self-sufficiency in old age, but the variation was not further investigated over the course of this project.

For their part, nonprofits handle the idea of guilt and social shame from the exact opposite position: They market their services as a tool of independent mobility that can reassure one's loved ones that trips outside the home are being undertaken safely and with the help of trained professionals and dedicated volunteers. Rather than a burden, nonprofits see it as a relief.

**Nonprofit transportation programs are deemed most trustworthy.** The concept of trust is a key driver in choosing a mode of transportation, and the older adults in these six focus groups spoke at length about how they conceptualize trust as well as how transportation providers do (or in many cases, do not) engender trust among older riders. The question was structured to measure trust of the modes themselves, but participants preferred to speak about whether and how they trusted the humans involved with transit, paratransit, and nonprofit transportation. For the first two, trust was scarce and stories about poor impressions were plentiful. But the nonprofit transportation programs were regarded as trustworthy and respectful of older adults' needs, indicating that mode has a distinct advantage in attracting and retaining older riders. Given the importance of trust and dignity in the literature on older adults and transportation, this suggests that nonprofit managers in the metro areas in question have managed to leverage their clients' trust into building a reputable transportation alternative that older people will use.

In comparing group responses in the three cities, a transportation nonprofit's age and maturity status seemed to the author to influence participants' willingness to trust it with their transportation needs. In Chapman Falls, participants referred repeatedly to that region's established nonprofits as being trustworthy, but when asked to speak about the younger nonprofit, most people in both groups did not know enough about it to have an opinion. A similar dynamic occurred in Brookside, where startup nonprofits are less known and ostensibly less trusted than those providers more familiar to older adults.

**Nonprofit personnel are considered helpful and concerned with rider welfare.** Closely related to the issue of trustworthiness among transportation providers is that of perceived helpfulness and concern. As Table 4.3 illustrates, focus group participants rated nonprofit personnel as being particularly helpful to them. This was another area of discussion and effusive

praise, particularly among longtime users of the services. Those who were most intimately familiar with the nonprofit programs spoke at length about how much they trust drivers and managers to see to their needs, while those new to the programs spoke of how surprised they were to encounter drivers who showed direct and genuine concern for their comfort and wellbeing. They contrasted this with the drivers they had encountered on paratransit, who were described as being generally less friendly or concerned with rider satisfaction beyond a bare legal minimum. As one individual in Brookside termed it, "[Transit and paratransit] drivers are just there to do a job. But [nonprofit] drivers are there because they know how to take care of us and they want us to have a good ride." This rider perception of nonprofits being more trustworthy and genuinely concerned with elders' wellbeing mirrors the sentiments expressed by nonprofit managers in a previous chapter of this dissertation, and further enhances the narrative that nonprofits are well-positioned to offer services that appeal to older adults on an emotional as well as functional level. In observing the focus groups on this topic, the author noted a particularly positive emotional tone among many participants, and an eagerness for participants to build on one another's positive experiences.

This perception of helpfulness and attentive care closely matches the intentions of nonprofit managers interviewed for this project, and illustrates the degree to which those managers structure and market their services to be client-oriented. In five of six focus groups, the author told participants that their area elder-service nonprofits viewed themselves as "uniquely suited" to promote the safety and welfare of older adults in the community, and in all five of those cases, participants agreed with the statement.

**Wait times for nonprofit programs are often longer than advertised.** A criticism of paratransit that recurred throughout the six focus groups was that mode's often notoriously haphazard scheduling of rides for older adults and people with disabilities. Participants shared

stories of waiting well over an hour for a vehicle to arrive for a ride, and of having to book windows of time for transportation without knowing the exact time they might expect the vehicle to arrive for the trip. Others eagerly agreed with these stories, and the groups found easy consensus in criticizing paratransit's erratic and vague scheduling in all three metro areas. When the author asked how nonprofit transportation compared, the responses were mixed and in some cases not too different. Respondents in Chapman Falls and Lovell gave examples of times when their scheduled ride via a nonprofit provider was late or altered at the last minute. They stated an appreciation for the simpler and more reliable scheduling mechanism used by the relevant nonprofits, but expressed disappointment that the nonprofit mode might fail to keep the precise agreed-upon schedule. In the words of one participant in Chapman Falls, whose argument was ultimately supported by the other nonprofit clients in the same group:

> [The nonprofit program] is usually good about keeping appointments, and still better than [paratransit], but lately they've had a lot more delays than they used to. And I know people who've had a ride cancelled, or had a manager show up in their car to take them to their appointment. It's not perfect, but I hope they get their act together soon.

While the operational shortcomings of nonprofit transportation are as yet undocumented in the literature, the unreliable nature of paratransit scheduling (and its subsequent impacts on ridership and transit reputation) has been vigorously documented by Burkhardt, Rosenbloom. Furthermore, the literature hosts a chorus of quantitative studies that generally agree that a service with notoriously unreliable or vague scheduling is likely to be avoided by choice riders. This tends to hold true even for time-inelastic riders such as retirees and older adults. Therefore, if a nonprofit program develops a reputation for unreliability, it may suffer the same community fate as paratransit, and lose those riders who have access to alternatives. Among focus group participants,

the consensus was easy that paratransit service is unreliable and delayed, and taken almost as a plain fact of paratransit's nature. When pressed, participants in one focus group argued that unreliable scheduling was simply a function of that system's large service area and high demand, and would therefore never be improved without a major public investment or a shrinking of the service area. However, the frustration with scheduling delays among nonprofit providers was described in less-blasé terms, and a few used terms indicating they hold nonprofit providers to a stricter standard and are thus less forgiving of delays.

Focus group participants in Lovell – where the nonprofits were faith-based and designed to serve church members – spoke most glowingly about their nonprofit transportation providers. It remains unclear whether this viewpoint was due to that program's stellar performance in the eyes of riders, or whether people were influenced by the nonprofit's religious nature and its clients being hesitant to criticize a program operated by a church. Participants in the other two cities – where programs were secular in nature – were to some degree more willing to criticize their nonprofit transportation providers, but still maintained optimistic support that shortcomings would be addressed and resolved.

When asked how these individuals might tell their nonprofit providers about schedule delays or operational shortcomings, focus group participants offered a variety of suggestions ranging from an immediate phone call to a more passive "give them a break" attitude. The gatekeepers in the Chapman Falls and Lovell focus groups – where participants told stories of last-minute cancellations – took a moment to apologize to the group for those experiences and assured attendees that such mishaps were neither acceptable nor common.

**Older adults view nonprofit transportation as superior to transit and paratransit.** The portion of the focus group discussions that contained the strongest opinions dealt with comparing

transit and paratransit with nonprofit transportation. Most individuals at the group sessions had experienced transit before switching to a nonprofit program, and some still used transit or paratransit for some trips. These discussions often devolved from comparisons into blunt criticisms of the transit agencies in the three cities, and participants had a great deal of emotion and experiences to share. Participants told stories of long wait times at bus or train stops, rude drivers or passengers, complex trip-planning processes, and hazards between their home and the nearest bus or train stop. In addition, several people knew others who had endured negative experiences while using public transit. Much of this sentiment was unprompted and discussed organically, and the author allowed respondents to express their views without interruption or qualification. One participant in Lovell had the following to say about his and his wife's easy transition from public transit to the nonprofit alternative:

> My wife and I gave the bus the benefit of the doubt for years, putting up with the delays, the grimy vehicles, waiting in the hot sun, worrying about crime, whatever. And when we found out about [nonprofit transportation], we switched the same week and haven't looked back. It's just a whole other universe.

While the outlook of these groups was generally critical of transit and paratransit, these stories about negative experiences with those two modes gave color and depth to people's feelings. For those individuals who did not have a negative experience of their own to share, many empathized with those who did, and when prompted mentioned that they had heard of such negative experiences from friends or relatives who had used transit services in the past. Many of these negative beliefs are widely-held among older adults in these communities. By comparison, the many faults placed on transit and paratransit by focus group participants were not shared by nonprofit transportation programs. Respondents would tell their tales of discomfort and

degradation on transit, and follow them up with glowing comparisons about how the nonprofit program they use currently does not have any of those shortcomings. This suggests a perception advantage in favor of nonprofit transportation programs, who in cases such as these likely do not have to overcome such deep or widely-held public reservations about the quality of their services. This also suggests a willingness on the part of older adults to heed the warnings and tales of their peers, and make choices due at least in part to the personal recommendations and experiences of their friends and neighbors.

The focus groups in Brookside harbored particularly rich and negative experiences with fixed-route transit, arguably due in part to that Southeastern city's history of segregated bus service and an unreliable rail system built decades prior to those serving Lovell or Chapman Falls. Participants in Brookside did admit to using paratransit services more often than their peers in the other two cities, but still viewed that program as starkly inferior to nonprofit programs. The anecdotes shared by Brookside residents were generally personal experiences, whereas many of the stories shared in the other cities' focus groups centered on the transit experiences of friends and peers rather than the group participants themselves. Still, in focus groups across the three case cities, transportation options overseen by transit agencies tended to be associated with negative experiences, unmet expectations, and horror stories that deterred riders as well as non-riding peers.

**Older adults view nonprofit transportation and driving as liberating in different ways.** The literature on driving cessation for older adults features a great deal of exploration into the link between access to transportation and an individual's sense of independence (Adams-Price, 2013; Coughlin, 2001; Clarke et al, 2008). It therefore became an essential part of this study for the author to discuss feelings of liberation and independence as they related to respondents' transportation choices. As Table 4.3 indicates, respondents across the six focus groups generally

found nonprofit transportation options to be just as beneficial to one's daily life as independent driving. While some of the sentiment was on display as the participants discussed the relative benefits and drawbacks of the four modes – and how nonprofit transportation is generally less complicated, anonymous, or frustrating than transit or paratransit – respondents in some cases also noted their nonprofits' explicit focus on preserving independent mobility. A particularly satisfied nonprofit client phrased her outlook as "It's always worked for me, and if it keeps me independent, I'll use it forever!"

Language to that effect is featured in the promotional materials for several of the nonprofits involved in this study, and many clients are familiar with the link between courteous and conscientious transportation service and subsequent benefits to older adults' mobility and independent aging. Whereas those who drove themselves tended to view that mode as most preferred, those who both drove and used nonprofit transportation tended to see the two as equal in terms of appeal and utility in meeting their daily needs as independent older adults living in suburban areas. If this holds true over a larger study pool, it would be another indication of an actionable advantage that nonprofit transportation programs have over transit and paratransit – that they can offer their clients a genuine feeling of liberation and confidence normally only felt with auto ownership.

**Discussion**

In analyzing the focus group responses and viewpoints, the author finds several solid sentiments that speak to the initial two-part research question posed by this study: What are suburban older adults' perceptions of the various transportation options available to them (driving, transit, paratransit, and nonprofit-managed transportation), and how do these perceptions shape

older adults' transportation choices? The sentiments are hereafter organized into brief and workable suggestions suitable for practice.

**Older adults' perceptions of transportation are deeply held and similar across geography and gender.** The perceptions of older adults who use one or more of these transportation services are, based on these focus groups, deeply held, emotional in nature, and informed by both personal experience and broader social knowledge. In addition, the groups in all three metro areas were rather uniform in their sentiments, with little vociferous disagreement among participants. The most vital transportation characteristics, according to the focus groups, are flexible schedules, friendly and supportive staff, and general trustworthiness. Providers of either public or nonprofit type must work to center reforms on these core attributes in order to attract and retain a strong base of older-adult riders. Participants also viewed both transit and paratransit to be generally less desirable, less reliable, and more complicated than either driving or nonprofit transportation. Participants generally did not distinguish too sharply between the two mode types, suggesting transit agencies may need to devote more effort to differentiating the two service types in the eyes of riders. In addition, transit agencies must continue to improve reliability, reputation, and ease of scheduling for both fixed-route and paratransit services if they are to overcome the negative reputation they have among older adults such as those participating in these focus groups. One component of several of the six focus group discussions – one which was not readily apparent in the existing literature on older adults and transportation – was a recurring element of humility among these older adults. When asked to critique the nonprofit transportation programs they used and cherished, most were hesitant to speak ill of them. In addition, several mentioned not wishing to "overburden" the nonprofit system with too many requests for transportation. This sentiment was not extended to driving or the taxpayer-funded modes of transit

and paratransit. The lesson here for providers may be that clients of nonprofit transportation may view their position as vulnerable, and may thus be hesitant to make special requests or schedule too many trips with the mode. One final perception that cut widely across all six focus groups was that access to transportation services in general – regardless of operator or funding source – is believed to improve one's health and wellbeing. To these groups of older adults, mobility itself matters far more than the specific mode being used. For practitioners, this may indicate that older adults' transportation preferences are indeed malleable, and existing perceptions and judgments can be changed if an improved product is consistently offered to older riders.

**Older adults' transportation perceptions greatly inform their actions.** Amidst the focus group discussions, it became clear to the author that participants' views and experiences regarding transportation had a direct relation to their mode choices over time. Participants widely agreed that driving (or riding as a passenger in someone's private automobile) is the most preferred option, even when all others are presented and available. In most groups, this preference was justified as being the most familiar mode to these individuals. They preferred driving because it was what they knew and trusted most of all. These older adults had for many years perceived automobiles and driving to be the quintessential form of personal mobility, and it thus came to dominate their conceptualization of mobility out of both necessity and familiarity. Among the non-driving modes of transportation, nonprofit-managed transportation was generally strongly preferred over either transit or paratransit for a few agreed-upon reasons. These reasons included nonprofit programs using personal autos instead of buses, having consistent scheduling and a fixed pool of familiar drivers, and a generally more intimate and less stressful setting for newer riders. Nonprofit-managed transportation was rated by the focus groups to be generally the most preferable alternative to driving. For policymakers and nonprofit managers, the lesson here may

be to take advantage of those positive attributes in the short term in order to maximize ridership on the nonprofit options, while at the same time plotting a long-term solution that changes public perceptions of transit and paratransit into something more familiar and less daunting or threatening to novice or vulnerable riders.

**Conclusion**

In answer to the guiding research question of this project, the evidence is sound that older adults residing in the suburbs of America's metropolitan areas do indeed harbor rich and informed perceptions about the transportation options available in their communities, and these perceptions have a direct impact on their choice of transportation mode as they contemplate or even undertake a transition from driving to riding another mode as a passenger. Much of the process from initial perception to steady preference is the result of personal experiences, both positive and negative. However, the easy consensus in all six of these focus groups demonstrates the significant degree to which the experiences of friends and peers also shape long-term transportation preferences and choices. Some of the motivating forces – such as feelings of autonomy, independence, and personal freedom of movement – are beyond the reach of a transit agency or elder-services nonprofit to remedy or resolve on behalf of the individual client. However, others – those related to a vehicle's appearance and atmosphere, staff practices, and ease of access/use – are more directly in the control of transit managers and nonprofit leadership. As one moves from understanding the scope of this issue and toward generating actionable solutions to the mobility gaps facing suburban older adults, an understanding of these boundaries and practical limitations is essential. The unmet need is vast, and the potential solutions are numerous, but the powers that be must focus on those factors and attributes of the transportation experience that can be remedied from a policy or program management perspective.

This study was not without its challenges, and many questions remain given the findings offered by the focus groups and distilled in the preceding sections of this chapter. First and most fundamentally, this study represents only the views of those older adults in three large American cities who were willing to be part of a focus group on the issue in question. Their views are not representative of the nation as a whole, or of older adults as a population. Still, their contributions and perceptions have value as legitimate observations of functioning transportation systems, and are presented here without reservation or doubt on the part of the author. Also, nearly every participant in these six focus groups was an active user of nonprofit transportation and/or a personal auto, and thus may have been biased in placing those two modes ahead of transit and paratransit as preferable means of transportation. Finally, as with any project relying on qualitative data and focus group insights, the risks of groupthink and "unnatural consensus" may have played some role in the ease with which group participants agreed with one another's anecdotes and strong impressions. The author did strive to prevent this wherever possible, but some degree of groupthink is arguably inevitable, particularly in groups of similar demographics who generally know each other in advance. Without one-on-one interviews after the focus groups, the author is unable to determine with certainty the degree to which individual views may have been colored by an implicit pressure to agree with the group's prevailing sentiments. Still, the insights hold value in building out this nascent literature and speaking to the budding theories surrounding older adults' preferences and perceptions of their transportation choices.

A natural next step in the evolution of this strand of research is to conduct a similar exploration of these concepts using a much larger pool of individuals, possibly including a survey conducted on a national scale. Future investigation should also include an unstructured-response portion as well, giving participants a greater opportunity to discuss their own individual

impressions of the transit menu in their community. The expansion of the Burkhardt model undertaken in this study could be further expanded to encompass even more mobility options for suburban older adults, including walking and rideshare platforms. In addition, given the role of faith-based nonprofits in providing transportation services for suburban older adults, a study investigating that particular perspective on transportation and aging would also make a unique contribution to the literature. Given the projected growth of suburban older adults in the United States in the coming decades, the need for practice-ready research on this topic will continue to grow and fuel richer questions. Studies exploring transportation for suburban older adults – in particular, studies of a qualitative orientation – will continue to be needed in order to more fully bound and explore this largely unknown literature.

# CHAPTER FIVE:

# CONCLUSION

Each of the three preceding chapters contain lessons and implications specific to their respective investigations and research questions. Taken individually, the three showcase the current state of practice from the perspective of nonprofit transportation managers, nonprofit-public partners/collaborators, and older-adult users of the services, respectively. Taken together, the three studies illustrate this field as one of multiple challenges, opportunities, and dimensions. Initiatives to address the older adult mobility crisis in suburban areas are numerous and diverse in type, and workable lessons can be adapted for literature and future practice. This chapter outlines the lessons learned from these three studies and begins the process of synthesizing workable policy recommendations and necessary next steps for building a more comprehensive and accessible literature on nonprofits as providers of older-adult transportation. A summary table is included as Table 5.1.

Chapter Two explored transportation partnerships for older adults from the perspective of nonprofit program managers, and noted the ways in which those organizations' cultural, administrative, and social/political orientations influence their performance as providers of transportation. The author found that these nonprofits have an elder-service mission among staff, specialized training for drivers and contact personnel, retiree board members to advocate for elder issues, and mission statements that explicitly focus on older adult issues in ways that public transit agencies cannot. When interviewed, nonprofit managers tended to view their programs as more adaptable and in-touch with older client needs than public transit, and thus superior in terms of operational efficiency and customer service.

**Table 5.1: Summary of Selected Findings by Chapter**

| Chapter | Finding/Outcome |
|---|---|
| Two | Transportation nonprofits are mission-oriented, efficient, and volunteer-reliant |
| | These nonprofits view themselves as adaptive and qualified to serve older adults |
| | Most transportation nonprofits were founded to provide other services, and added transportation at a later date |
| | Nonprofit managers view community reputation as more valuable than funding |
| | Financial independence - and willingness to resist government partnerships - grows as a nonprofit matures |
| Three | Transportation partnerships are financial in nature and based on contracts |
| | Partnerships are generally vertical in orientation, between a funder and recipient |
| | Active partnerships are uncommon in the cities examined, with many nonprofits resistant to partnerships |
| | Transit managers view partnerships as having potential to change older-adult transportation, but not in the near future |
| | Transit managers view partnerships as political rather than objectively necessary for transportation |
| Four | Older adults see nonprofits as more genuine, reliable, and trustworthy than transit agencies |
| | Driving remains the preferred means of personal transportation, even when nonprofit service is liked |
| | Impressions and experiences of friends – particularly negative experiences – influence older adults' choice of mode |
| | Older adults are deeply critical of public transportation, but generally hesitant to criticize nonprofit transportation |
| | Older adults value transportation attributes such as flexibility, independence, and dignity when choosing a mode |

Chapter Two also found that transportation nonprofits grow in community stature and capacity over time. Novice nonprofits tend to be smaller and less visible, while mature nonprofits are generally well-connected to local funders, donors, and political figures. The strength of these local ties – and the maturity status of an elder-service nonprofit – affects their outlook and willingness to seek partnerships or financial grants for program growth. Financial and political independence at the local level, coupled with a perception that government grants are complicated and demanding, compels mature nonprofits to avoid grants. Novice nonprofits, however, lack those ties and thus seek funding and guidance.

Chapter Three explored the nature of partnerships between nonprofits and public transit agencies, again relying on insights from administrator interviews and document review. A prime lesson for this study is that administrators from both agency types view their interagency partnerships as essential and ultimately beneficial to the public they serve, however some administrators viewed specific partnerships in their communities as more essential or worthwhile than others, suggesting some degree of locally-influenced variation in this finding. Managers also opined that beyond funding, many of the partnerships based on contracts or fees-for-services provide little constructive benefit to the nonprofits involved. Transit-agency expertise is rarely shared with nonprofit managers. In addition to this information asymmetry, the realities of funder-recipient relations suggests that despite the nomenclature, partnerships involving a government funder and a nonprofit recipient are in truth more vertical than horizontal in nature. This indicates a potential point of contention or disagreement among parties, particularly if one side of the partnership feels beholden to the other by means of a contract or a financial asymmetry. Finally, Chapter Three revealed that both parties in these interagency transportation partnerships sometimes harbor significant reservations about the political realities of working together. While

cooperation is ostensibly beneficial for these entities, and sold as such to political stakeholders, some of the government managers interviewed for the study described a feeling of pseudo-competition for Section 5310 dollars – in effect, having to share those grant dollars between public transit agencies and suitable nonprofits. At the same time, these managers described an increasing political pressure to partner, diversify services, and effectively "contract out" services in order to advance an agenda of cost-efficiency in local government. At the same time, nonprofit managers harbor reservations about the true benefits of partnering with government agencies. Most of those interviewed for the study expressed a devotion to their organization's mission and an unwillingness to alter or expand their mission purely to attract federal or local dollars. This sentiment, if borne out across a wider sample of agency managers, represents a rejection of mission creep among nonprofit organizations, making it a novel contribution to that literature. Ultimately, both entities respect the idea of cooperation and partnership in the name of providing better services to a growing population in need, but political realities and internal biases will continue to make the partnership landscape a colorful and occasionally unpredictable place.

Chapter Four explored the impacts of these interagency partnerships on older adults who rely on one or more of the services for their transportation needs. Semi-structured focus groups were organized in each of the three study areas, and populated with clients from the nonprofit agencies as well as a few older adults who drove themselves and did not utilize any form of structured transportation alternative. The results were a colorful affirmation of nonprofits' influence in the realm of transportation, with focus group participants holding diverse but largely positive views on nonprofit transportation programs. These individuals tended to perceive the nonprofit programs as supportive of older adults' independence and personal dignity in ways that public transit and paratransit were not, at least within their communities and circles of friends. In

terms of clients' awareness of alternatives, focus group participants showed an acute awareness not only of the various options available to them in the community, but of the structural and operational differences between public transit and nonprofit transportation. When pressed for elaboration, participants in all three cities gave the general impression that fixed-route transit was perceived among their peers as being unreliable, bureaucratic, and unfriendly. At the same time, nonprofit programs, where available in the community, were seen as flexible, trustworthy, and attentive to older people's needs and modest requests.

When asked to discuss what traits they found most vital to promoting their independent mobility, focus group participants named issues of schedule flexibility, staff friendliness, and trustworthy programs and employees to be most critical. Many of these participants told stories of experiencing the complications, delays, and unfriendly service provided by fixed-route transit and paratransit in their communities, and secondhand stories of poor treatment were also common. These negative experiences appeared to color participants' views on transit as a whole. Another development to emerge over the course of this project was older adults' seeming reluctance to overburden or critique their nonprofit transportation providers in the way they might critique their local public transit agency. The language and tone used when describing the nonprofit programs tended to be more constructive and forgiving than the terms used to describe and critique the programs funded through tax dollars. Criticisms of nonprofit programs were generally borne out of frustration or impatience, while criticisms of public agencies were often more florid and indignant in tone. These individuals tended to expect proper treatment from taxpayer-funded agencies and to be irritated when services were delivered that failed to meet expectations. At the same time, they appeared grateful for the nonprofit programs' existence and generosity of spirit, and were subsequently muted in what criticisms they harbored about the shortcomings of those

programs. This suggests a deep reservoir of support and affection for nonprofit transportation among suburban older adults. If this affection holds over the long-term, it will arguably lead to steady and strong demand for these services. It will also likely influence policy outcomes should future administrators seek to revisit the current contracts-heavy landscape of partnerships between taxpayer-funded transit agencies and their local nonprofit peers.

Among these older adults, driving was still strongly preferred by those who still could safely do so. Nonprofit programs utilizing personal automobiles for travel, therefore, hold the most promise for ensuring continuity of experience by allowing older adults to ride in a vehicle similar to one that they might themselves have driven. Capability in this case also matches preference, with older adults regarding nonprofit transportation programs as their most preferred and most suitable alternative to driving themselves.

**Policy Recommendations and Reforms**

The findings of each of the three chapters indicate some specific points where existing policy can be expanded or reformed in order to better orient these agencies and funders into a more productive service environment for suburban older adults. The agency managers interviewed over the course of this project offered a great many policy solutions of their own, and these individuals possess a respectable grasp of the issues that will arguably contribute to the policy discussion going forward. The following recommendations and reforms, briefly synthesized from the three studies, have the potential to address many of the recurring concerns among providers and clients, and would greatly improve and streamline the state of practice for agencies providing transportation services for older adults. A summary table of policy recommendations and reforms that emerged from the three essays is included as Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2: Policy Recommendations and Reforms Derived from Investigative Process**

| Policy Recommendation/Reform | Source of Recommendation/Reform | | Entity Responsible for Recommendation/Reform | | Potential Benefits of Recommendation/Reform | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Interviews with Program Managers | Focus Groups with Area Older Adults | State or MPO Transportation Authorities | Nonprofit Transportation Providers | Improved Mobility Services | Improved Health and Wellness for Older Adults | Reduced Costs | Improved Information Sharing |
| Promote better sharing of expertise across agencies | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Allow geriatric medicine experts to evaluate programs | X | | X | | X | X | | X |
| Promote full range of mobility options for suburban older adults | | X | X | X | X | X | | |
| Require trained staff and ADA-compliant vehicles for all elder-serving transportation programs | X | X | X | X | X | X | | |
| Gather ridership/operations data from all Section 5310 grant recipients | X | | X | | | | X | X |
| Simplify and standardize the collection/reporting of ridership data | X | | X | | | | X | X |

The broadest consensus among these providers, even those critical of interagency partnerships and contracting, is that public-nonprofit partnerships in transportation hold great potential in closing mobility gaps for suburban older adults and improving efficiencies for providers system-wide. Providers freely admit that existing systems are insufficient to meet the current and future demand for transportation services, and are eager to grow their programs in a way that meets this demand while also adhering to their stated mission and purpose in the community. The evidence gleaned from the interviews and focus groups of this project strongly suggests that transit agencies' partnerships with elder-service nonprofits are ultimately meeting their stated goals and aiding the mobility of suburban older adults. In addition, providers engaged in partnerships generally wish to continue working together, and those providers not in partnerships have given some clues as to what might need to occur in order for agencies of their mindset to join a revised partnership structure in the future. While these relationships continue to grow in complexity and depth, and several reforms of the funding arrangements are still needed, providers and riders are ultimately optimistic about their potential. Thus, these partnerships should continue to be encouraged and supported through the policy and funding process, albeit with key reforms in administrative burden and outcomes assessment.

It is in the realm of outcomes assessment and performance that these partnerships must undergo their most significant and comprehensive reform. As discussed in the preceding chapters, the current arrangement of funding public-nonprofit transportation partnerships using federal resources requires very little in the way of data collection or performance evaluation. Each state or MPO is permitted (but not required) to assess the performance of each grant recipient in terms of ridership counts, geographies served, common destinations, or the degree to which access to the service improves the independent mobility of clients. Although tracking these data in a thorough

and consistent manner would effectively add to the administrative burdensome of grant recipients – a concept that several nonprofit managers in this project have identified as problematic – the potential for having a more comprehensive understanding of the costs and benefits of these partnerships would enable a more effective system for providing transportation services to this population. Indeed, given that the stated purpose of the Section 5310 program is to enhance mobility for older adults and persons with disabilities, it would arguably bring the program into better compliance if future partnerships were required to objectively measure how their programs improved mobility for clients.

Related to this is the suggestion that agencies incorporate some degree of input from resources trained in gerontology or public health. The partnerships are structured to serve older adults and persons with disabilities, but in the cases examined in this project, no one from either the disability community or the local area agencies on aging was formally consulted about the partnerships or the potential costs and benefits to their respective constituencies. Such consultation or oversight is not required under federal law, and none of the agency managers interviewed knew of any means of gathering or integrating such input within their respective agencies. The elder-service nonprofit managers interviewed for this project were proud of their specialized expertise in caring for older adults, and noted frankly the need for more expertise of this type in transportation circles. Incorporating input from advocates trained in gerontology, geriatric medicine, or public health would add a much-needed health perspective to the planning of transportation for older adults, and would help to ensure that transportation options on offer for older adults were accessible, age-conscious, and genuinely beneficial for older adults and people with mobility impairments.

While policy recommendations generally induce providers to increase their administrative overhead or add new steps to their existing processes, the author is mindful that many nonprofit providers interviewed in this project stated an explicit desire to avoid bureaucracy and paperwork affiliated with accepting an interagency partnership or grant. Therefore, while these policy suggestions would add extra steps to the existing administrative process, a vital reform overall would be to simplify and standardize the reporting requirements, particularly for smaller-scale or novice nonprofits that may lack the staff capacity to navigate a complex or lengthy reporting process. If all nonprofits receiving federal 5310 monies were required every month to complete a simple yet comprehensive progress report – for example, a one-page worksheet tabulating riders served, vehicle-miles traveled, most common destinations by type, and the number of rides dedicated to a health-related trip – then administrative burden could be clarified but also greatly enhanced for both funder and recipient. The results of such progress reports could be processed by the state or MPO that originated the grant, and subsequently reported to the federal Department of Transportation and the relevant aging and transportation agencies in the region. By providing a clear and useful system for tracking vital information, and making it easier to report ridership data, funders can overcome the barrier identified in this project and encourage more nonprofits to engage in contracted services with a public agency. Such a reform would also aid scholars and policymakers seeking to better understand transportation partnerships for older adults, and to better identify best practices for future endeavors.

**Next Steps for Enriching the Literature**

Given the current state of the literature on nonprofits as providers of transportation for older adults, several more exploratory studies are needed to solidify a foundation of findings and linkages to theory. While the findings drawn from this study's three phases contribute to the

broader discussion, much work remains in order for the literature to fully mature and offer nationally-relevant grounding for policy and practice. The following suggestions for enriching the literature are derived from lessons the author learned during this project, and would collectively or individually add useful heft to the current state of affairs.

While this project focused on the state of nonprofit transportation in three American metropolitan areas, future studies must continue to explore the state of practice in additional metro areas, as time and funding permit. A wider geographic sample would add additional substance to the arguments and findings of these studies, and would presumably provide a richer array of experiences and individual-agency practices as well. A national-level effort, with a standardized survey instrument and interview question set distributed to providers in a dozen or more North American cities, could potentially form a database of nonprofit transportation providers nationwide, giving policymakers and funders a tremendous resource for tracking and better understanding how nonprofit transportation operates in the United States.

In concert with a wider sample of agencies and providers, the literature would benefit from a similarly national-scale collection of information and interview data from the older adults who use these services and hold insightful views on their operations, culture, and potential to address mobility issues facing suburban older adults. Properly-conducted interviews often provide rich descriptions of experiences and perceptions, and these data would be invaluable to the literature, but it would be of even greater value to construct and distribute a survey of transportation preferences and habits to a national audience of older adults. The author has conducted such a sample in one American city, but the resources required to conduct, distribute, and analyze a national-level survey would require considerable investment of time and funding. However, the benefits to practice and scholarship would arguably outweigh the administrative costs of the survey

exercise. Information from the survey and interviews could form an accessible database on the state of older-adult transportation in America, and have similar practical utility to the provider database mentioned previously.

A longitudinal study – where one group of adults is tracked and documented over a span of years – would be useful to this literature, specifically one that documented older adults' transportation habits and preferences as they entered retirement, ceased driving, and transitioned to other modes. Existing studies on older adults' transportation habits are functional snapshots of existing habits, with little accounting for the forces and decisions that led individuals to make the choices they do. A longer-term study would document changes in these people's daily lives over a period of years, and would provide rich detail on how discrete choices can have long-term impacts for older adults. As with the above suggestions, the barrier to this is cost and staff time. Still, a longitudinal study conducted on a small scale may be feasible for a dedicated research team, and would provide useful insights into the shifts in older adults' transportation habits and views over time.

As discussed in the second and third studies of this project, different transportation providers track different amounts of data on ridership, performance, and outcomes/benefits of their services. Recipients of grants under the Section 5310 program, for example, are not required to track in any formal way the degree to which their programs benefit older adults and riders with disabilities. While the policy itself must be reformed in order to compel grant recipients to better document this, scholars can contribute to the broader literature by documenting the ways in which some transportation providers do track ridership and mobility improvements. These data could be collected in concert with the national-scale data on transportation providers mentioned previously, and incorporated into the same database. Developing a richer understanding of how providers

measure and track outcomes – and whether their programs objectively benefit their clients – is a needed first step toward reforming the tracking process and ensuring these programs provide a measurable benefit to independent older adults.

One final investigation with the potential to enrich this body of literature is one covering the financial aspects of contracting in transportation service. Given the fact that most of the interagency "partnerships" explored in this project were ultimately financial in nature and based on fee-for-service contracts, it still remains to be seen whether this atmosphere of using contractors to provide public services (such as transportation) are objectively cheaper or more effective than traditional public transit agencies. Agency managers interviewed in this project were of the opinion that contracting is cheaper and ultimately more beneficial for transit agencies, but little hard evidence exists to confirm this, at least in the realm of nonprofit transportation services for older adults. Given the highly specialized nature of older-adult transportation – particularly as espoused by the nonprofit programs offering it – a rigorous financial analysis of costs and performance would add a much-needed financial dimension to the literature on these programs. It would also prove invaluable to those scholars and advocates seeking to reform the existing Section 5310 program. Such a study must incorporate the expertise of accounting, transportation planning, and gerontology in order to properly determine cost-effectiveness for a given program, making it ripe for an interdisciplinary investigation.

The lessons learned over the course of this dissertation represent a useful but brief foray into a literature that is still developing and greatly in need of additional studies and resources. Given the dominance of driving and auto-oriented urban form in American society, and given the rapid growth in the number of Americans in age cohorts where safe driving is often a delicate proposition, the need for richer studies into alternatives to driving is clear. Aging is one of the

great ubiquities in human society – everyone ages, no matter their race, gender, location, or socioeconomic status – and research into older people's mobility needs, capabilities, and wishes will ultimately benefit all humans who reside in a settled area and wish to travel from place to place. The author remains captivated by the unanswered questions and unmet challenges of transportation for older adults and the potential for age-conscious adaptation of human settlements, and he remains optimistic that this work might constitute a sound contribution to a body of knowledge crying out for insights, adaptations, and better ways of living in cities and towns.

## APPENDIX A:

## CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

**Agreement to Participate in Research**

**Responsible Investigator:** James Wood
**Human Subjects Committee Number:** 2017.21177
**Project Title:** Meeting the Need: Transportation Offerings for Suburban Older Adults

1. You have been asked to join this project because you are an administrator of a public transit agency or an elder-service nonprofit organization that provides some degree of specialized transportation for older adults residing in your community of service. Your experiences, views, and insights into your field are valuable to scholars and practitioners, and this interview will aid in informing others about the state of transportation services for suburban older adults.

2. You will be asked a series of questions about transportation for older adults in your community, chiefly how your agency and its local peer organizations provide transportation for this population. With your permission, the author will record the interview for note-taking purposes.

3. No foreseeable risks are expected to arise from your participation in the study.

4. The lessons learned today will provide insights for transit agencies, city authorities, state/federal transportation departments, and other entities with an interest in issues related to transportation and the older adult population. The information may also be presented in scholarly publications.

5. Although the results of this study may be published, your name will not appear in any published material without your express, written permission.

6. There is no compensation for participation in the study.

7. Questions about this research may be addressed to the author. Complaints about the research may be presented to ***Tim Chapin, Dean, College of Social Sciences and Public Policy, (850) 644-5488.*** If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact the FSU IRB at 2010 Levy Street, Research Building B, Suite 276, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742, or by email at humansubjects@magnet.fsu.edu.

8. No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose not to participate in the study.

9. Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with the Florida State University or with any other participating institutions or agencies.

10. Your responses will remain confidential. This confidentiality is guaranteed by law.

_____ _____

Signature Date

## APPENDIX B:

## CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

**Agreement to Participate in Research**

**Responsible Investigator:** James Wood
**Human Subjects Committee Number:** 2017.21177
**Project Title:** Meeting the Need: Transportation Offerings for Suburban Older Adults

1. You have been asked to join this project because you are an older adult who uses – or does not use – the transportation programs offered by a nonprofit agency in your community. You surely have opinions and desires about transportation for people your own age, and your insights will be helpful in educating policymakers about the needs and wishes of older adults.

2. You will be asked a series of questions about transportation for older adults in your community. You will be joined by several other individuals of your age group, who will also be discussing this topic. With your permission, we will record the interview for note-taking purposes.

3. No foreseeable risks are expected to arise from your participation in the study.

4. The lessons learned today will provide insights for transit agencies, city authorities, state/federal transportation departments, and other entities with an interest in issues related to transportation and the older adult population. The information may also be presented in scholarly publications.

5. Although the results of this study may be published, your name will not appear in any published material without your express, written permission.

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8. No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose not to participate in the study.

9. Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with the Florida State University or with any other participating institutions or agencies.

10. Your responses will remain confidential. This confidentiality is guaranteed by law.

_____ _____

Signature Date

## APPENDIX C:

## BASE LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What led your agency to serve older clients in the community?

2. Do you serve a dedicated geographic area, such as a city or set of zip codes?

3. How are your relationships with other providers in the region? Do you partner much?

4. What can you tell me about those partnerships? How did they begin?

5. Who initiated the partnership - your agency or theirs?

6. Why has the partnership endured? What do both parties receive out of the arrangement?

7. How is your agency affected/changed by having this or other partners?

8. How do you feel about the partnerships your agency has?

9. Why do you think there is such a growing and unmet need for transportation for older adults?

10. How did you enter this line of work?

11. What sort of training does your agency undertake to better serve older adults?

12. Does your agency use specialized vehicles to transport special-needs older adults? If so, how are they operated, scheduled, and funded?

13. What makes older adults unique as clients/passengers, and how do you address that?

14. Do you utilize paid or volunteer drivers for your services?

15. If so, how are drivers paid? Traditional hour/wage, or some other form of compensation?

16. Are volunteers compensated in any way?

17. What do you think your agency does particularly well?

18. What makes your agency so good at that?

19. Does your board of directors have dedicated roles for older adults (aged 65 or older?)

20. If so, is it a formal/legal process, or more of an informal practice? Why does your agency do this?

21. Do you think nonprofits have a better reputation among older adults than the government or the private sector? Why or why not?

22. What is the most challenging obstacle your agency faces today?

23. Why do you suppose this is the case?

24. Does your agency track customer satisfaction? If so, would you be willing to share with me?

25. Does your agency receive funding or support from a larger government or nonprofit agency? If so, what is the nature of this relationship?

26. If your agency receives funding from a government agency, how do you and other leaders at your agency feel about this financial relationship?

27. Is there anything that we did not discuss today that you wish to discuss or add?

## APPENDIX D:

## DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The following survey will help us to better understand the makeup of this focus group. You may decline to answer these questions if you wish, and you may still participate without completing the survey form.

1. Please select your current age range:

   _____ Under 55 years of age
   _____ 55-59 years of age
   _____ 60-64 years of age
   _____ 65-69 years of age
   _____ 70-74 years of age
   _____ 75-79 years of age
   _____ 80-84 years of age
   _____ 85 years of age or more

2. Please indicate your gender:

   _____ Male
   _____ Female

3. Please indicate your neighborhood type:

   _____ Urban
   _____ Suburban
   _____ Rural/Small Town

4. Have you driven an automobile in the past three months?

   _____ Yes
   _____ No

5. Which of the following four modes of transportation do you use most frequently?

   _____ Automobile
   _____ Fixed-route bus/train
   _____ Paratransit bus/van
   _____ Nonprofit organization vehicle

6. How often do you leave your home using any form of transportation besides walking?

   _____ Every day
   _____ A few times per week
   _____ Once per week
   _____ A few times per month
   _____ Once per month

## APPENDIX E:

## BURKHARDT METRIC FOR OLDER ADULTS' TRANSPORTATION CHOICES

| Concept | Specific Measures | Client Assessments (Agree or Disagree) |
|---|---|---|
| Acceptability | | |
| | Connectivity | *I can get where I need to go* |
| | Security | *I feel safe using this mode* |
| | Image/Appeal | *I am happy riding this mode* |
| | Vehicle Quality | *The vehicles are safe, clean, and attractive* |
| | Trust | *I trust this mode to take care of me and my peers* |
| Accessibility | | |
| | Physical Utility | *I can get in and out of the vehicle comfortably* |
| | Helpful Personnel | *I can get help from the driver if I need it* |
| | Ease of Use | *I can easily arrange a trip using this mode* |
| Adaptability | | |
| | Flexibility | *I can change my travel plans if I need to* |
| | | *The drivers will allow last-minute requests* |
| Availability | | |
| | Sufficiency | *This mode is available when I need it* |
| | | *I can use this mode as often as I need it* |
| | Independence | *I can travel on my own schedule* |
| Affordability | | |
| | Financial Cost | *I can afford to travel using this mode* |
| | Time Cost | *I don't waste time using this mode* |
| | Social Cost | *I don't have to trade favors to get a ride* |
| Alternatives | | |
| | Awareness of Choices | *I can use this mode in place of another* |
| | | *I have many choices for transportation* |
| | Operator Awareness | *Drivers are aware that I have other choices* |
| Assessment | | |
| | Empowerment to Assess | *I am able to rate this service and give feedback* |
| | | *The operators take my feedback seriously* |
| | | *I would recommend this service to a friend* |
| Achievements | | |
| | Quality of Life | *This mode improves my daily life* |
| | | *This mode allows me to live independently* |
| | | *I feel safe and confident using this mode* |
| | Driving Cessation | *I can replace driving with this alternative* |

# APPENDIX F:

# APPROVAL MEMO FROM INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

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