



Measuring
Rural Community
Vitality



NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY

COMMUNITY CARE
NORTHUMBERLAND INITIATIVE

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RURAL ONTARIO
INSTITUTE

I INTRODUCTION

Local transportation is an important factor of wellbeing for residents living in rural areas. Community members, especially seniors and those without cars, are dependent on local transportation to go about their everyday activities. These include grocery shopping, going to and from work, attending appointments and seeing friends. Due to sparse population density, however, public rural transportation is difficult to implement and even harder to maintain. In 2008, **Community Care Northumberland (CCN)** created the **Northumberland Transportation Initiative** (rural transit) to address the need for affordable and reliable local transportation in **Northumberland County** (Birney & Hoskins, 2017). This initiative was one of three CCN transportation programs in Northumberland, which included previously named Aging at Home and Venture Van. Also, CCN offers a Volunteer Transportation Program that provides transportation for Seniors and those on OW and ODSP. As the county population grew, the needs for rural transportation became obvious, and the three programs were consolidated into two: Specialized Transportation Program and Volunteer Driving Program (Ibid). The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) selected the Specialized Transportation Program to participate in its Measuring Rural Community Vitality Initiative, which offered funds to facilitate an evaluation of the project.

I NEEDS ADDRESSED

Prior to this initiative, local public transportation in Northumberland was only available in urban centres of Cobourg and Port Hope. These towns were the county's main destinations for shopping, medical appointments and entertainment. With the growing aging population, transportation became an increasingly important issue. It serves as a vital link to services offered in various townships within the county. To address this need, Northumberland United Way conducted a community survey in 2006 to identify priority community issues – over 1,000 surveys and 1,200 comments were received. Over a third of county respondents identified transportation as their top priority and identified four townships for service expansion: Alnwick/Haldimand, Cramahe, Trent Hills, and Brighton.

The Northumberland Transportation Initiative was created in 2008 in response to the clear message that better-connected transportation was needed. CCN served as the lead agency from the outset. One full-time project coordinator was hired with funding from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) – Employment Supports. This individual has remained the coordinator of transportation in Northumberland for the past nine years (Birney & Hoskins, 2017). CCN launched services in Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand following another round of consultation with residents, research on transportation studies and case study learning. This included consultation with other transportation services in surrounding communities who also offer transportation.

To respond to a demand for growth, CCN consolidated the rural and accessible service names, calling the new initiative the Specialized Transportation Program. The Specialized Transportation Program aimed to provide sustainable, affordable and wheelchair accessible rural transportation services to residents. CCN also provides the Volunteer Driving Program for seniors and those on OW and ODSP. CCN aims to enhance existing service by adding additional days to the current program, expand the hours of operations to evening and weekends and expand service to Trent Hills, rural Port Hope and Hamilton Township. Brighton is currently serviced by Quinte Access.

In order to successfully implement the next improvement phase of the Specialized Transportation Program, CCN engaged in an evaluation of its current services. This evaluation was made possible through the funding received from ROI and offered an opportunity to receive feedback to create an improved, centralized service of convenient schedules and low fares. This service expansion would dramatically increase the availability of transportation options for approximately 300 rural residents in currently underserved areas. Consequently, community members could enjoy improved mobility, increased socialization and further employment options.

| SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

With the support of local service organizations, including libraries, churches, Northumberland County Community & Social Services and the municipalities, the program connected with potential clients and partners to review the Specialized Transportation Program and how it could be improved. The consultation engaged 200 clients, caregivers and other stakeholders. The main research objectives were to:

- Understand the impact (social, economic, quality of life) of transportation on the lives of individuals in rural communities
- Discern how access to transportation changes the number or level of opportunities (education, employment, social supports) available to individuals?
- Increase awareness and collaboration amongst users and stakeholders of transportation options, including gaps in service, potential service improvements and expansion.

This consultation was divided in four stages:

1) “Ride-along” discussions

The first stage consisted of the project coordinator and other researchers going on bus rides to gather information from current riders about their experience with the transportation service including: benefits and gaps in service, impact of service in their life and other questions related to research objectives.

2) Survey distribution

The second stage involved further data collection through surveys designed by the researcher and CCN staff. It was important to gather information from transportation service clients who may not have had a chance to provide verbal feedback. Clients from three routes were invited to participate by either completing the survey on the van or taking it home and mailing it back. A second survey was also prepared for stakeholders to receive feedback on their needs. Similar to the “ride-along” discussions, the eight survey questions inquired about the benefits and gaps in service, impact of service in their life and other questions related to research objectives.

Several agencies, including Northumberland County Community & Social Services Ontario Works (OW) helped support this work by assisting clients to complete the surveys by overcoming any literacy barriers to participation. This engagement by partner agencies also served to advertise the program to those who were previously unaware and to highlight its importance in facilitating access to community services

3) Story Telling

The third stage of this consultation was to collect stories from clients, their families and other stakeholders regarding the positive or negative impact of rural transportation services. Researchers made connections with participants through CCN staff and/or Regional Transportation Committee members. Storytelling interviews were conducted in person, at a location identified by the storyteller, or over the phone. 136 participants shared their stories.

4) Transportation Summit

The final stage of the project involved a Transportation Summit organized to showcase transportation services in Northumberland County. This provided an opportunity to discuss future plans and requirements for a sustainable rural transportation service. During the summit, riders and drivers came forward to share their stories and brainstorm next steps for the program. The summit enabled 60-70 local municipal politicians and staff: County Social Service, ODSP and OW Case Workers; employment agencies; Fleming College staff and other educational providers; Community Living workers, as well as; CCN clients, caregivers and family members to celebrate successes and discuss opportunities for improvement.

Timeline

Evaluation of the Rural Transportation Pilot was conducted between June and December 2016. CCN staff were adaptable and responded to many changes impacting their workplan. Timelines were adjusted to accommodate staff retirements. While the project coordinator completed the evaluation’s requirements, internal work has continued to improve the service and to follow-up with summit attendees one year later. Two lessons learned from adjusting the timeline were to include post-summit activities in the workplan from the beginning and to have a smaller time frame for data collection. Rather than giving participants a month for survey completion, the project coordinator reflected that 1.5 to 2 weeks would have been sufficient time.

The following are some of the project's milestones:

- **Summer 2016**
Data collection - Complete "ride-alongs" with current users to collect stories from clients, families and other stakeholders.
- **July – September 2016**
Survey distribution.
- **September 2016**
Data analysis.
- **October 2016**
Transportation summit.
- **Summer 2017**
Summit follow-up.

Northumberland County is located on the Northern shore of Lake Ontario and is home to over 85,000 people in seven municipalities (Alnwick/Haldimand, Brighton, Cobourg, Cramahe, Hamilton, Port Hope, Trent Hills). The area is 50 minutes away from the Toronto metropolitan area with market access to 9 million people. Population density in Northumberland County itself is sparse at 43.1 per square kilometer.

Community Care Northumberland (CCN) was established in 1988 and is a multi-service, primarily volunteer-run community support organization. Over 850 volunteers, through a variety of programs, help residents maintain a higher quality of life and strengthen community ties. In addition to their transportation programs, CCN also runs other programs such as meal delivery, friendly visits, home help and maintenance, hospice and palliative care support and recreational programs.

| COMMUNITY ASSETS

Engagement & Partnerships

CCN's extensive network and experience running various programs, including previous start-ups and implementations of the rural transportation program also helped make the Specialized Transportation Program expansion a success. The community was also very active in engaging with the program coordinators; dozens of both riders and drivers provided feedback, and community services also participated. Community services such as libraries, churches and employment agencies saw the rural transportation service as a key enabler for residents to access and connect the various services the County had to offer. Engaged residents, community services and organizations, staff and committee volunteers were essential to the long-term success of the program.

Early in the transportation program's development, it became evident that collaboration and support from organizations and municipalities would be key to the success and sustainability of the program. With this in mind, the program coordinator met annually with local political and service providers for a program update. These meetings built a strong partnership between various stakeholders in the community and allowed for easier connections during this consultation.

This program benefitted from partners' generosity of time and resources. Partners demonstrated commitment to improving rural transportation through their financial contributions, helping clients participate in interviews and surveys, and by participating in crucial conversations for the future during the summit.

Institutional Memory

The project aimed for a collaborative approach where community partners could work together toward a common goal. Stakeholders who supported the project included the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, the deputy mayor, who was part of the steering committee, and the County. Community members contributed many ideas and suggestions about the potential of schools in rural communities, and envisioned roles for community members. The project provided opportunities to learn about leadership in a rural setting, and was successful in fostering dialogue and communication among various community groups. Informal conversations were critical in developing trust and relationships in rural areas. First fostering informal relationships then building toward more formal relationship structures helped set the tone and dynamics of the project and its collaborative relationships.

The project also facilitated relationships with other key players in education and rural development, such as the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI), **Community Schools Alliance**, and the School Closure Policy Research group. **Dr. Bill Irwin** of the Department of Economics and Business at Huron College was pivotal in providing external academic validation on the project, fulfilling a goal of developing a project that could be applied in other rural communities. Indeed, having the project's survey approved by the University Research Ethics Board added weight to how the research results would be received.

Developing relationships with these important education and rural development actors strengthened voices of the community so they could be better heard. Knowing that external influential voices were also pursuing this issue boosted the confidence of the community, not only validating their feelings that their concerns were relevant and important, but that their sentiments were supported by research. Parents and concerned community members were buoyed knowing that other people were working hard to address this issue.

The project survey taps into the knowledge and expertise of community members. The insights of parents and former students helped to inform this work. Communication and engagement were maximized by going out into the community and providing opportunities for people to contribute their perspective.

Financial Management of Resources

Financial obstacles were perhaps some of the greater and more constant challenges of the program. However, the CCN staff were finance-savvy in their use of funds received from the Ministry of Transportation and the Rural Ontario Institute. They hired internally a part-time staff to oversee work plans, data collection and analysis. By doing this they were able maximize the use of their resources in the evaluation.

The project coordinator was a skilled networker and leveraged funds from a variety of sources and grant pools over the years. Without municipal grants and MTO Gas Tax funds, running such a program would be almost impossible. The coordinator noted that “transportation isn’t a money maker, but there is high social return – people that live in these rural communities, if they didn’t have this program, they wouldn’t be able to go anywhere.”

Thanks to the fund development skills of the project coordinator, this project benefited from various financial contributions beyond ROI support over the years. Operating and maintenance costs are combined from multiple sources, i.e., In 2010, to help grow the rural service, the Ontario Trillium Foundation provided an \$80,000 grant, of which \$20,000 was spent on a wheelchair-accessible van, and \$60,000 was spend on expansion operating costs. The **Northumberland Community Futures Development Corporation** provided another \$20,000 and the Northumberland United way contributed \$5,000 (Hoskin & Vandine, 2016). The program is also supported by the Municipality of Trent Hills, which donates \$45,500 to CCN for additional gas tax support every year (Community Care Northumberland, 2014). The program also receives a yearly grant from Northumberland County Community and Social Services \$40,000.

The project coordinator also approached the townships of Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand to request financial assistance, and suggested they apply to the **Gas Tax Fund** from the provincial government. The Gas Tax funding allowed the program to continue past the pilot stage and is critical to its ongoing operation

In-kind contributions included a videographer at the Summit to tell the story of the project and volunteer time of a dedicated transportation committee that meets four times per year.

| RESULTS

Currently, Municipality of Trent Hills, Alnwick/Haldimand, Cramahe Townships, Town of Cobourg and Port Hope, and Hamilton Township in Northumberland County are connected through the Specialized Transportation Program. Other important results, though less tangible in nature, were noticed. Stories of resident's finishing school, finding employment and making friends thanks to the Specialized Transportation Program demonstrate the value of rural transportation in benefiting individuals and strengthening social capital. Program staff who typically have access to personal vehicles were struck by the program's impact through survey feedback and the stakeholder summit. Summit organizers were surprised at the high level of community interest in the program. CCN staff report a greater appreciation and understanding of transportation needs and services. The program's success story has been shared with **Haliburton County**, where similar efforts are struggling to receive support.

CCN presentations to local councils and participation in social services coordination meetings with mayors and wardens have been helpful. The project coordinator has undertaken these activities at least once a year since the transportation initiative began in 2008. Overall, this evaluation has helped strengthen partnerships and increase engagement.

The program is currently conducting a one-year review following the stakeholder summit. Leaders have found it difficult to maintain momentum after the initial push of engagement and implementation. However, they still plan on finishing the review despite some delays, as they believe it important to provide residents with an update as well as to demonstrate what has become of their feedback. In hindsight, a stronger post-implementation plan and a smaller survey sample (e.g., 50 instead of 200 people and more quality conversations with the community) would have been useful at the onset of the project (Interview, 2017).

LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

CCN Specialized Transportation Program has learned many lessons since it first implemented its transportation service in 2008. Their advice to others includes:

- Start with a workplan and adjust along the way
- When conducting surveys, think quality over quantity
- Have a separate follow-up workplan for post-implementation; accept that “the work never ends” and that there are always improvements to be made
- Be in the public eye, keep the community engaged and informed
- Every community is different, there is no cookie-cutter approach that will work everywhere
- Political support and financial backing will be different in each community and are essential to the success of the project
- There is currently a lot of support from the Ministry of Transportation to improve transportation services; the time to act is now!

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Specialized Transportation Program has had a tremendous positive impact on the wellbeing of Northumberland County residents. The increase in ridership and need to expand, as well as the personal stories of how it has impacted residents’ lives, highlights the importance of the service to the community. Community service providers have also seen the value of the program, as their services are more integrated and frequented. Rural transportation programs are expensive to maintain and constant grants and subsidies are needed to keep the program running. CCN, through extensive community engagement and visibility as well as strong organizational planning, has proven the value of such a service and can provide an example to other rural communities seeking to implement similar transportation services.

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| CHECKLIST

Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?

It may work well if your county/organization...

- ☒ Has strong and supportive political backing.
- ☒ Is eligible to receive sufficient grants and subsidies to implement and maintain the program.
- ☒ Has a strong need for regular, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transportation options.
- ☒ Has a sufficient number of dedicated staff willing to deliver a transportation program.
- ☒ Has strong organizational and planning skills and preferably a history of running community or transportation services; running a public transportation and booking service requires a lot of coordination!
- ☒ Is willing to invest in advertisement and awareness building to develop strong community engagement, gather feedback and gain clientele.
- ☒ Is looking to provide a much-needed service, but are not expecting to turn in a profit.

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The Rural Ontario Institute provided information gathered and summarized by Dr Suzanne Ainley of Ainley Consulting to Platinum Leadership to describe the community projects. All such descriptions have been reviewed and approved by the relevant community contacts.

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