

REPORT: LIGHTING THE WAY

Learning from People with Limited Transportation Options

Get Your GreenBack Tompkins – Fall 2016

Karim Beers – kwb6@cornell.edu

“Living out in the country. Walking to the bus is dangerous. No sidewalks. Narrow roads, especially in the winter. No transportation to Cortland ... Taxi in Groton is too expensive.” – Groton resident

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Well-networked individuals interviewed 91 people from low-income immigrant, rural, and/or formerly incarcerated populations around Tompkins County to learn about their transportation struggles and solutions. Analysis of the survey highlighted three issues: a) work-related transportation was the top struggle and priority, and having a job was often connected to people’s ability to afford transportation; b) even when transit service was available, many faced barriers to using the bus; c) and many would use a bicycle if they had one. Some solutions are suggested, including developing a van service to fill in transit gaps and a service to provide free or affordable cars and repairs; revitalizing a community bike shop; and improving transit communications. Based on the analysis, the research team recommends Tompkins County adopt a goal and develop and implement a plan to guarantee transportation to work.

II. INTRODUCTION

Who are the people with limited or no reliable and affordable transportation options? Where do they live? What trips are the ones they need? What solutions are they finding? A team of transportation professionals, researchers, and community organizers sought to answer these questions by interviewing over 90 people with limited income who faced transportation barriers. This report summarizes the methodology, key findings, and related recommendations, along with excerpts of first-hand experiences of interviewed individuals. The project was coordinated by Get Your GreenBack Tompkins, with a grant from the county’s Special Community Mobility Projects.

III. METHODOLOGY

Three individuals with strong connections to marginalized communities were hired to conduct interviews with individuals with limited transportation options. Each Community Educator Organizer (CEO) conducted around 30 surveys, each one focused on a particular population. One CEO, Khalil Bey, a local artist connected to the re-entry efforts in the county, focused on previously incarcerated individuals; another, Ruth Williams, who is well connected to local food insecurity programs, concentrated on the rural poor, with a special focus on Groton; a third, Bailtal Hsa Moo, primarily interviewed recent immigrants, including many Karen people from Burma. Some of the people interviewed did not fall into these categories, but all of them had faced significant transportation barriers recently. To find people to interview, the CEOs mostly relied on their extensive personal and professional networks, including family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

Here is a snapshot of those interviewed:

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Gender | Women slightly outnumbered men |
| Age | ¾ between 26 and 59; four respondents were 60+; 18 were < 25 |
| Children | 40% of respondents live with children under the age of 18 |
| Work | 50% of respondents work, 1/3 don't and 12 are students, retired, etc |
| Immigrants | 32 respondents were immigrants |
| Car | 72% of respondents did NOT own a car |
| Urban/Rural | 33 respondents lived in the City of Ithaca, 17 in the Town of Ithaca, and the rest in rural towns in the County. |

CEOs were hired for approximately eight months, working some 10 hours a month, with a stipend of \$20/hour or per survey for up to \$200 per month (occasionally more). For each of the four months they conducted about 3-15 semi-structured interviews using surveys that they helped develop in conjunction with Get Your GreenBack Tompkins coordinator Karim Beers, and Gretchen Rymarchyk, a Research and Evaluation Consultant. A copy of the survey is included as an appendix. The survey and survey process were designed to create a safe, respectful space where people felt comfortable sharing their stories and thoughts. Interviewees received a choice of three different \$10 gift cards for participating. Throughout the surveying, the CEOs met together as a group to discuss how things were going, and share learning on how to improve the survey process and the quality of data they were getting. CEOs described the process as empowering for both themselves and for some of the people they interviewed, who appreciated having the chance to tell their story, contribute ideas to solutions, and have their time and thoughts be valued as demonstrated by the gift card.

A schedule of CEO activities is presented in the table below

| MARCH/APRIL | APRIL-AUGUST | SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER | OCTOBER-NOVEMBER |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Training | Surveying | Analysis & Writing Report | Presentations |

An undergraduate intern from Cornell University, Ivy Wong, helped digitize the surveys and prepare analyses, presentations and reports. In total, 91 surveys were collected and digitized. The entire research group made up of the CEOs and Karim and Gretchen helped identify major recurring themes and important findings.

Presentations will be given to a network of transportation professionals, as well as an open meeting for interested community members.

IV. KEY FINDINGS

The stories told were diverse, in many cases heart-breaking, and were rich with insights. Many different challenges were mentioned in the interviews. However, we want to highlight three barriers that came up repeatedly in the stories.

1. Transportation is an acute barrier to finding and maintaining work, which is the priority trip for most people interviewed. Not having a job limits people's ability to afford transportation.
2. Buses are a lifeline for many, but some face barriers to taking public transportation.

3. Some people rely on bicycles for transportation, and more people would use a bicycle if they owned one.

Each of these is presented in greater detail, followed by proposed solutions.

1. “[I need] a job so I can have money to get a car or whatever!”

The most recurring obstacle reported was the struggle to get a job or to get to work due to lack of transportation options. This was mentioned by 64 of the 91 respondents. The lack of reliable or consistent transportation options had affected people’s ability to get to work or even to job interviews. It also prevented them from getting better paying jobs: a number of respondents mentioned taking lower paying jobs that they could get to more easily. Over a third of the respondents (33) mentioned having to quit or pass up jobs because they couldn’t easily or reliably get to their job.

Getting a job and getting to that job was the top travel priority for those interviewed: 50 mentioned work trips as the single most important trip that they wanted to solve (the next two highest priorities were healthcare [15] and groceries [9]).

For many, not owning a functional car was perceived as **the** transportation problem, and car ownership its solution. Most people interviewed (65) reported needing a car of their own to solve their transportation needs. Just getting a car, however, wasn’t the end of all problems. Some reported problems when their car broke down; others didn’t have licenses or have had them suspended, and some women faced cultural barriers to driving. But the fact remains that most thought that having their own car was what they needed to get where they needed to go:

A woman from Ithaca highlighted the challenge when her car broke down: “I am a single mother. My car broke down last winter. I work at Ithaca college at 5 AM, and no coworkers have the same schedule. Had to call friend for a ride with them to work. Spent \$25 for every three days. One guy I paid him \$15 for two days. I only make \$9 an hour at work. That month, I spent \$120 paying friends.”

An Ithaca resident: “Lack of transportation keeps in me in low paying jobs with funny hours.”

Another: “[Because of transportation,] I blew two good job interviews. I got a job at Dunkin Donuts but I am skilled to do welding and metal work. I need a car to work in my field. I had to accept working at Dunkin Donuts because my P.O. [parole officer] was on my case.”

A Newfield resident: “Getting to work is hard ... after I blew the head gasket on my car. I had to catch the bus and ask for rides to and from work and catch taxis to go to the market. My job threatened to fire me if I continued to be late. I had saved some money to buy a car but I am spending it to pay for rides--\$300 in the past month just to be on time for work.”

2. “I don’t know how to ride the bus”

The second most common solution to transportation problems, which ten people cited, after owning a car, was increased bus routes and service. However, even when there was bus service, many people faced barriers to taking the bus. Fourteen respondents, six of whom were recent immigrants, could have taken the bus to get where they needed to go, but didn’t because they didn’t know how to or where to take the bus.

"I try to find a job that is close to where I live but there are no jobs available. One time I got accepted by Challenge Industries but because it's too far away, I decided not to take the job. Ended up with no job. I don't know how to take buses there. I have been here a few years but I don't know how to ride the bus." - Immigrant mother of three, who was unemployed at the time of interview.

An Ithaca resident for over five years: *"I had to pass up three jobs because I wasn't able to get a ride to and from work, and I don't have knowledge of all the bus routes and schedules because I never thought about using a bus."*

For non-work related transportation issues, such as getting to healthcare, social services, or to groceries, 24 respondents encountered difficulties due to buses not reaching their areas, bus times being infrequent or not matching with their schedule, or missing the bus. Eighteen of the respondents who had work-related transportation issues also experienced those same difficulties.

3. Give Me a Bike and I Will Ride

Nineteen of the respondents are already using bikes for transportation, often to get to work, including several who started biking after their cars broke down. Of the 67 who do not own a bicycle, 17 said that they would use a bike if they had one. Distance may have been a barrier for others: of the 50 who would not use a bicycle for transportation, 32 individuals lived over 5 miles away from work. Other barriers to using bicycles mentioned by interviewees included health issues, not knowing how, or fear of riding in heavy traffic.

"Since my bike broke down, I have been having a hard time getting around like I used to and it will be a few weeks before I can get my bike fixed or replaced. Groceries is another struggle ... [To get where I need to go] I need a new bike 'cause I don't drive." --A male resident in the City of Ithaca currently working a part-time job.

4. Other Findings

There were a number of additional insights gleaned from the surveys:

- For those who did not own cars, the most common way they overcame their transportation challenges was by **getting rides with friends or family**. One immigrant put it thus: *"If I don't have friend, I never be able to go to work."* This put a lot of pressure on those providing rides, who had to carry that extra responsibility. One immigrant told a story of being the reliable ride to a friend to a job site outside of the county: *"My car broke down, and both of us ended up quitting our jobs. I feel sorry for him."*
- Another possible solution that people considered was **living closer to work**. Over 30 of those interviewed mentioned the **price of housing being an obstacle** to living closer. Some were able to get to work because they could walk there.
- Another lifeline for several people was having their employers be flexible with their work schedule. One woman worked late in summer because she could walk home, but in winter shifted to earlier schedule in order to be able to get a ride or a bus.
- Many found difficulties with **intercounty travel** to medical appointments, higher education, and mandatory meetings for unemployment due to almost non-existent options. A number of people

on parole mentioned the **challenge of visiting their parole officers** in places outside the county such as Elmira.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that transportation should not be an obstacle to getting and keeping a job, and that as a community we should commit to finding ways to solve this problem. We include some recommendations below that could address some of the unmet needs for transportation for those with limited incomes, recommendations which are on our findings and respondents' suggestions.

1. "The Work Van" - Van Service

"I wish there was a regular car or van to help me and other people like me." -- A mother of two living in Enfield who was looking for a job and trying to balance taking care of her kids, childcare, and shopping.

A van service could fit in between fixed route bus service and private taxis, filling in some of the gaps of TCAT's rural service, providing rides from Ithaca to surrounding towns at times that are outside of regular commuting hours. In addition, there could be routes providing inter-county service. Interviewees suggested routes between Ithaca and Elmira and Groton-Dryden and Cortland. These van services could run on semi-flexible fixed routes or loops, and more frequently than the bus. Some ideas to explore include:

- Using existing vans from municipal departments or non-profit agencies.
- Including job training as part of the model, providing additional work opportunities for those who struggle to get a job, a job that helps others get a job and get to a job!
- This could be run as a small business. There may be ways to pay people to use their own car or van to provide others with rides to work that aren't serviced by transit. Numerous stories demonstrated people are willing to pay significant amounts of money for rides.

2. Free or Subsidized Car and Repair Service

Respondents made it clear that the biggest help to them would be having a functional car. *"A car would be perfect [to get me where I need to go], but I can't afford one."* Many solved their problems when they got one. A program that provides free or subsidized cars and repair services could help meet some of the demand for cars. Some ideas to consider:

- Receive donated cars, from private individuals and local businesses who could use the donations as tax write offs
- Prioritize those who could provide rides to others as well, or require sweat equity.
- This could be a job training opportunity as well, helping people learn car repair skills, connected to BOCES or the William George agency.
- From what we have heard, such a service used to exist in Tompkins County but was discontinued.

3. Revitalize RIBs – Free Bike & Bike Repair

Recycle Ithaca's Bicycles (RIBs), a program of the Southside Community Center, was originally set up to help provide access to bicycles to children and adults with limited financial resources. However, its primary focus over the last several years has been on repair services for those with bikes. The director has mentioned having to continually turn down requests for free bikes from low-income community members and agencies serving these populations. We need community support to help revitalize RIBs, and help it develop the capacity to meet the needs of the scores of individuals who could benefit from access to a bike, as well as continue with its bike repair services. RIBs and other community bike programs such as Friends Bike Clinic could also help equip certain bicycles with racks, containers and trailers in order to increase cargo capacity to haul groceries and other goods.

4. Improve TCAT Communications

Improving the **TCAT website and materials would help many residents, including immigrants.** Some ideas:

- Include information on riding the bus in different languages, and integrating education on bus riding into programs for new immigrants.
- Provide videos on how to take the bus at bus stops, on TV, and elsewhere.

A recent immigrant commented *"I wish somebody teach me how to take the bus ... so that I don't have to bother anybody anymore."*

5. Personalized Support – Concierge/Transportation Navigator

When people struggle to get to work or somewhere, they need someone who can help them navigate all the local transportation options, including figuring out bus schedules, getting a bike, getting started with carpooling, etc. Many interviewees mentioned they lacked information about a service, or needed help finding a way to get a ride.

6. More Multimodal Solutions

In addition to car or repair services, there could be infrastructure to help people switch from one mode to another--for example, going from bike to bus or carpooling or vice-versa. Some ideas:

- Providing spaces in the outskirts of Ithaca where commuters can switch from their car or bike to the bus, car or bike.
- Providing additional bike rack space on the buses to accommodate more bikers.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study helped shine the light on some aspects of transportation challenges for people with limited financial resources, as well as possible solutions. While only 91 people were interviewed, their

transportation struggles impact hundreds more--children and other family members, as well as friends and co-workers.

The interviews were full of insights, though our analysis was limited. One lens for future research would be to compare and contrast short-term, one-off transportation problems (what someone does when their reliable transportation falls through for a limited period) versus long-term challenges. Further probing people who say they need a car to find out if there are other solutions that would work for them as well may prove interesting. Finally, a more robust and statistically-valid study would be useful to shed more light on the extent of the problem.

While we believe the suggestions above will help address some of the major challenges described, the research team is aware that transportation is just one piece of the puzzle. Affordable and accessible childcare, for example, is another issue that came up several times in the interviews as a significant obstacle for adults to be able to go where they need to with the transportation resources available to them.

VII. APPENDIX

Survey is included below.

Date:
Interviewer:

1. Has transportation affected your ability to get to any of these places?

School **Y N** health care **Y N** social services **Y N** family & friends **Y N** Groceries **Y N**

Other _____ [If no to all, skip to question 3]

Can you share a story in which you struggled to get to one of these places?

2. Continuing with this story, did you figure out a way on that occasion or on other occasions despite the challenges? **Y N** If so, Would you share how? _____

3. Has transportation affected your ability to get a job or get to work? **Y N** If so, would you share how? What did you do?

4. Did you figure out a way to get to work on that occasion or on other occasions? **Y N** Would you share how? (Your solutions or ideas may help others as well)

5. In general, what would you need to get where you need to go?

6. Are you using a bicycle for transportation? **Y N** If not, Why not? If yes, where to?

Do you own a bicycle? **Y N** If you did, would you use one? **Y N**

7. How far away do you live from your work? _____ Would you like to live closer? **Y N** Why or why not?

8. If things were different and you could get rides from others easily, how many rides would you need to solve your **biggest** transportation problems?

1 or 2 a month _____ 1 or 2 a week _____ Once a day _____ 2 or 3 a day _____ I need my own car _____ Other:

9. If things were different and you could solve one, which trip would you solve? [Priority]

10. Is there anything else you would like to add or other ideas you would like to share?

Reminder: the following questions are optional:

Where live? Caroline _____ Danby _____ Dryden _____ Enfield _____ Groton _____ City of Ithaca _____ Town of Ithaca _____ Lansing _____
Newfield _____ Other: _____

How long have you lived in the Tompkins County area? Less than 1 year _____ 1-4 years _____ 5-10 years _____ 11+ years _____

Did you emigrate from another country? **Y N** **Have Driver's License:** **Y N** Other _____

Have car? yes, works _____ yes, but doesn't work _____ no _____

Gender: _____ **Age:** 18-25 _____ 26-59 _____ 60+ _____

Children ages 0-18 live with you? No _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3+ _____

Are you employed? Full Time _____ Part Time _____ No _____ Other _____