

Addressing the Transportation Dilemma

Access to transportation is a major concern of Kentucky's older adults. Gas prices are climbing ever higher and driving is not an option for older people with mobility limitations. Many Kentuckians, particularly those in rural areas, are fearful of how they will get by when it becomes necessary to give up driving. Taxis, if they are available, are expensive. A significant proportion of respondents to the 2007 KERI survey (44.6%) reported that their community does not have public transportation. Two-thirds of the respondents (66.5%) reported that they will be forced to rely on family or friends for transportation when they have to give up driving. Other respondents indicated they have "no idea" how they will get around when this occurs. If public bus transportation is available, the stops are often difficult to reach, the schedules inconvenient, and there is rarely provision for assistance with carrying groceries or packages.

The KERI Survey asked respondents about their use of public transportation. Of those who have used public transportation in the past year, 59.9% said they used it only once or twice. At the same time, 43.6% of persons 62 and older and 54.6% of Baby Boomers (persons aged 43-61) anticipate that their need for public transportation will increase. How will such transportation be provided, particularly in rural areas? Is there any way to provide flexible transportation options meeting the specialized individual transportation needs of older adults?

One option scheduled to begin service in Lexington/Fayette County in September, and in adjacent counties as the service expands, is ITNBluegrass (www.ITNbluegrass.org)(Hewlett, 2008). Affiliated with the national Independent Transportation Network (ITN), ITNBluegrass is a non-profit membership organization for anyone over the age of 60 and persons with visual impairment. Using volunteers, many of them older adults, the organization provides door-to-door transportation. There are no limitations on trip purpose. Executive Director Gale Reece, Deputy Director Laura Dake and Rep. Susan Westrom were the driving force behind House Bill 204 which provides ITNBluegrass with exemption from current law forbidding volunteers from driving their own cars.

As the aging of the Baby Boomers places ever increasing demands on Kentucky's infrastructure, it is critical to experiment with innovative options like ITNBluegrass that offer new solutions to old problems. If they succeed, such ventures can provide models for replication throughout the Commonwealth. Without such innovation Kentucky's older citizens will increasingly find themselves no longer able to enjoy simple freedoms such as shopping by themselves or participating in community life that every person deserves.

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