THE VETERANS ONLINE DIALOGUE: "STRENGTHENING TRANSPORTATION CHOICES SO WE CAN SERVE THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED THEIR COUNTRY"

Executive Summary
July 2012

“We ensuring that our veterans and military families have access to quality, convenient transportation is just one way we can thank them for their service. With these transportation grants, we will help connect veterans and military families with the jobs and training opportunities they deserve, as well as the medical care and other services they need, all located close to home.” DOT Secretary Ray LaHood

We must serve those who have served their country. There are over 23M Veterans today\(^1\) and Veterans over 60 are the largest demographic group – 12.5M. Estimates suggest that 2.3M Veterans live with some type of disability.\(^2\) The U.S. Department of Defense estimates 233,000 soldiers were diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries from 2000 to 2011. Unemployment rates for Veterans under 24 is astounding 29% vs. an unemployment rate of approximately 8% overall for Veterans.\(^3\) Thus, throughout the US, there is an ever-growing need to support veterans and military families. Assisting with community reintegration for veterans with disabilities ensures access to services. Transportation is one of the key services everyone needs for community-based living. The Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration recognized this need and developed the Veterans Transportation and Community Living Initiative (VTCLI), committing over $60 million for innovative projects and partnerships to enhance access to local transportation services to meet the needs of returning service members, including wounded warriors, veterans, and their families. This vitally important effort with over 119 grants to date, connects veterans, service-members and their families with the opportunities they need and deserve—from jobs and job training centers to schools, hospitals, day care centers, and recreation.

As the community grantees of VTCLI programs begin their work, information is needed on the issues, barriers, and possible ways to address the transportation needs of veterans, active-duty military personnel and their families. Easter Seals Project ACTION (ESPA) organized and managed an online dialogue on veterans’ transportation to seek answers and find solutions regarding Veterans Transportation. ESPA, on behalf of the FTA, fielded an online event, Strengthening Transportation Choices So We Can Serve Those Who Have Served Their Country, May 7 through June 8, 2012. The online event utilized a relatively new social networking tool called “online dialogue.” This type of web-based tool allows any interested stakeholder to share information 24/7 on a topic by submitting an idea, commenting on an idea, or voting on an idea, and site visitors have the choice to register and participate or just view the site. The Veterans Transportation online dialogue sought involvement from Veterans, Military Service-members, and their families as well as providers of transportation and human services across four areas: Overcoming barriers, communications, policy issues, and getting a ride. The dialogue site remains live for those who want to peruse the details of the results: http://veteransdialogue.ideascale.com/.

---

2 American Community Survey of 2009.
Over two thousand people (i.e., 2,241) visited the site with 20% (459) choosing to register and fully participate. Users generated 1,073 actions: 78 ideas, 239 comments, and 756 votes, and, represent the most engaged set of registrants of any ESPA online dialogue to date. The number of votes an idea generates identifies which ideas participants feel are the most important. The veterans’ transportation online dialogue had an action rate 70% higher than the two earlier dialogues. This dialogue’s action rate, which is the votes to idea ratio, was 9.7 votes for each idea. Previous dialogue action rates were 5.5 and 5.7. A major reason for this success was the level of Federal executive support in outreach to spread the word about the opportunity to participate in the dialogue. Not only did Secretary LaHood share a video and blogged on his award winning ‘Fastlane’ about the event, but the White House blogged and both FTA Administrator Rogoff and Deputy Administrator McMillan both encouraged participation during their speeches at major transportation association events. In addition, Easter Seals, VETs First of United Spinal, the American Public Transportation Association, and the Community Transportation Association of America did special outreach efforts.

Out of the 78 ideas submitted by the participants, three over-arching themes emerged from the Veterans Transportation Online Dialogue: the need for innovative funding mechanisms, the opportunities for enhancing access to transportation through technology initiatives and the importance of collaboration as a transportation multiplier. A number of respondents also noted the challenges associated with rural communities and transportation. Of the top five voted ideas, two were associated with funding approaches, two with technology, and one with collaboration – these themes often intersected, demonstrating the association between all three areas.

Innovative funding suggestions ranged from a need for more operational funding, specialized reduced fares for Veterans or merging with technology initiatives such as using smartphones and smartcards to provide special fares to Veterans. A number of ideas reinforced the utility of call centers with seven ideas discussing how call centers, databases and systems like 211/511 ease access to transportation choices, thus showing the efficacy of the VTCLI program’s major area of focus. One creative idea recommended, “We redesign the VA ID Card so that the Federal Government can reimburse Public Transit agencies for providing transit services to all military Veterans.”

The importance of collaboration and coordination echoed strongly in the results, especially in terms of barriers. Many reported the opportunity for collaboration between military bases, VA hospitals, and public transportation but noted there was a lack of communication between the entities. Here again, technology was recommended as an answer: “One of the challenges to coordinating operations between human service transportation providers and MSO/VSO transportation providers is the lack of easy mechanisms for being able to send trip request or vehicle availability information between providers. Aside from phone calls and faxes, there is no straightforward and secure means to communicate between systems unless perhaps the providers are using the same scheduling & dispatch software.” Coordination was recommended as a way to address rural issues: “Coordinate a multistage effort to arrange and reduce problems with veterans’ transportation to medical treatment facilities. Medical treatment facilities can work with transit agencies to block specific dates for veterans living in remote access areas that use local transit agencies to provide service. In cases where the two agencies cannot resolve the issue the county Veterans Service Agency should get involved to help resolve the issue and provide oversight until the process runs smoothly.”

The dialogue reached its intended audience with a mix of interest with those participating between public transportation (31%) and veterans’ services (27%). Participants to the site came from all of the US with concentrations in the District of Columbia, California, Illinois, Oregon, Virginia, Colorado, and Iowa. The many veterans; individuals from veterans’ services organizations, public transportation providers, human services providers, medical transportation providers, and private transportation providers; and advocates who took the time to participate provided compelling ideas for
future action. The success and information generated through this project shows the utility of social media to find answers to pressing needs. Most importantly, the Veterans Transportation Online Dialogue provides substantive, actionable ideas to enhance transportation for those who have so unselfishly served their country. As FTA Administrator Rogoff notes: “America’s war heroes deserve a chance to support their families, participate in their communities, receive job training and get to work. It’s vitally important that we remove barriers to success by making transportation available wherever our veterans choose to live, work and receive care.”