

# FREEDOM TO RIDE

---

Freedom to Ride: Measuring the Effectiveness of Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program

Chesley Giertz, LLMSW

Developmental Disabilities Institute

Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

This project sponsored by a grant from Easter Seals Project ACTION.

### Abstract

From 2005 to 2008, Michigan implemented a transportation voucher program to address barriers to transportation for individuals with developmental disabilities. This study examined the question, How did Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program increase the community connectivity and quality of life of its participants? Surveys were mailed to 311 program participants in four counties. The survey included 23 quantitative and 4 qualitative items assessing participants' demographic information, transportation needs, and experiences in the voucher program. Participants' Quality of Life was measured according to eight core indicators as described by Schalock and Alonso (2002). Community connectivity was measured using participants' responses to the qualitative questions. Of the surveys mailed, 73 were completed and returned. In terms of their overall quality of life, 54% of respondents said it was better with the voucher program than without it. Participants used the voucher program for a variety of purposes, including recreational or community activities (58%), running errands (49%), medical appointments (42%), visiting family and friends (30%), and employment/job training/volunteering (24%). No significant differences were found in terms of age, gender, or disability type. The findings of this study indicate that Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program did increase the quality of life and community participation of its participants.

*Keywords:* Disability, transportation, voucher, quality of life

## **Introduction**

For many people with developmental disabilities, gaining access to the community can be challenging. Among transportation challenges are limitations on the days and hours of operation of various forms of transportation, restrictions on public transportation routes, vehicles unequipped for people with physical disabilities, high cost of travel, and non-existent public transportation systems in many rural areas (Easter Seals Project ACTION, 2006). A lack of affordable and accessible transportation prevents people with disabilities from being full participants in their communities (Seekins, Enders, Pepper, & Sticka, 2007; Enders & Seekins, 2009; Carmien, Dawe, Fischer, Gorman, Kintsch, & Sullivan, 2005; National Council on Disability, 2005). Completing everyday activities such as shopping, medical appointments, working, and visiting family and friends is difficult without a reliable source of transportation, and unfeasible if public transit does not exist in a community. For those who do not drive, a reliable and accessible public transportation system is the key to community inclusion (National Council on Disability, 2005) and a better quality of life (Gilhooly et al., 2002). According to Schalock and Alonso (2002), social and community inclusion are two indicators of good quality of life. Wasfi, Levinson, and El-Geneidy (2006) also acknowledge the relationship between transportation and quality of life among people with developmental disabilities.

To address the transportation needs of people with developmental disabilities, various forms of transit have been developed. Fixed route services are common in urban communities; these can include line haul buses, trains, and subways. Flexible services, wherein a rider can schedule transportation to and from a desired location at a specific time, are found in both urban

and rural communities. Other types of transportation systems include vanpools, carpools, agency vehicles, transportation for health care, and voucher programs.

Transportation voucher programs have been demonstrated in at least 12 states throughout the United States, primarily in rural communities. Rather than creating or replacing a transit system, transportation voucher programs augment existing services. Voucher programs are operated by sponsoring agencies that negotiate with public and private transportation providers to accept vouchers, recruit and train eligible participants, and help riders identify volunteers and transportation providers who will accept vouchers (Gonzalez, Stombaugh, Seekins, & Kasnitz, 2006). Riders are given a voucher book, similar to a check book, with an allocation of miles or dollars from the sponsoring agency, and are responsible for organizing and securing rides. The sponsoring agency reimburses transportation providers who submit vouchers.

There are benefits and disadvantages to voucher programs. Voucher programs are cost effective (Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living, 2006; The Beverly Foundation, 2003; Bernier & Seekins, 1999; Easter Seals Project ACTION, 2006; The Community Transportation Association, 2008). They utilize volunteer drivers, who make up for a lack of transportation and are less expensive than hiring drivers or purchasing vehicles (Easter Seals Project ACTION, 2006; Bernier & Seekins, 1999). Voucher programs encourage choice and self-determination among people with disabilities, and allow funds to follow individuals as they are based on a person's individual transportation needs (Hagner & Marrone, 1995; Bruyere et. al, 2002). Transportation voucher programs allow people to access transportation at any day and time, and travel long distances outside their local communities. On the other hand, challenges to operating a voucher program include a potential for misuse of

the voucher without adequate monitoring (Bernier & Seekins, 1999; Gonzalez et.al, 2006), and agencies' reluctance to collaborate due to fears of losing financial control and visibility in the community. For a full description of transportation voucher programs, please refer to the Transportation Voucher Program Wiki through the Federal Transit Administration's website ([http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants\\_financing\\_8614.html](http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_8614.html)).

Historically, transportation voucher programs have been implemented in rural communities due to a lack of transportation funding and resources in more remote areas (Bernier & Seekins, 1999; Gonzalez et. al, 2006; Seekins et. al, 2007). In 2005, Michigan's Developmental Disabilities Council awarded demonstration project funds to six grantees in the state, to develop and implement transportation voucher programs in rural, suburban, and urban communities. The six grantees encompassed eight counties: Antrim and Kalkaska, Baraga, Jackson, Muskegon and Newaygo, Shiawassee, and Wayne (Figure 1). Each grantee operated its program differently, and was responsible for determining participant eligibility and other criteria. However, the Developmental Disabilities Council of Michigan mandated that at least 51% of participants have a developmental disability. There were approximately 460 riders in the program from 2005 until the program ended in 2008.

Despite the growing use of transportation voucher programs, little research has been published on the effectiveness of such programs. In their evaluation of the Traveler's Cheque Voucher Program, Gonzalez et. al (2006) reported improved quality of life and community participation among participants in the program. However, according to Seekins et. al (2007), little research has been published about transportation for people with disabilities. Gilhooly et al. (2002) also acknowledge that the relationship between access to transportation and quality of life

has been examined infrequently. In preparation for this study, a review of the literature revealed no quantitative research on the effects of transportation voucher programs on the quality of life and level of community participation of people with developmental disabilities. The goal of this research was to answer the question: How did Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program affect the community connectivity and quality of life of its participants?

### **Method**

The population of interest for this study included participants in Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program. Four of the eight counties that participated in the voucher program (Baraga, Jackson, Newaygo, and Wayne) agreed to participate in this study. Participants in Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program were adults over 18, and at least 51% of voucher program participants had a developmental disability. Participants in this study participated in the transportation voucher program for various lengths of time, from two months to three years.

In order to obtain maximum participation, surveys were mailed to all voucher program participants in the four counties whose leaders agreed to participate in this study. Prior to the distribution of the survey and other materials, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Wayne State University. Voucher leaders were given materials to distribute to participants, including an introduction letter, an information sheet, the survey, and postage-paid return envelopes. The information sheet included a section for participants to consent to participate in the study. Return envelopes were pre-addressed to the Principal Investigator of this study. Voucher leaders created packets containing each piece of the materials and mailed

the packets to participants with current contact information (Table 1). Gift cards valued at ten dollars each were offered as incentives to participants in exchange for completed surveys.

Of the 311 voucher program participants who were mailed survey packets, 11 were returned to sender due to an insufficient address; one indicated that the survey respondent was not a person with a disability; and four indicated that the survey respondent did not participate in Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program. Three participants completed the survey online, which was accessible through the Developmental Disabilities Institute's official website. Seventy-three of the completed surveys were valid and used for this study (response rate=24.4%). Of the valid surveys, 52% were completed by a person with a disability and 41% were completed by someone in collaboration with a person with a disability (i.e., direct care staff, Support Coordinator, friend, or family member). Seven percent of survey respondents did not indicate if someone assisted them in the completion of the survey.

The survey consisted of 23 quantitative and 4 qualitative items. The quantitative questions assessed standard demographic information of participants (age, sex, type of disability, living arrangement, and employment status). Other quantitative questions ascertained participants' experiences in the voucher program and their transportation needs. Participants' Quality of Life was measured according to eight core indicators as described by Schalock and Alonso (2002). The eight core indicators include: emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, self-determination, social inclusion, and rights. Qualitative questions asked participants to describe the community activities in which they participated while using the voucher. Two of the qualitative questions

asked participants to describe problems they had while participating in the program, and things they disliked about the program. Community connectivity was measured using participants' responses to the qualitative questions.

## **Results**

### **Demographics**

Frequencies were calculated on demographic data in order to determine overall characteristics of the sample (Table 2). Fifty-six percent of the sample was male, 44% was female. Twenty-two percent of respondents were 18 to 35 years old, 43% were between the ages of 35 and 55, and 34% were 56 or older. Forty-five percent of respondents had a physical disability, 36% a cognitive/intellectual disability, 43% a mental/emotional disability, and 8% another type of disability. Other disabilities that respondents listed included arthritis, stroke, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, head injury, Tourette Syndrome, epilepsy, and legal blindness. Participants were able to indicate more than one disability. Most respondents lived in their own home or apartment (52%); 30% lived with parents or family, 12% lived in a group home, and 4% lived with a spouse/partner. The majority of respondents (74%) were not employed at the time of the survey. Of those who were employed, 15% were employed part-time and 3% full time.

### **Transportation Needs and Issues**

When asked how they usually traveled to places in the community, the majority of respondents indicated they rely on a family member or friend (67%); 25% indicated they walked or biked and 7% used taxis. Only 15% of respondents owned their own car. Respondents were

able to indicate more than one mode of transportation.

When asked what were the two most important things in meeting their transportation needs and maintaining their independence, 65% of respondents indicated that being able to travel where they wanted was most important; 47% said cost was most important.

The results suggest that transportation issues keep individuals with disabilities isolated. Just under two thirds of the respondents (61%) said they had missed out on a social event due to a lack of transportation, and 27% have either lost a job or missed out on getting a job because they lacked transportation.

### **Impact of the Transportation Voucher Program**

Participants were asked whether various aspects of their lives were better, worse, or the same with or without the transportation voucher program. Responses indicated that respondents felt they were better off with the transportation voucher program: 61% were less stressed with the program, 61% were able to spend more time in the community, 50% had more time to relax, 43% said they were better able to develop skills or continue their education, 47% felt more respected and more equal to others with the voucher program, 43% said they were better able to maintain relationships with friends and family, and 29% said they were better able to hold down a job. In terms of their overall quality of life, 54% of respondents said it was better with the voucher program than without it.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Several open-ended questions were included in the survey. Participants were asked to describe in their own words: 1) where they went with their transportation voucher, 2) what they

did with their transportation voucher that they could not do before, and 3) what were some of the things they did not like about the transportation voucher programs. Responses to each question were content analyzed for common themes. The frequency of responses to each theme was tabulated (Tables 3, 4, & 5). These results indicate that participants used the voucher program for a variety of purposes, including recreational or community activities (58%), running errands (49%), medical appointments (42%), visiting family and friends (30%), and employment/job training/volunteering (24%). Further, the voucher program made other activities possible for participants including medical appointments (31%), travel outside the community (31%), running errands (29%), and recreational or community activities (32%).

Overall, the majority of participants (79%) indicated there was nothing they disliked about the voucher program. Of the 15 participants (21%) who expressed dislikes, 5 thought the program was too short, 4 thought they weren't allocated enough miles, and 3 indicated they had problems obtaining and returning voucher forms for reimbursement. One of the participants did not like having to tally up the amount of miles used with each voucher. Another participant stated that she could not use public transportation in her area because she uses a wheelchair. A third participant stated that he had a problem locating volunteer drivers.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the affect of Michigan's Transportation Voucher program on its participants' quality of life and community connectivity. The findings of this study indicate that having access to transportation is a factor in maintaining a good quality of life and participating in community activities. Most of the participants surveyed indicated they had a higher quality of life during the voucher program. Additionally, participants felt a greater sense of equality and

respect while enrolled in the program, and felt less stressed. Participants engaged in more community activities during the voucher program than before, and found it easier to maintain relationships with family and friends.

It can reasonably be concluded from this research that transportation barriers prevent people with disabilities from maintaining relationships with family and friends, and being active participants in the community. These findings correspond with those of Seekins et. al (2007), that a lack of transportation is a major obstacle to community participation for people with developmental disabilities. The majority of survey respondents indicated that a lack of transportation has kept them from participating in social activities. The flexibility of the voucher program allowed participants to travel whenever and wherever they chose. Some of the participants indicated that the voucher program gave them the ability to travel outside their local community, something they were unable to do before. Most transportation systems in Michigan do not travel beyond city or county boundaries, so the flexibility of a voucher program gave participants control and freedom. The research of Gonzalez et. al (2006) similarly indicated that with a transportation voucher program, people with developmental disabilities can meet their own transportation goals independently and effectively.

There are some alternatives that could be offered to explain the results of this study. Transportation resources are very limited in the state of Michigan for people with developmental disabilities, especially in rural communities. People may be willing to overlook negative program characteristics for fear of losing what little transportation resources are available. Since surveys were distributed in only four of the eight counties that participated in Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program, results cannot be considered comprehensive. Additionally, the

survey was not field tested prior to distribution due to time constraints. With more resources, focus groups and personal interviews could have enhanced the results of this study.

Transportation voucher programs are a low-cost, flexible way to supplement existing transportation systems, and provide access to transportation where public transit does not exist. Though communities continue to explore voucher programs as a solution to transportation barriers, no comprehensive study has assessed the quantitative outcomes of such programs. A study examining the effectiveness of transportation voucher programs on participants' quality of life and community connectivity would be helpful to fill the gap in the existing literature. Further, while most voucher programs have been implemented in rural communities, research examining voucher programs' usefulness in urban communities would enhance the emerging literature.

In conclusion, finding affordable, accessible transportation is a challenge that many people with disabilities face on a daily basis. Without reliable transit, people remain isolated from their communities, families, and friends. Voucher programs allow participants to decide when they want to travel and where they want to travel. Participants can offer compensation to volunteers for providing transportation, and can afford to choose between available types of transportation. This study provides a starting point for further research on the benefits of transportation voucher programs for people with developmental disabilities.

## References

- Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living. (2006). *Toolkit for operating a rural transportation voucher program*. Kent, OH: L. Gonzalez, D. Stombaugh, T. Seekins, & D. Kasnitz.
- Bernier, B., & Seekins, T. (1999). Rural transportation voucher program for people with disabilities: Three case studies. *Journal of Transportation Statistics*, 2(1), 61-70.
- The Beverly Foundation. (2003). *PasRide: A pilot low cost/low maintenance STPs*. Pasadena, CA.
- Bruyere, S.M., Erickson, W.A., VanLooy, S.A., Sitaras, E., Cook, J.A., Burke, J., Farah, L., & Morris, M. (2002, May). *Employment and disability policy: Recommendations for a social sciences research agenda*. Paper presented at NIDRR and APA Conference, Bridging Gaps: Refining the Disability Research Agenda for Rehabilitation and Social Sciences.
- Carmien, S., Dawe, M., Fischer, G., Gorman, A., Kintsch, A., & Sullivan, J.F. (2005). Socio-technical environments supporting people with cognitive disabilities using public transportation. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 12(2), 233-262.
- Community Transportation Association of America Joblinks Program. (2008). *Transportation voucher programs: Facilitating mobility in rural areas*. Washington, DC: C. Haarstad.
- Dennis, R.E., Williams, W., Giangreco, M.F., & Cloninger, C.J. (1993). Quality of life as context for planning and evaluation of service for people with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 59(6), 499-512.

- Easter Seals Project ACTION. (2006). *Transportation services for people with disabilities in rural and small urban communities*. Washington, DC.
- Economic and Social Research Council. (2002). *Transport and ageing: Extending quality of life for older people via public and private transport*. Swindon, United Kingdom: M.L.M. Gilhooly, K. Hamilton, M. O'Neill, J. Gow, N. Webster, F. Pike, & C. Bainbridge.
- Enders, A. & Seekins, T. (2009). *A review of FTA Section 5310 Program's state management plans: A legacy program in transition*. Missoula, MT: The University of Montana Rural Institute.
- Gonzalez, L., Stombaugh, D., Seekins, T., & Kasnitz, D. (2006). Accessible rural transportation: An evaluation of the Traveler's Cheque Voucher Program. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 37(3), 106-115.
- Great Plains Rural Initiative on Transportation. (n.d.). *History and use of vouchers*. Retrieved from <http://165.234.216.166/grit/CAOhistory.html>
- Hagner, D., & Marrone, J. (1995). Empowerment issues in services to individuals with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 6(2), 17-36.
- Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council. (2008). *Transportation voucher replication handbook*. Lansing, MI.
- National Council on Disability. (2005). *Access to transportation by people with disabilities: Illustrations of implementation from the United States*. Washington, DC: L. Frieden.
- Schalock, R., & Alonso, M.A.V. (2002). *Handbook on quality of life for human service practitioners*. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.

- Schalock, R.L., Bonham, G.S., & Verdugo, M.A. (2008). The conceptualization and measurement of quality of life: Implications for program planning and evaluation in the field of intellectual disabilities. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 31, 181-190.
- Seekins, T., Enders, A., Pepper, A., & Sticka, S. (2007). Allocation and use of Section 5310 funds in urban and rural America. *Journal of Public Transportation*, 10(1), 81-100.
- Wasfi, R., Levinson, D., & El-Geneidy, A. (2007). Measuring *the transportation needs of people with developmental disabilities*. Presented at the 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board, Washington, DC.

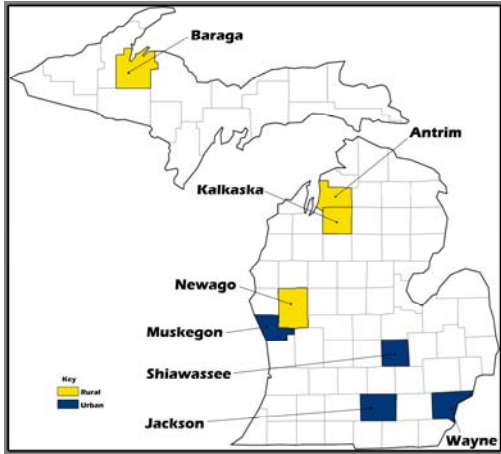


Figure 1  
*Michigan's Transportation Voucher Program*

Table 1

*Breakdown by County of Voucher Program Participants Who Received Surveys*

---

County	Surveys Mailed	Completed Surveys	Valid Surveys	Response Rate (%)
Baraga	33	19	19	57.6
Jackson	95	22	21	23.2
Newaygo	63	14	14	22.2
Wayne	120	21	19	17.5
Totals	311	76	73	24.4

---

Table 2

*Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n=73)*

Characteristic	N	%
Age		
18-25	12	16.4
26-35	4	5.5
36-45	15	20.5
44-55	17	23.3
56 and over	25	34.2
Gender		
Male	40	54.8
Female	31	42.5
Type of disability		
Physical	33	45.2
Cognitive/intellectual	26	35.6
Mental/emotional	31	42.5
Other	6	8.2
Employment status		
Not employed	54	74.0
Employed full time	2	2.7
Employed part time	11	15.1
Microenterprise/small business	1	1.4
Day program	11	15.1
School	8	11.0
Other	10	13.7
Living arrangement		
With parents/family	22	30.1
With spouse/partner	3	4.1
Licensed group home	9	12.3
Individual's own home or apartment	38	52.1
Other	1	1.4

Table 3

*Where did you go with your transportation voucher? (n=73)*

Response	N	%
Recreational community activities	39	58.2
Errands	33	49.3
Medical appointments	28	41.8
Visiting family and friends	20	29.9
Employment, job training, volunteering	16	23.9
Travel outside local community	10	14.9
School	6	9.0

Table 4

*What did you do with your transportation voucher that you could not do before? (n=73)*

Response	N	%
Medical appointments	11	31.4
Travel outside local community	11	31.4
Errands	10	28.6
Visiting family and friends	10	28.6
Recreational community activities	8	22.9
Employment, job training, job search, volunteering	3	8.6
School	3	8.6

Table 5

*What did you dislike about the voucher program? (n=73)*

Response	N	%
The program was too short.	5	6.8
There were a limited amount of miles to use.	4	5.5
Obtaining and returning voucher forms was difficult.	3	4.1
Other	3	4.1