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Transportation Issues: Perspectives of Orientation and Mobility Providers

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Transportation Issues: Perspectives of Orientation and Mobility Providers

Abstract

Introduction: This is an exploratory study of orientation and mobility (O&M) providers' perceptions of transportation issues for persons who are blind or visually impaired.

Transportation challenges, particularly regarding employment, are examined, the role of the O&M provider is explored, and strategies to address these barriers suggested.

Methods: Six orientation and mobility providers volunteered to participate in a focus group conducted at a national conference. Transcripts of their remarks were coded and themes associated with the research questions were identified and reported.

Results: Limitations of public transportation and the cost of transportation were viewed as major barriers to accessing transportation, particularly regarding employment, but safety issues and stress associated with transportation were also concerns. O&M provider involvement in securing transportation varied with most not directly involved in the process. Most consumers received instruction in use of fixed route transportation systems during O&M instruction regardless of availability.

Discussion: Living in areas with accessible public transportation, advocating for themselves, and using bioptics to drive should be explored as they may be helpful in overcoming transportation barriers. Consumers are not routinely engaged in dialogue with O&M providers about the strategies needed to identify and negotiate the transportation options available to them.

Implications for Practitioners: Engaging consumers in discussions that focus on problem solving skills, such as how to negotiate rides or find a driver, may be helpful to them in overcoming

transportation barriers. Further research to determine who should be responsible for facilitating these conversations is warranted as well as research regarding drivers' attitudes about liability and the impact of bioptics on rehabilitation outcomes. Rehabilitation counselors may need training about how to screen consumers for referral for potential use of bioptics to enable driving.

Transportation Issues: Perspectives of Orientation and Mobility Providers

Orientation and mobility (O&M) providers have a unique role in the rehabilitation service delivery system for persons with visual disabilities as they provide specialized instruction in how to travel safely and efficiently, as well as teaching individuals how to travel among and within various locations. This instruction includes training in the use of problem-solving skills (Sauerburger, 2013; Dodson-Burk, Park-Leach, & Myers; and Perla & O'Donnell, 2004) that persons with visual disabilities could apply to a variety of situations, including making transportation arrangements. Despite the obvious link between negotiating transportation arrangements and O&M training, there is a lack of information regarding O&M providers' perspectives on that link and their participation in working with consumers to make those arrangements. This study seeks to identify issues related to transportation and persons who are blind or visually impaired from the O&M instructors' viewpoints and to identify strategies that rehabilitation providers, including O&M instructors, might use to facilitate access of employment related transportation.

Transportation, particularly transportation to work, is well recognized as a barrier, particularly regarding employment, in the daily lives of persons who are blind or visually impaired (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden, McBroom, Skinner & Moore, 1998; and McDonnall, 2011). Various strategies have been proposed to overcome the transportation barrier to work. Persons who are blind or visually impaired have recommended that employers provide flexible schedules, allow the potential for working from off-site locations or subsidize transportation. They have also suggested that rehabilitation providers promote advocacy efforts to improve and increase public transportation availability, facilitate orientation and mobility training, and promote consumer independence. Consumers should also be skilled in negotiating rates with cab companies and working with volunteers or retired persons for assistance with

transportation (Crudden et al., 2002). Employers have recommended that fellow employers advocate for adequate public transportation for their employees who are blind or visually impaired, provide transportation to special events at off-site locations, devise employee schedules to accommodate transit systems, and explore providing or subsidizing transportation to and from work (Crudden, et al. 2002). Rehabilitation counselors have recommended paying for consumers' transportation to work for at least 60 days after employment, advocating for adequate public transportation, involving employers in advocacy efforts, exploring funding sources for new transportation options, advising consumers to relocate, networking with co-workers to coordinate rides, using community agencies to find and hire drivers, exploring self-employment, and investigating use of private transportation programs operated by other employers or agencies (Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005).

Some of these strategies appear to require skills that all persons who are blind or visually impaired may not possess or may not think to utilize. For example, how do consumers know how or learn to advocate for adequate public transportation, negotiate rates with cab companies, find and hire drivers, or network with co-workers to find transportation? O&M providers may serve as advocates for persons with visual disabilities by teaching persons with vision loss how to advocate for themselves (Provost-Hatlen & Myers, 1990). O&M providers also play a vital role in training people who are blind or visually impaired in developing the problem solving skills necessary to access and use transportation and may assist consumers in learning some of these other transportation related skills. However, their perspectives regarding employment transportation issues are notably missing from the literature. Consequently, an exploratory focus group of O&M instructors was conducted to gain their input about the topic.

Focus group methodology is particularly helpful during exploratory research as it can generate information helpful in developing hypotheses for future research or items for future surveys (Gibbs, 1997). Additionally, focus groups are a mechanism for implementing participatory action research, a research approach that provides a mechanism for understanding issues from the perspective of the service provider, including what issues they believe are in need of additional investigation (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Our focus group was organized around the following research questions: What are the major transportation challenges impacting persons who are blind or visually impaired? To what extent is transportation a barrier to employment? How involved are O&M instructors in assisting consumers in locating and scheduling transportation? What innovative transportation strategies have been observed?

Method

Collecting O&M providers' perceptions about issues related to transportation, and specifically, employment related transportation, was suggested by the national advisory council that functions as a participatory action research team for our Center's research activities. That group includes consumers and O&M professionals. A draft interview protocol was submitted to these members for review and was modified based on their feedback. The protocol addressed the research questions with prompts to probe responses.

The focus group was conducted during a national conference of O&M providers. The session was two hours total length, with additional time for distribution and collection of informed consent documents, collection of demographic information, and distribution of snacks to participants. At the conclusion of the session each participant received a gift card for \$50. The focus group session was audio taped, with permission from participants. Two persons facilitated

the group with one person assuming the role of primary facilitator. The secondary facilitator was a certified O&M specialist.

Participants

Participation in the focus group sessions was solicited via personal contacts and postings on two electronic lists for O&M providers. A total of 11 participants volunteered; however, all members did not attend and some persons who did not volunteer in advance came to the session. All six participants (four women and two men) performed O&M instruction as their primary job duty. All instructors were currently serving adolescents or adults, though some also occasionally serve younger persons. See Table One for more specific information about the participants.

Data Analysis

The recording of the focus group session was transcribed, inspected, and segments related to the research questions identified. After reviewing and sorting these segments, major topics and issues were classified and coded. The coded segments were analyzed for themes associated with the research questions. Each theme was then examined to identify issues of commonality and divergence and to generate results focused around each theme.

Results

Major Transportation Challenges

Focus group participants report that some transportation challenges are different for rural and urban consumers. For example, persons who live in rural areas typically have no fixed route transportation system and as a result, rely on family and friends. When consumers reside in urban areas, transportation challenges tend to revolve around public transportation. Specific problems associated with public transportation include limited services, wait times, and anxiety associated with reliability. Consumers who rely on public transportation fear being late and those fears reportedly become more pronounced for individuals residing further from the city hub and

for those who use paratransit systems. Participants commented that some consumers are reluctant to use paratransit systems because they require advance scheduling, thus limiting spontaneity. Issues with limited service primarily surround weekend and after-hours services. As one participant noted, “Public transportation is inadequate for an independent lifestyle. It barely runs outside of regular business work hours and is not available for second or third shifts working.”

Limitations caused by the expense associated with transportation was reported as a factor for both rural and urban consumers. O&M providers noted that few of the consumers they serve can afford to use cab services for regular transportation associated with tasks like employment. Some paratransit systems offer services beyond those required by law but these additional services are regarded as too expensive for routine use.

While perhaps not a major barrier to transportation, participants mentioned that persons with service animals sometimes have difficulty finding transportation because drivers do not want the animals in their cars. This was regarded as an issue that could limit options for someone attempting to use or develop a carpool.

Impact on Employment

Participants unanimously agreed that transportation has a significant negative impact on the employment of persons who are blind or visually impaired. The most significant issues impacting employment had some overlap with the general transportation barriers in that expense and limited services of public transportation were both raised. Specifically, public transit systems that do not operate on weekends, evenings, and early morning hours make it difficult for consumers to accept some jobs. Even transportation providers such as van or cab services limit their hours of service, particularly in rural areas. Participants believe that paratransit systems have a demand that exceeds their ability to efficiently transport consumers to and from work,

thus making it an unreliable system for employment, though one participant reported that the paratransit system in his city was the most reliable method to get to and from work.

Another complicating issue was that the demand for labor seems to be moving away from the urban hub. One participant remarked, “Development keeps moving out from the city. Transportation is ridiculously minimal and ends early in the day.” Limited public transportation options cause consumers to be reliant on private providers or friends and relatives and can be both cost prohibitive and/or unreliable for work related transportation.

Safety concerns associated with travel were discussed, with participants noting that sometimes these concerns are valid and sometimes they are not. For example, one participant described a situation where a consumer could have walked the distance from her home to work except that there were two sets of large railroad tracks with no sidewalks along her route, thus making the route too risky. A similar issue was mentioned about employment at big box stores that do not allow public transportation stops in their parking lots, thus requiring public transportation users to navigate large and busy parking lots. Safety issues associated with public transportation were also raised; these concerns appeared to center around consumers’ feelings of vulnerability or perceptions that they live in or travel through dangerous areas. One participant noted that the federal government does not recognize safety concerns as a legitimate reason to be eligible for paratransit services but all participants were sympathetic to these concerns. One participant stated, “Your ability to flee from an attacker effectively is a disability related issue that should be considered in determining eligibility...Confidence is an issue.” Other participants said that consumers’ families sometimes discourage use of public transportation by telling the consumer it is too dangerous.

The stress associated with transportation was also discussed. One participant noted that some street crossings are very difficult and that traffic sounds and other factors, such as noise from vehicles, can be a problem and necessitate an alternate route that is longer in time and distance. Avoiding very busy times for public transit is another option to reduce stress but is sometimes difficult for those with a traditional work schedule. Some consumers must take one route to work and a different route home to avoid unsafe street crossings and this was noted as creating additional stress.

Liability issues were raised as a concern by the participants. They report that potential drivers, either in carpools or hired, tend to have concerns that they will be sued by the person who is blind or visually impaired if an accident occurs. The reasonableness of this concern was a topic of discussion and the participants agreed that whether legitimate or not, this fear of increased liability seems to exist among some potential drivers, and even some of the participants. As one participant commented, “You want to give people a ride. You want to do what you can do. But this is a very litigious society. If you hit the brakes fast and someone says ‘whiplash’ that is a lawsuit waiting to happen. I worry about that kind of stuff.”

O&M Involvement in Transportation Options

When discussing their involvement in facilitating successful transportation with the consumers they serve, participants agreed that providing quality O&M services is their primary function. These services include use of extensive orientation information so that, as one participant stated, consumers “have a good intellectual knowledge of their location, what is in their surroundings, what is close to what. They can figure out how far it is out of a person’s way to take them where they want to go. Understanding the layout of the community, whether you can read a tactile map or not, is very important.”

When collecting demographic information, the participants were asked what percentage of consumers they serve have access to fixed route transportation. Their responses varied from 2 to 95% with a mean of 38.25%. Most train consumers to use fixed route transportation and when consumers do not have access to public transportation but want to know how to use it, the providers go to a nearby community where fixed route systems exist. Those providers stated that they discuss how living on a fixed route system is helpful and encourage consumers who are considering relocation to explore with them and with other consumers the most desirable locations to facilitate access to transit. They note that some consumers relocate specifically to obtain or improve their access to public transportation. Participants also provide instruction in using the public transit website and some work with consumers in using Google Transit or other software packages. Providers stated that they routinely assist consumers in completing applications for paratransit services, noting that in some localities the applications are long and complex and the correct phrasing to achieve eligibility is critical.

Some providers said they encourage consumers to advocate for themselves and to communicate with others. For example, one provider said, “If public transit tells you that you have to transfer at this particular intersection tell them no, I am not transferring there, it is too dangerous.” Another stated, “If you want to work, if you want to get there, you have got to be able to talk to your mayor or congressman or whoever you need to talk to to get something going. I can’t do it for you because they are not going to listen to me. You have to say it. Go do it.”

When demographic information was collected before the focus group began, participants were also asked if they routinely assist persons they serve in making transportation arrangements; two participants said no and four said yes. In the focus group session, none of the

providers said they provide assistance to consumers in locating transportation to and from work. An example of their comments concerning this was, “It is a great responsibility of ours to teach people strategies for doing it [travel to/from work]. I think the initiative has to come from within the person.” When asked whose responsibility it is to arrange work related transportation, a common response was, “It was my responsibility when I chose to work. So, I think it is the individual’s responsibility.” When a participant mentioned the importance of discussing backup transportation plans with consumers, particularly those relying on family members, others agreed, stating the importance of a back-up plan is sometimes a factor in convincing consumers to learn to use fixed route transportation.

With regard to talking to consumers about how to negotiate a ride with someone else or how to find or request a ride, most providers said they did not do this. The one participant who did said, “We encourage our students...to find out who their coworkers are and see if they can ride share” and “We talk about how to find a ride, how to solicit that ride. How do you know if a person does not want to give you a ride? How do you know if you have overstepped boundaries? Will you pay for a ride? Share expenses?” Another participant said, “We talk about the risks associated with that type of thing.” Yet another participant stated, “I didn’t discuss it with a client but she told me she found a ride to/from college on craigslist. I was shocked when she told me that. It could be risky.” When asked if they think anyone is talking to consumers, during adjustment training or other times, about how to find rides and negotiate that process, most said no. One participant who worked in a center-based setting stated, “I don’t think that is a normal process in our situation. Sometimes in the communication department they use the computer to google things and look them up and do research. That gives them the opportunity to put some of the skills together.”

Participants were evenly divided in providing information about how to find, screen, and negotiate arrangements with drivers. One stated that most consumers are not financially able to hire a driver. One participant, who is legally blind owns a vehicle and has hired a driver, reported that when consumers learn he does that they frequently ask him about how owning a car and hiring drivers works. When they do, he discusses how to buy a car and the insurance issues surrounding hiring a driver.

Finally, providers discussed that providing information to consumers and empowering them is an important part of O&M service delivery. For example, one provider noted that consumers are not always aware of who else is using public transportation and it sometimes makes them more confident and comfortable to learn about the other passengers. Also, consumers sometimes need to be convinced that, despite the concerns of their families, they have the capability to travel independently. One participant stated, “Don’t listen to what your momma and daddy said because they won’t be around forever. You can do it. You can travel.”

Innovative Strategies

In discussing innovative strategies or potential solutions to overcoming the transportation barrier, particularly with regard to employment, participants noted that they are on the alert for consumers who might benefit from bioptic devices for driving. While recognized as not an option for all consumers, participants report that when appropriate, bioptics make a significant difference in consumers’ lives. One participant who is a bioptic driver noted that factors such as weather or darkness can limit driving, so consumers with bioptics must have alternate methods of transportation when those conditions arise.

Some participants gave examples of consumers who have negotiated alternative arrangements with existing transportation providers. One strategy of this type involved a

consumer who negotiated an arrangement with a cab driver for reduced fees. Another example is a consumer who negotiated with a university to use its shuttle bus system although the consumer was neither an employee nor a student of the university. Yet another consumer found a van service for state employees and, while not a state employee, made appeals that went to the governor's office and gained permission to use the service. Each of these strategies was implemented by the consumer without assistance from the O&M provider.

Participants reported that some employers, both public and private, are involved in providing transportation for their employees. Encouraging other employers to implement such programs was suggested. One participant observed that some companies move vehicles from one destination to another and pay people to do that, such as when car dealers move vehicles across town, and suggested that consumers could work with these employers to ride in those vehicles.

Participants reported that when a driver is identified, particularly a driver who is the spouse of someone who is blind or visually impaired, other persons who are blind or visually impaired may hire that person to also provide transportation for them. Providers stated that they have observed sighted spouses who have turned driving people with visual disabilities into "...a lucrative part time business. They undercut the cabs. It makes it affordable for people to work and gives them door-to-door transportation." The importance of ride sharing in various forms was stressed as an important transportation strategy. Participants say that some consumers report bartering for rides rather than paying.

While not necessarily innovative, participants spoke at length about consumers relocating to use public transportation with some saying they have recommended this strategy. Participants agreed that they are eager to serve as resources about the best places to live to maximize access

to public transportation. Participants also discussed negotiating with public transportation systems to modify or expand their routes to improve access.

Discussion

O&M professionals, like other stakeholders, recognize that transportation often presents a barrier for persons who are blind or visually impaired, particularly regarding employment. The transportation issues, strategies, and concerns reported here provide valuable information for rehabilitation professionals working with consumers engaged in the rehabilitation process.

O&M provider comments indicate that they provide orientation and mobility training that includes information about the community and use of public and paratransit systems. But when it comes to planning for employment-related transportation, there appears to be variation in the O&M providers' level of involvement and in strategies that are discussed with consumers. Some of that variation depends on the particular consumer's situation. For example, if consumers can relocate to access public transportation then, if asked, the O&M provider may advise about the best locations to facilitate that access. But there does not appear to be a consistent process to assist consumers in generating and exploring ideas regarding how to get to work. However, providers did recognize and reported discussing the importance of back-up transportation plans.

Transportation for work includes a complex set of tasks that, in addition to learning O&M skills, may include identifying, screening, and hiring drivers; finding a carpool and negotiating arrangements; using transportation services provided by another party; or combining multiple methods. It appears that assisting consumers with the complex process of navigating options and securing reliable transportation to and from work is not a task routinely completed by O&M providers. Thus, we return to an important issue. Namely, who will assist consumers in learning these transportation related skills?

It is also interesting to note that these O&M providers were involved in referring consumers for potential use of bioptic devices to enable driving. This indicates that some rehabilitation counselors are not recognizing from eye reports which consumers might benefit from referral for evaluation for use of bioptics. Because use of bioptics might allow some consumers to gain or retain the ability to drive, thus increasing their transportation options, it is important to identify persons who might benefit from their use.

One of the unique issues about focus groups, particularly when the members share key characteristics (in this case, all O&M providers), is that they facilitate the group's ability to generate a synergistic discussion of the issues (Rabiee, 2004). In this focus group the members had a fairly lengthy discussion of liability concerns associated with transporting people who are blind or visually impaired. One member, who is visually impaired, challenged this, asking why the issue of liability arises more often with this population than with other persons. While no clear conclusion was identified, some participants said they share the concern that they will be sued if involved in an accident while transporting someone with a visual disability.

Limitations

This small, volunteer sample was recruited from participants at a national O&M conference. It provides a limited picture of the experiences, practices, and opinions of how O&M providers engage consumers regarding transportation. While the results presented here cannot be generalized to the wider population, the transportation barriers discussed are similar to the barriers reported by consumers and rehabilitation counselors. Readers can evaluate the suggested strategies for the appropriateness of applying them to other contexts or settings.

Implications for Practitioners

Participants shared some of the innovative strategies consumers have implemented to overcome transportation barriers as well as solutions they have observed. Sharing these success stories and strategies with other consumers, as well as sharing their own experiences, might be helpful to all rehabilitation providers, including O&M instructors, in generating conversations with consumers about innovative ways to access transportation. However, the comments of these providers support the concern that consumers are likely not routinely engaged in dialogue about how to devise their own transportation arrangements or given adequate opportunities to learn the skills needed to do so. Engaging consumers in effective problem solving strategies may be a significant factor in resolving transportation barriers and further research in this area, including who should be responsible for such training, is warranted. Resources to stimulate problem solving and strategies to locate and/or access transportation are available (Corn & Rosenblum, 2000 & Crudden, 2014). O&M providers may wish to revisit their role in the process of information delivery and advocacy for their clients. In addition to providing information about the physical environment, O&M providers are called upon to advocate for accessibility and assist consumers in requesting accommodations (Barlow, Bentzen, & Franck, 2010). Advocacy efforts could include ensuring that persons with visual disabilities receive the support and training they need to make their transportation arrangements.

Additionally, the discussion about liability concerns is a topic that merits further exploration. If drivers are indeed more concerned about the liability of having passengers with visual disabilities, then perhaps this is associated with some underlying perception regarding persons who are blind or visually impaired that must be addressed. Finally, rehabilitation counselors might benefit by learning more about how to identify persons who would be

candidates for evaluation for use of bioptics to allow them to drive and the impact of bioptics on rehabilitation outcomes is in need of further examination.

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Table 1: Summary of Participant Characteristics

Certification/Licensure						
	O&M					5
	TVI					2
	Certified Vision rehabilitation therapist					1
	Certified Visually Impaired Teacher					1
	Deaf Blind Specialist					1
	Registered Drama Therapist					1
		Multiple certifications				4
Service Delivery Setting						
	Rehab facility (adult)					4
	Itinerant for adults					1
	VA Medical Center					1
	School					1
		Multiple settings				1
Population Density						
	Urban					4
	Rural					2
Ages served						
	High school and over					3
	Adult (over 18)					2
	All ages					1
Years of experience						
	15-20					3
	20 - 30					3
		Mean years				20.5
Education						
	Bachelor's degree					1

	Master's degree					5
Age of Participant						
	31 - 40					1
	51 - 60					5
		Mean age				55