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Enhancing Transit Service in Rural Areas and Native American Tribal Communities: Potential Mechanisms to Improve Funding and Service

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Primary funding for rural transit comes from federal and state Departments of Transportation (DOTs). However, through numerous surveys, rural transit providers have cited financial constraints as a major limitation to providing adequate desired transit services, meaning that these traditional DOT funds are not sufficient for funding rural transit. Consequently, transit planners and providers must pursue additional funding beyond these traditional programs before they can meet and satisfy the transit demand. The primary objective of this study was to identify and document current non-DOT (i.e., non-traditional) funding programs that rural transit providers and planners could pursue and acquire to close that funding gap and enable them to meet the transit demand.

Technology implementation, along with collaboration among transit providers, can help streamline service.

Study Methods

The methodology for this study involved reviewing literature, reports, and other sources of information to identify, compile, and document potential sources of rural transit funding over and above the traditional funds from the federal and state DOTs. In addition, the study identified various other financing mechanisms that also can fund transit. Finally, the report also identified and presented potential transit operational strategies for cost-effective utilization of the transit funds and other resources.

Findings

In addition to the traditional DOT funding programs, several non-traditional or innovative transit funding programs from various non-DOT federal government agencies were identified. These are specialized funding programs designed to support transit trips for special needs or disadvantaged populations. Approximately \$116 billion was available for obligation from non-DOT federal agencies for fiscal year 2013, as shown in Table 1. Additional details for each of these programs are provided in the report. Table 2 is a partial example of such detail that includes the name of each program and the type of transit trips or services that it can fund.

In addition to these federal funds, special financing programs or mechanisms that also can be used to fund rural transit are identified. Finally, strategies are explored that transit providers can implement to use the funds and resources more efficiently. They include travel reduction, service coordination strategies, and technology use.

Table 1: Available Transportation-related Grants from Non-DOT Federal Agencies

Agency	Grant Available for Obligation 2013 (\$)
Department of the Interior	54,900,000
Department of Veterans Affairs	366,000,000
Department of Labor	4,185,000,000
Department of Housing and Urban Development	5,961,000,000
Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)	14,595,000,000
Department of Education	15,511,000,000
Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service	76,070,000,000

Table 2: Federal Funding Programs from the Department of Veterans Affairs

Funding Programs and Corresponding Transit Trips Funded	Employment Activity Trips	Medical Care Trips	Education/Training Trips	Shopping/Home-delivered Meal Trips	Social/Senior Centers/Recreational Trips	Grant, Retrieved for Obligation 2013 (\$, Millions)
Veterans Medical Care Benefits (medical services, support & compliance, facilities, and medical and prosthetic research)		X				52
1. Grants for Transportation of Veterans in Highly Rural Areas		X				3
2. Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program				X	X	299
3. Grants for the Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot	X	X	X	X		10
VA Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program				X		2

Policy Recommendations

Transit providers can begin by identifying the gaps and needs in their services, which can then be used to identify various potential funding sources. Redefining the nature of transit service operations to incorporate increased transportation functions can provide access to more funding opportunities for various trip purposes. Technology implementation, along with collaboration among transit providers, can help streamline services across transit agencies and tribal communities and ensure efficient use of the funding, facilities, and resources.

About the Authors

The authors are affiliated with the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). Mohamed Kaseko and Hualiang “Harry” Teng are associate professors of civil engineering, while Peris Nyagah is a Ph.D. candidate in civil engineering.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1147.html

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