

OPPORTUNITY LINK'S NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA TRANSIT INITIATIVE

INTRODUCTION

Based in Havre, Montana, Opportunity Link is a nonprofit organization focused on systemic approaches to reducing poverty and promoting economic development in the state's north central region. A key principle underlying Opportunity Link's work is that success in target areas such as workforce development and affordable housing depends in part on the availability of good local and regional public transit systems. Transit planning is therefore essential to achieving Opportunity Link's broader mission of "helping the communities of north central Montana achieve independence, prosperity and a better way of life." This case study looks at Opportunity Link's North Central Montana Transit initiative, its relationship to community development goals, and the implications for children's health, including reducing and preventing childhood overweight and obesity.

THE CLIMATE

Situated within the Great Plains, north central Montana is a vast and largely rural region covering 31,000 square miles. Population densities are low, with many counties containing as few as two people per square mile. The region is home to several Indian reservations and small frontier towns, as well as the larger micropolitan centers of Havre and Great Falls.

Barbara Stiffarm, executive director of Opportunity Link, says that families in north central Montana face a number of environmental and social barriers to accessing resources and services that influence health either directly or indirectly, such as education, employment, healthcare, fresh food retailers, parks and playgrounds, and programs for youth. One of the biggest barriers is distance. Residents live far from basic services and urban amenities—as much as 100 miles is common. At the same time, many cannot afford to own and maintain a car or the fuel required for necessary trips. This mismatch between the spatial allocation of places where people want and need to go and their options for getting there makes it very difficult, sometimes impossible, for low-income and non-driver residents to engage in the local economy and, by extension, to make healthy choices for themselves and their children.



Low population density environments lacking access to safe, practical transportation options present distinct health disadvantages for children and adolescents. In many small communities in north central Montana, already sparse populations are declining even further because residents frequently move to be closer to urban centers where they can more easily connect with jobs and other resources. This has led to an increasing number of school consolidations, forcing students to spend more time commuting back and forth to schools, and less time engaging in physical and other activities that help young people maintain a healthy weight. For instance, walking or biking to school is a viable way for children to be more active, but is impractical when excessive distances are involved. It is also dangerous because rural communities are connected only by narrow, two-lane highways, which are not constructed to provide a wide enough shoulder allowance for bicyclists or pedestrians. With school buses being the only form of public transportation available, students' options for independent mobility, and therefore for physical activity and play with other children in social settings, are constrained to those provided in school facilities during school hours.

POLITICAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC WILL

Over a decade ago, Opportunity Link began bringing together communities in the north central Montana region to help them develop plans that would enable them to secure state funding for their own local bus transit systems. This started a process of collaboration between different stakeholders, setting the stage for a more recent series of community meetings in which participants identified a need for increased regional mobility. "A lot of people said they needed to have a [regional] public transit system in order to affordably access education, employment, healthcare, and services, and to be able to remain in their homes," says Barbara Stiffarm. "There were many who just stayed home or who were lost in the system because they didn't have access to get where they needed to go."

A major challenge in developing North Central Montana Transit (NCMT) was funding. "The tax base to support a free system for these small communities is non-existent," says Stiffarm. "So our greatest obstacle was how to provide a service that costs more to operate, because you're not just riding a half mile, but putting a bus out on a highway that needs to make an 80-mile round trip." The Montana State Department of Transportation provided some startup funding, but more was needed to sustain the system. Opportunity Link built additional support for NCMT by getting key regional institutions and agencies on board, including some that could contribute resources. An important step was forming a transit advisory committee which included representatives from educational institutions, healthcare agencies, community and social service organizations, business, and tribal communities—all stakeholders that Opportunity Link argued stood to benefit from a regional transit system. For instance, many potential service workers could not afford housing costs in communities near appropriate employment

opportunities. At the same time, living a distance away from potential work meant a high cost of commuting in order to sustain a job. This made it challenging for businesses to maintain a steady, reliable base of employees. “When you are trying to improve your competitive edge,” says Stiffarm, “transportation is key. If you can increase accessibility to your institution, more people will be able to seek out the opportunity to be part of these activities.” Montana State University Northern, for instance, contributed a substantial amount to the system because, Stiffarm says, they recognized how it would benefit their students. “So it was an education process with the institutions to make them see how it was in their interest to do this, too.”

Opportunity Link also partnered with local Boys and Girls Clubs, which meant that mobility and safety issues facing children and youth were a consideration in the planning process from the start. “If we’re going to change people’s methods of getting around, our youths are going to drive that change,” says Stiffarm. “Our point in working with [the clubs] was to identify pick-up sites that would provide access to youth.” As a result of this effort, Boys and Girls Clubs in several communities were included as fixed stops on NCMT’s inter-city routes. During the planning process, the clubs also helped bring people together by allowing for some of the community meetings to be held in their facilities, which were familiar and easily accessible for many residents.

IMPLICATIONS

When the service was inaugurated in 2009, planners expected NCMT would need to provide a maximum of about 3,600 rides during its first year in operation. By 2010, that number had swelled to 18,000, and continues to increase. “We are having a hard time keeping up with demand,” says Barbara Stiffarm. The system’s success illustrates how access to safe, reliable, and affordable transportation can open up opportunities for low-income and non-driver families that would otherwise be inaccessible. For example, Violet Billy holds a job as an opening supervisor at a Wendy’s restaurant in Havre. Before NCMT, the only way she could get to work was to hitchhike. “If not for the bus,” she says, “I would probably be unemployed, and very likely on welfare.” The system also enabled many residents who had previously had no way to do so to get to facilities where they could receive medical attention. Obviously, parents’ ability to improve their own economic and social circumstances has a direct impact on children. Reducing childhood overweight and obesity therefore depends on reducing inequities in the built environment that affect health further up the causal chain, such as communities’ lack of access to employment and healthcare. *We can make significant progress toward addressing these inequities by ensuring good transit options for all Americans.*

Good transit can also reduce inequities in the built environment that affect children’s health more directly, such as a lack of safe spaces for physical activity and play. NCMT dramatically improved children’s access to, for example, public swimming pools, community parks, and activities such as skateboarding and

bowling. “Great Falls has a large park designed for skateboarders,” says Stiffarm, “and we had several youth who never had an opportunity to go. We barely have sidewalks in our communities, so the chance to go spend the day participating in a recreational activity was just awesome for them.” Permanent stops at several Boys and Girls clubs mentioned earlier provide children with access to structured play and exercise. Jim Lyons, NCMT’s Director of Transportation, relates a story from a single mother who was unable to take time off from work during the day to get her children to the clubs, and didn’t think it was safe to allow them to walk alone. Now her children can get there safely on their own using the bus service, whereas before, she says, they would have simply stayed at home and watched TV.

Public transit systems are just as essential in rural as in urban areas. The public perception of rural communities as idyllic places where hearty children spend lots of time outdoors can be an obstacle to addressing overweight and obesity in rural areas. “People get this vision in their heads of the vastness and beauty of the land,” says Barbara Stiffarm, “but those same things become barriers when you’re looking at distances to go to school, or to a grocery store where you could get fresh produce. I’m hoping that, when there’s consideration for funding for public transit, people will get that yes, rural areas are beautiful places to live, but we also have to think of individuals who need access to medical care, employment, fresh foods, and necessities in life.”

Finally, *engaging in planning and collaboration at the regional level puts communities with low population densities and few resources in a better position to garner the support of a variety of stakeholders*, which gives them a better chance of successfully solving large-scale infrastructure problems such as lack of viable transportation options.

CONCLUSION

U.S. transportation policy is at a crossroads. The economic recession has further intensified the already strong need for new or improved public transit options in communities across America by leaving people with even fewer economic resources and less ability to afford to operate vehicles and pay for gas. At the same time, funding such systems is more challenging in a climate of scarce resources. The example of North Central Montana Transit and its implications for health can guide policymakers at this critical decision-making juncture. Barbara Stiffarm says, “A system like [NCMT] is so interconnected with our ability to improve living conditions, access to affordable housing, and economic growth, that we cannot afford to lose it.”