

**Greater Raritan One-Stop Transportation Brainstorm Session facilitated by
Fernandel Almonor, Greater Raritan One-Stop Operator**

Debrief

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Introductions

Fernandel Almonor

This session will be audio recorded, primarily for minutes. Sometime after this meeting we'll share the debrief materials. If there are any additional supplemental materials that you would like to share with the rest of the group, please email them to me before the end of this week.

Transportation Brainstorming Objective: To take advantage of employment opportunities, our customers require reliable transportation. Many customers need transportation to routinely drop off children at childcare then arrive to work on time. In some cases, there's a considerable distance between the childcare provider and employer. To set up our customers for success, these immediate needs must be consistently met despite considerable barriers. The objective is to better understand the transportation needs, barriers, and solution strategies to adequately address those needs. We need actionable solutions.

Maria Marnell

Good morning. Hi, my name is Maria Marnell. I'm a lead instructor with the Hunterdon County Educational Services Commission. We facilitate the job readiness workshops for TANF and GA clients, teaching them job preparedness.

Linda Rapacki

Good morning everyone. I'm the Director of Mobility Management and what that really means is to help individuals navigate transportation in the best possible way.

Ken Wedeen

Good morning, my name is Ken Wedeen. I'm the Supervisor Transportation Planner for the Somerset County Planning Division. I've been doing it for quite a while, all things transportation. This is obviously an area of interest of mine, so I hope to learn a lot. Also, bring some potential suggestions to try to get our folks to training, jobs, and obviously childcare, which are the three big ones.

Walter Lane

Good morning everyone. Walter Lane. I am the Director of Planning for Somerset County. I've been here not quite as long as Ken, but close. And prior to my role as Director, I've been the Director for almost 10 years now. I ran the transportation planning section, so we're in the midst of updating the county circulation plan of the master plan, so if there's great ideas from here, we can hopefully translate that into the master plan.

Tara Shepherd

Good morning. I'm Tara Shepherd, Executive Director of GoHunterdon, a transportation management association serving Hunterdon County, similar to RideWise here in Somerset County. We do a variety of community mobility programming, including travel training, and work very closely with the Hunterdon County Link Transportation System to make sure that residents know about available services and how to use them.

Erin Neukum

Good morning. Erin Neukum, Transportation Coordinator for Hunterdon County, and I've been with the service overall for about 13 years.

Monica Mulligan

Good morning. Monica Mulligan, Director of Career Training Services Center.

Mike Frost

I'm the Director of Somerset County Human Services.

Amina Reeves

Good morning. My name is Amina Reeves. I'm the Supervisor of WorkFirst New Jersey here in Somerset County, Social Services. If you're not familiar with that program, it's a mandatory back-to-work program for people who are receiving TANF grant, GA grant, and SNAP EMT now, Employment and Training.

Karen Araujo

Good morning. My name is Karen Araujo. I am a Business Representative for the Department of Labor for Somerset and Hunterdon. I provide different services and solutions to meet the hiring needs of the employers.

Poo Lin

Good morning, everybody. My name is Poo Lin. I'm the Interim Manager for the Greater Raritan Employment Services. In a nutshell, our agency's tasked with helping people get back to work, and for the resources that're available in the county. I've been with the department for 22 plus years.

Paul Grzella

Director of the Greater Raritan Workforce Development Board.

Jeanne Cassano

I'm the Contract Compliance and Engagement Specialist, The Greater Raritan Workforce Development Board.

One-Stop Partners Transportation Challenges Defined

Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Danielle Kwan, in her absence, provided the following bullet points.

- Heard that the link is not reliable in Hunterdon. Door-to-door pickups are scheduled, but do not show up.
- Clients just don't have access and feel unsafe using Uber. Uber is expensive considering they're part-time, minimum wage employment.
- Some transportation won't cross county lines.

WorkFirst New Jersey (Amina Reeves)

Brief background, prior to the pandemic, two vans, drivers that we paid would go to our transportation dead zones. So, our main office is here in Somerville, but we have two satellite locations, one in North Plainfield and one in Franklin, but we are the main hub. WorkFirst New Jersey has in-person classes that are instructed by Hunterdon County Education Services Commission. The clients have to make it to our building and we have locations where clients can't even get to social services. Several cases of clients that live in desolate parts of Warren, *(Ken Weeden comment inserted 4/4/24: Establish a satellite location(s) in the Bedminster/Warren/Watchung north county area)* there is no transportation up there whatsoever, so they can't look for a job. We solved their problem of housing, because they now have permanent housing. They are far away from family, far away from job opportunities, and even to get down to social services and participate with the mandatory program that is to help them get back to work and become self-sufficient. There's many people that fall in that particular bucket.

Hunterdon created a virtual online opportunity for people to receive training, but that requires the client to have access to the internet and a computer. We've been trying to find different ways to assist in that way, but what's interesting is I also noticed there is no designated stop for social services here with the scoot buses at all. I know the closest one is, I think, Grove and Main, so that people can walk down one block, but that's just one of the scoot buses.

Again, so replacing those vans, the county has allotted me a certain amount of money to spend on taxis. The taxi rides are \$60 each way. In a case where I have a two-parent household, neither one of whom are working, and they have children that need to go to daycare so that they can participate in the back-to-work activities. We have to taxi that whole family, which includes dropping the children off to childcare. \$120 a day just to put one person back and forth to our office.

I know we can't solve everything, but if we had more transportation in that Far Hills/ Basking Ridge area, even if it's just specifically for people who are low or moderate income. Giving low-income people access our services here at social services, if they had an opportunity beyond just what I'm able to offer with a taxi. Once they become employed, I cannot taxi them. I can reimburse them up to \$15, but that has to be documented. If they get a job and they decide to Uber, I can only reimburse them \$15 for the day. If it's a \$35 ride, \$40 ride, they are fronting the extra cost. In a nutshell, that's the main thing. *(Ken Weeden comment inserted 4/4/24: Possibly negotiate a lower fixed rate with Uber/Lyft to provide some of the social services needed rides)*

Employment Services (Poo Lin)

My agency's primary task of helping people get to work along with child care, are probably the two biggest issues that we run into when we try to place individuals or refer them to job opportunities. What I see in Essex to Middlesex to Somerset is very different. Before the pandemic, we did an informal survey within the Department of Labor and it turns out that approximately 20% of our customers would otherwise be working had they had transportation. That's an astounding number, 20% of our customers.

Especially after the pandemic, the demand for remote work has increased. People going into education, training, work experience. They simply come in and say, put me in a remote job. Perhaps some of you can provide some input to that nuance.

Career Training Services (Monica Mulligan)

I just want to say one thing when it comes to transportation, it really impacts everyone. Many times when we're working with people that have been out of work, they have very limited financial resources. They are now in a kind of a crisis. We've learned a lot of this from Go Hunterdon and RideWise through the years.

These are some of the areas we consider when assisting customers going into training and/or connecting to employment:

- License valid license? Ever have one? Do you have your six points of documentation needed to get a license? Do you need assistance getting the proper documentation?

- Do you have money for the license application fee? Need driving lessons? Can you pay for lessons? Is your license suspended? For how long? Do you have money to restore it?
- Do you have a car? Is it in working order? Do you have money for repairs, maintenance, and gas? Do you have insurance? Can you afford insurance? Are you paying a surcharge fee to the state for excess points on your license?
- Where do you live? Are you within walking or biking distance of transportation? Is it safe to walk or bike to employment/training? Do you have a bike and bike lock? How sustainable is walking or riding a bike in inclement weather (rain, snow, or extreme heat)?
- Is Uber or Lyft available? What is the cost? Is it sustainable?
- Is there mass transportation? Do you have money for bus or train? Does it run the hours you need to get to work (shift work) or classes (day/night).
- How does childcare figure into this?

Sometimes there are ways that we can access funds to help people restore a license or repair a car. We have to make sure the other pieces are in place too because we're trying to set people up for success.

Brainstorm/ Discussion

Walter Lane

As a land-use planner, it comes down to land use. A lot of these situations are based on the land-use decisions our towns and our communities have made. As we're spread out and we're less dense, it's harder to serve transit services because of the distances between employment centers and residential areas of the county. So when we did our circulation master plan in 2011, we modeled future transportation conditions in the county. We had a bunch of different scenarios. We used the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority's regional travel demand model, basically to show us the level of congestion and level of service at different roads. We looked at a couple different scenarios. One was if all the road projects that all the decision-makers wanted to be built were built. That's 206 bypass, improvements to Route 22, interchange improvements at various highways.

Another scenario was if all the transit services were improved. We increased public transit service, not only for NJ Transit, but for the county, and reactivated the West Trenton passenger line that runs from West Trenton and then connects into the Raritan Valley line that goes into Newark. Everyone thought these projects would solve all those issues and be a great level of service, but it really comes down to the land use. When we looked at future population projections, in that blended scenario, we took the best of the transit projects, the best of the road projects, but also moved where the future growth was occurring instead of continuing to spread out in the county into areas that already had development.

You can't look at transportation issues without looking at the land use. We have our county investment framework where we try to align where growth and preservation should occur in the county. Right now we're updating our county circulation plan. The public adoption process will start probably in May but we did a lot of outreach. One of the recommendations in that plan is to reimagine our county public transit service. How do we better deploy our services? But what the solution is, we're not sure. We know we need to reinvent it, but not what it will be but so there's changes to commuter patterns, with remote work, so on and so forth. NJ Transit is kind of back to normal, but not quite. So maybe it's less of a commuter-focused transportation service that the county provides. We provide paratransit for some of the health trips and shopping trips. I think we, between NJ Transit and Rutgers University, we're the next biggest public transit service in the state.

For the limited amount of service we have, we're the third biggest in the state. Maybe it's more of a community services type of system, where it serves more of the social services and job needs versus a 9-to-5 commuter type of pattern, which is kind of what it's set up for right now. No decisions have been made, but that's really the next phase of our work. Looking at how we reimagine public transit?

Ken Wedeen

We don't go everywhere that people would like. We don't go on weekends to places. Our system still does not have an app. One thing I wanted to say about this, this is kind of a subset of public transit, and there's some experts in the room here. We're both mainly suburban and rural. We have some denser pockets. Let's say the North Plainfields, the downtowns, and Bound Brook, Somerville, Raritan. How are some of those counties in New Jersey or even across the country, how are they addressing the job training and getting people the jobs issue and the child care?

What are some of the innovative programs that are out there, and who do we need to tap in New Jersey to find out. What are some of the solutions that people are using? In some places, I know they've negotiated with Uber and Lyft to reduce the rates. Some places are using e-bikes or things to try to make up that first and last mile. There's some combination of solutions here that will help us address the issue, and I think we need to drill down and get into those best practices or talk to folks that work in similar areas. More buses isn't the solution anymore. We need to reinvent, variety under the public transit umbrella. Buses can't keep up with evolving demands for the public, need innovation/ variety of services to take up the shortfall. Out of the box solutions.

Walter Lane

Two other points, one is that we also have a workforce issue. The county's having trouble recruiting and retaining drivers for the public transit system because school buses and trucking companies are paying a lot more. That's part of the reason you're hearing routes getting canceled. Increasing the number of trips and routes that we do is only going to increase that problem. The other issue is affordable housing. We updated our housing element in 2017. Trying to guide the towns to put affordable housing in areas that already have development. It's difficult when affordable housing is built in the middle of nowhere that can't be served by transit. Many people don't have cars. How do we better integrate those into the existing areas of the county that have existing services in the infrastructure?

When the town's developed their plans, a handful of the projects were actually outside of growth areas of the county. That's pretty good. The governor just last week assigned a new affordable housing legislation with a new methodology, so the numbers are going to be assigned by the end of the year. We're going to do a surgical update of our housing plan this year. We'll really hammer in that land-use transportation connection, making sure these new housing opportunities are identified in areas that can be served by transit or have existing transit routes.

We talked a little bit about the circulation plan and why it's really important to make the right land-use decisions, where affordable housing is located. Hopefully we'll be able to guide more of that growth into the better area, the more appropriate areas in the county.

Monica Mulligan

If we could get some buy-in from some businesses. If there's a warehouse in a remote area, maybe the business can provide the transportation. A van or minibus could go to certain pickup points. We explore this strategy, it's relevant to workforce development. Maybe schools in remote areas with in person classes can also provide/ support transportation. The cost of tuition could include transportation.

Paul Grzella

This issue also affects Hunterdon. I'd like to hear from our Hunterdon partners.

Tara Shepherd

Transportation is a very customized thing. We talked about transportation in this very large umbrella topic, but that's not really a very valuable conversation. Transportation is about getting one individual from one location at a particular time to a destination and then to get them back to this other location. Mass and public transportation systems are designed for masses of people all going from one destination to another destination. What we've seen over the past two plus decades is you have one individual in the northern part of your county or the southern or the furthest west and that one person has to get to a destination. They can't rely on public transportation if their needs don't align with the needs of the masses.

We have a very well-intentioned housing policy in the state of New Jersey that did not put transportation first. We are now reckoning with those policies and constantly trying to keep that conversation of putting transportation first not only in the housing conversation but in the employment transportation issue. We've worked with Monica Mulligan for many years trying to address this transportation challenge. We have various destinations and various times. There's no community transportation service that's going to be able to run 24-7. We should focus the discussion on specific transportation scenarios, situations that don't align with mass transit needs.

In Hunterdon County we don't have similar mass employment locations so the vans or shuttle service idea wouldn't apply. We don't have large employer work sites any longer in Hunterdon County. We no longer have manufacturers on a large scale. Years ago the voucher idea was popular. It wasn't sustainable. Are they actually going to be self-sufficient? How long until they are actually self-sufficient? Consider moving to locations closer to their place of employment.

Aminah Reeves

I've seen a massive change over the last few years. Without getting into a lot of detail housing has brought a lot of people into board of social services for help. Many can't afford \$2,000 rent. Some use welfare to indefinitely subsidize their housing. I agree that we're not really we're not

adequately fostering self sufficiency. The previous model required more from participants to keep benefits.

I know transportation is a huge thing. I was employed at New Jersey Transit and sat with the planners and all that good stuff. So I understood all of that at the macro level. I would go sit with the mayor and try to convince them why they needed bus stop signs, but I don't think we want to get to the point where we're just not addressing the macro challenges in transportation. We need to be proactive on all fronts. Maybe promote carpooling and tax breaks for companies who subsidize transportation for their employees. The Uber idea was tried but the significant liability issue stifled it. An accident can put the county at risk if we're promoting Uber/ Lyft. Also open to negotiating with taxis for discounted rates. Skyview has a monopoly on taxis in this area so we don't have leverage to decrease their rates. Also looked into organizations to donate vehicles or bikes.

Monica Mulligan

Aminah mentioned tax breaks for corporations, how about no tax breaks and they just continue to reinvest and maybe cut their profits a little bit. I also want to give a little bit of a plug to the Needs Based Work Support Transportation Program that we had in place. It was for our Work First New Jersey population, we should expand the program. It addressed each specific person that had a transportation need. Then RideWise and goHunterdon would devise transportation plans for participants.

Paul Grzella

We already have that in the current supportive service model. We can just increase our supportive service dollars.

Monica Mulligan

The current supportive services model doesn't provide the planning piece. Transportation planning to Tara's point is very important and individualized. Macro level is important, but the individualized support could better address our customer needs.

Givelore Argant

I'm seeing more people moving to rural areas because of affordable housing. Also seeing many young adults moving in with grandparents. Transportation access doesn't factor into their housing decisions.

Maria Marnell

Could we employ participants with cars to drive other participants in their communities to work and childcare?

Givelore Argant

That's a good idea. It could apply to the rural areas I mentioned.

Linda Rapacki

Insurance and liability would be an issue.

Walter Lane

The county looked at this when we did a senior mobility study many years ago. There was a volunteer driver program, using some charity groups and religious institutions that provided transportation. The county sanctioned it because of the insurance/ liability issue.

Linda Rapacki

That was a volunteer program and it just practically drove us into the ground. The deadhead time and logistics were an issue. If those pockets of people were all together and were able to drive each other that solves part of the solution.

Donna Allison, RideWise Inc. Exec Director (post meeting addition 4/5/24 8:41AM)

Between 2015 and 2018, RideWise operated two ride programs. One program, RideConnect, used a paid transportation company, and the second was a volunteer driver program called Community Cars.

Finding a transportation provider for RideConnect was the biggest challenge. Most single-person providers can't afford \$5 million in liability and usually lack workers' compensation insurance. Transportation vendors that can provide this level of insurance generally pass the cost on to the customer.

The vendor charged rides at \$10 per mile with RideWise providing a 50% subsidy. Even with the subsidy, some clients felt it was too costly. Clients paid anywhere from \$15 to \$45 or higher for one-way rides depending on the rider's pick-up point and destination.

Tara Shepherd referred to this in her comments about travel distance. The rider doesn't only pay for the time he/she is in the vehicle; he/she also pays for the time it takes the driver to get to the client.

RideWise used this program to provide rides for One Stop clients for three years.

When RideConnect became financially unviable, we switched to a volunteer program, Community Cars. RideWise leased a vehicle with \$5 million in insurance from a partner agency and then recruited and trained volunteer drivers.

The problem was that riders wanted to know when they contacted RideWise that their ride was confirmed. We were unable to do that with volunteer drivers. Riders were told we would check to see who was available and get back to them. Unfortunately, riders didn't want to wait the 24-48 hours it sometimes took volunteers to get back to us with their availability.

As a result, the number of trips provided was minimal. Only 551 trips (as opposed to clients) were taken during a 2-year period.

Maria Marnell

What's the difference between employing a driver to transport people to social services versus employing to drive to businesses?

Monica Mulligan

It involves insurance, background checks, who owns the vehicle, who's paying the insurance on the vehicle and who's taking the liability?

Linda Rapacki

It's one of the reasons why vanpools really operate from individuals. Private individuals run vanpools. Businesses and corporations don't run vanpools.

Maria Marnell

Is there a different way to structure it so we don't take on the liability?

Karen Araujo

We should consider employing drivers. We should consider creating a program that incentivizes companies to relocate employees in transportation deserts. They can help with transportation costs.

Erin Neukum

In South Jersey, with the explosion of warehouses, there's a number of employment agencies providing transportation as part of their contracts. It could be a potential opportunity if there's similar worksites in Somerset County. The employer pays the employment agency and the agency fills the positions and subsidizes the transportation. I could provide you with a service contact of the TMA in that area.

Fernandel Almonor

Yes, please provide the contact information.

Givelore Argant

When I worked in South Jersey, we organized carpooling. I used to link the participants together that worked at the same employers so they could organize carpools.

Linda Rapacki

I just want to give a little perspective. I lead a remote and in-person workshop. They primarily depend on public transportation. Uber is too expensive. It's important to address the education gap, too many are unaware of public transportation options. I would've liked to see Somerset County Public Transportation in this discussion. Their voice needs to be heard. We individualized solutions to address the One-Stop transportation challenges. Transportation Islands/ Deserts are a significant issue. These areas have limited public transportation options.

There's recent regulations that require bus drivers to know what goes on underneath the hood. The knowledge and expertise required for bus drivers has been enhanced and increased, which is causing some of the gaps in hiring. There's first-party recruiters everywhere. We're not going to solve that issue unless we have a training program that focuses on the new requirements.

Fernandel Almonor

I'm hearing a need for a 2 fold approach. On one hand, we need to do stronger assessments of the transportation needs and devise individualized plans that address those specific needs. On the other hand, we need to better communicate public transportation needs to decision makers on a county level. Are the voices of disadvantaged populations being heard and addressed in county transportation decision making circles? Should the One-Stop play a greater role in communicating those needs?

Karen Araujo

Do we have statistics on transportation needs of disadvantaged populations? We should also focus on healthcare industry pathways.

Ken Wedeen

We really try to do a lot of public engagement. We have over 1,000 public comments between the map and the comments in the survey for the circulation plan. So we really do want public engagement, not have anyone left behind. We're always looking for opportunities to engage different groups.

Monica Mulligan

We get a number of surveys and share those links with all of our customers. Both counties are doing a good job putting out those surveys. The challenge is in everyone filling them out.

Walter Lane

We're willing to go to people, not expecting everyone to go to a public meeting. We have to go out and engage with the community to make this circulation plan successful. We have staff and consultants to help us accomplish successful outreach.

Mike Frost

I agree with everything that's been said but we can always do better. It's important for customers to know what services exist, also important to work from a micro and macro level. I didn't think this should be a binary discussion. This discussion can go on in perpetuity. If we keep developing and evaluating processes we can improve the process.

Givelore Argant

Can we invest in small businesses that provide transportation, outsource the solution (ie. taxis)?

Linda Rapacki

Insurance can not be overstated. It's millions of dollars involved.

Fernandel Almonor

Sounds like the plan needs to start with better assessment of each customer's transportation needs, then address those specific needs. Keeping a customized approach, the immediate needs dictate our direction. Also, currently what specific type of customer feedback is needed for the county plan?

Walter Lane

We encourage and appreciate all feedback, no specific preference. We try to make sure that we're not missing anyone.

Aminah Reeves

It's important that low income properties factor in public transportation when deciding location, especially in rural areas. We should start with low income, they should be the priority. They suffer disproportionately from county transportation challenges.

Linda Rapacki

Not enough resources, drivers, and buses to accommodate all county needs. Need for innovation.

Tara Shepherd

It's all about proximity to public trans service. The remote locations and one-offs require a different approach. Need to consider employment locations when choosing residence. Factor in transportation needs. We mapped out an employment map. Need individualized strategies.

Paul Grzella

We have that on the GRWDB website. It includes employer locations and public transportation routes, but it needs to be updated.

Fernandel Almonor

This was only part one of this discussion. We'll share the document and next steps soon.

Solution Strategies Identified

1. Use the CTS assessment strategy system wide. Each customer should receive a transportation assessment and individualized strategy to meet their needs. This can include RideWise transportation planning and supportive services (car repair, bus vouchers, etc.).
2. Encourage customers in need of public transportation to prioritize proximity to public transportation and distance from employment/childcare when selecting a residence.
3. Ensure customers have access to public transportation information relevant to their commutes.
4. Investigate insurance/ liability issues around subsidized transportations for customers. Is there a way to subsidize and promote affordable transportation options without the liability risk?
 - a. Organizing customer led carpools
 - b. Hiring customers with cars to transport other customers to work and childcare.
 - c. Subsidizing transportation vans or buses
 - d. Discounting and promoting ride sharing
5. Get more involved in the county public transportation reimagining plan. Ensure disadvantaged voices are heard in the process.
6. Encourage more customers to complete county transportation surveys.
7. Promote strategies that foster self sufficiency.
8. Establish “realistic” transportation expectations. Customers should know the limitations of public transportation and the financial implications of their options.

One-Stop Priority Tasks

1. Use the CTS assessment strategy system wide. Each customer should receive a transportation assessment and individualized strategy to meet their needs. This can include RideWise transportation planning and supportive services (car repair, bus vouchers, etc.). Establish “realistic” transportation expectations. Customers should know the limitations of public transportation and the financial implications of their options.
2. Investigate insurance/ liability issues around subsidized transportations for customers. Is there a way to subsidize and promote affordable transportation options without the liability risk?
 - a. Organizing customer led carpools
 - b. Hiring customers with cars to transport other customers to work and childcare.
 - c. Subsidizing transportation vans or buses
 - d. Discounting and promoting ride sharing