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MSAA Initiative Aims to Create Eight ITS Strongholds

By Caroline March-Long, contributing writer

Workshops, studies, grants, a myriad of federal funding programs — around 62 at last count — are all aimed at tackling issues related to human service transportation delivery. Not only is the list long and confusing, but one has to wonder how much time, money and effort are duplicated between and among all these initiatives.

One recent initiative from the U.S. Department of Transportation Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) office, called the Mobility Services for All Americans (MSAA), aims to cut through all this redundancy and establish a replicable model that shows how providers and agencies can utilize ITS to address the rising costs and needs of all riders, but especially those with special transportation challenges, whether it be disability, age or rural barriers.

The MSAA initiative is related to the United We Ride (UWR) program, which was designed to implement the Executive Order on Human Service Coordination issued by President Bush in February 2004. The simple answer on how they differ is that the UWR program answers the “What” is to be accomplished — more rides and easier access for older adults, people with disabilities and low-income populations - and the MSAA initiative is the “How” is this going to be accomplished — how will communities across the country cooperate and use newer tools to achieve coordinated, integrated transportation services.

Off to the Races

After a research phase that established a record of past and current human service transportation related projects, identified needs and gaps in current transportation practice and barriers, the MSAA initiative issued a request for proposals (RFP) on April 14, 2006 to select up to 10 sites that would be able to plan and design a replicable and scalable travel management coordination center (TMCC) that could deliver



Yehuda Gross, ITS transit program manager, U.S. Department of Transportation Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS).

Photo courtesy of Paducah Area Transit Systems

enhanced human service transportation across different environments and scenarios.

An inter-departmental committee including those from the Department of Transportation, Department of Labor and the Department of Education fielded 37 applications from across the country, meticulously reviewing written RFPs to find the best demonstration sites, regardless of geographic location. In the end, eight sites were selected: Aiken, S.C.; Atlanta, Ga.; Cherry Hill, N.J.; Fitchburg, Mass.; Kent, Ohio; Louisville, Ky.; Paducah, Ky.; and Orlando, Fla.

“What struck us the most is that all of the sites chosen are east of the Mississippi, but we didn’t focus on geography when selecting sites, rather we focused on selecting sites that had at least some basic infrastructure and made steps in planning,” says Yehuda Gross, ITS transit program manager.

“We were surprised to see that some sites were very advanced in coordination planning, but had zero ITS infrastructure. Also, the contrast between rural and urban centers: rural remote locations were more advanced in organizational planning with little technology, while urban centers had more technology but much less focus on coordination and planning.”

Since the announcement of which communities would receive funding for the MSAA initiative, all eight sites have already submitted a detailed project plan and are expected to submit a concept of operation by end of October 2007. “This concept of operation will tell us what they plan to do. Will they implement a virtual TMCC, set up a new, centralized facility or do a combination of both?” says Gross.

The end game is June 2008. This is when each site delivers a detailed design plan and requirements analysis: How would they build a TMCC that could serve as the model for how a community sets up and operates an ITS-driven TMCC?

Originally, one site from the eight was going to be selected for the TMCC implementation phase during the second half of 2008. However, the MSAA committee quickly learned that urban/suburban and rural sites require “totally different” solutions, according to Gross. “However, we have every intention to follow up on the other six sites and see if they are still moving forward with their plans,” adds Gross.

Extreme Project Management

How do you manage a project like this — eight different sites each with a laundry list of stakeholders,



Located in Aiken, S.C., the Lower Savannah Council of Governments (COG) is a regional planning and development organization.



Paducah Transit introduced the world’s first portable driving simulator.

starting out with different IT systems and operational procedures? Think, liaisons.

Beginning with a kick-off meeting in March 2007, all eight sites were introduced to their liaisons. First, a technical liaison from the Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC) is on each team to offer advice and support and report back to MSAA on a monthly basis.

Second, there are the federal liaisons that reach out to each team and keep them informed of any developments at the federal level, and they also are on the lookout to make sure teams don't diverge from their stated plans and meet each deliverable on time.

Finally, an evaluator is assigned to get a baseline at each location to measure where things stand at the beginning so that improvements can be measured relative to the starting point.

Every site has the ability to get up to 100 points and whichever two sites get closest or reach 100 points will be awarded the grant for implementing the proposed TMCC. "I told each demonstration team at our kick-off meeting that I hope each one gets 100 points and all we need to do is use a lottery system to select the two winners," says Gross.

Another Day, Another Grant in Aiken, S.C.

The Lower Savannah Council of Governments (COG) in Aiken, S.C., is no stranger to grants and funding to develop coordinated systems in its six-county, primarily rural region. Out of necessity — in many areas of the region more than 50 percent of the population is below the poverty level and in some areas more than 75 percent live below poverty — the Lower Savannah COG has had to pull agencies, providers, transit organizations and government officials together to solve some challenging transportation problems.

After being designated the state's first regional coordination demonstration project in 2000, Lower Savannah COG formed a Regional Transportation Management Association (RTMA) in 2001 to work on coordination and asked for agreements to participate from each county government in the region.

From there, RTMA worked with the South Carolina DOT to get technology — RouteMatch Software's scheduling and dispatching software was selected as the primary vendor — and digital radios through the Federal Transit Authority in the field, allowing local providers and agencies to be linked and able to communicate for the first time in the region's history.

Lynnda Bassham, director of human services for the Lower Savannah COG, can barely contain her excitement and passion for using technology to bridge the rural distances in her serving area. "We have learned that to make any technology solution work, you need to overcome the non-technical issues. You need to reach a level of trust and common ground with stakeholders, but at the same time, there needs to be one entity that does take the lead," notes Bassham.

Bassham points to two success stories that most likely caught the attention of the MSAA committee. In Allendale, the poorest county in South Carolina, RTMA helped local leaders develop a public transit system, using existing health and human service vehicles, by sharing seats with the public.



To forge this new public transit system, human service agencies agreed to share seats on their vehicles and sell tickets to the public or agencies, which purchase transportation for their consumers. When an agency transports another agency's client, they are reimbursed an agreed-upon passenger mile rate, while the public will pay \$2.00 for every 10 miles traveled. The new local mobility manager takes trip requests and uses RouteMatch's scheduling and dispatching technology and digital radios in vehicles to meet the demand. Now, 109 new riders are able to get to work and other appointments and the service registers a 95 percent trip satisfaction rate.

Two years later, RTMA worked with Bamberg County leaders to help create a similar system using existing vehicles and the exact same mobility manager and type of technology that works for the Allendale Scooter.

Now, comes the MSAA initiative. Lower Savannah COG, as promised, worked on getting buy-in and support and now has a 40-member statewide advisory group, including consumers, advocacy groups, transit providers, health and human service organizations and educational institutions.

"We are committed to solve the most challenging problems: getting consumers rides and giving them the right information on where to access rides, the hours of operation, funding questions and the service area boundaries. Our mobility manager working in the regional office is taking lots of calls from members of the public and is already a big help in discovering where the breakdowns in communication occur between consumers and providers," says Bassham.

Lower Savannah is optimistic that a TMCC will be developed whether or not they get selected. Along with a United We Ride grant and the funding from MSAA, "we are also funded by a Systems Transformation Grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, so we see ourselves continuing no matter what," adds Bassham.

Paducah Will Try Anything Once

When you look at Paducah Area Transit System in Paducah, Ky., you'll find a provider that is committed heart and soul to, as they state, "thinking out of the box." The only 24x7 operator in the state, Paducah offers an eight-county wide dial-a-ride service, van pools, and will even deliver UPS and FedEx packages if need be, providing up to 1,600 rides a day. And, Paducah Transit is the Medicaid Broker for HSTD (Human Service Transportation Delivery) since 1999.

Using RouteMatch Software and Mentor Engineering, Paducah Transit automates service using GPS routing and scheduling, automated vehicle location and mobile data communications and coordinates transportation in its service area.

"We like to say that we'll try anything new," says Kim Adair, assistant general manager at Paducah Transit, pointing out that they even introduced the world's first portable driving simulator, a tractor trailer that can pull up to any location and give drivers computer-based driving simulation to hone their driving skills.

But all this is for their customers, according to Kim Adair. "First thing we did when we were selected by MSAA was to host a Riders Forum. We are meeting every three months with passengers to find out what they need from our service and keep them up-to-date about the MSAA program."

Paducah has no hesitation when it comes to using the MSAA grant to push forth on ITS initiatives. From smart cards, a 211 human services information center and a 511 travel information center to interactive voice response (IVR), kiosks and disaster recovery capabilities, Paducah aims for nothing less than becoming the region-wide call center for transportation management.

But technology can bridge the gap only so far. “We understand that a virtual system or IVRs can only get us so far. Younger people don’t mind an automated system, but older people want a live person,” remarks Adair.

The devil is in the details, as they say. How do you fully embrace ITS to keep down costs, while meeting the needs of the very people you aim to serve — senior citizens? “Perhaps we use a technology, like IVR, to triage calls,” says Dana Luttrull, grants manager for the Lower Savannah COG. “We allow callers to press a number to get to the right information, but allow others to simply bypass the system and get directly to a human option.”

Overcoming the Fiefdom Syndrome

ITS may be the buzzword for MSAA’s initiative, but going from concept to reality may be more akin to the kindergarten principles of learning how to share and cooperate. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) has a daunting task: how do you get 10 counties across the Atlanta metropolis that are used to working independently with different systems to come together and share vehicles, space and money?

Using funding from MSAA – \$400,000 plus an additional matched sum of \$100,000 from within – ARC is busy developing a detailed plan, as required, to set up one informational center to help riders get from point A to point B in greater Atlanta.

“Individual counties have different software and they’re not integrated. We need to establish an open architecture so that any agency can plug into the TMCC at any level they want,” says David Schilling, senior planner for ARC. “However, technology is important, but we need to create institutional policies as well.”

ARC has a three-pronged approach to get all stakeholders engaged and cooperative. A policy advisory panel of major state and local agencies is kept informed of ARC’s plan for the TMCC, a technical stakeholder team is available to make sure that the TMCC will technically work and a user discussion group was set up with older adults, lower income and disabled riders to extract information on what they need and want from the TMCC. ARC also has contracted with Cambridge System to help it on the project.

“We have to stay focused on the fact that we are charged with serving the customer,” adds Schilling. “Everyone has to think larger than just their own county and that is what we aim to facilitate.”

Not If But When

Technology buzz is always years ahead of mainstream adoption. The industry has been talking ITS since the mid 1980s when, according to a Journal of Intelligent Transportation Systems article dated November 2006, the California Department of Transportation (DOT) sponsored a conference on intelligent vehicle highway systems, and established the New Technologies Division and the PATH (Partners for Advanced Transit and Highways) Program.

Many challenges have been holding ITS back from ubiquitous implementation including political, financial, procedural and infrastructure issues. But the federal and state agencies are showing the will and resolve to push ITS for transportation coordination forward. In the end, Gross points out, “it simply makes no sense not to do it” and believes that transportation funding will be increasingly linked to the adoption of ITS, creating what Gross calls, “a narrowing of the strait jacket.”

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