

Tribal Transit Services Get Boost for Automation and Growth Through Federal ‘Set-Aside’ Funding

Extending transportation services to rural areas of the country has gotten a shot in the arm over the past years from Federal initiatives such as the Mobility Services for All Americans (MSAA) initiative and United We Ride (UWR) program, designed to implement the Executive Order on Human Service Coordination issued by President Bush in February 2004. These programs are all meant 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.

Yet, the American Indian/Alaska Native communities face particularly vexing challenges, as pointed out by the Transportation Research Board.

Many don't realize that this predominantly rural segment of the U.S. population lags substantially in economic resources behind mainstream America. While 79 percent of the U.S. population (2000 Census) is classified as urban, this statistic is reversed for American Indian/Alaska Native communities with about 75 percent of the population classified as rural.

Even with the substantial improvements in Indian community economies since 1990 (e.g., poverty rate and unemployment improvements ten times higher than the U.S. as a whole), the average income for Indians is still at or below the poverty level and Indians are unemployed at triple the rate of the U.S. population.

With this situation as the backdrop, transportation providers in these Indian communities struggle to provide public transportation to medical facilities or get citizens to their workplaces when, for many, personal automobiles are a luxury, or the price of gasoline is just too steep for many to afford.

Where in the past, federal funding for Indian communities focused largely on road or bridge work and repair, in the *Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users* (SAFETEA-LU), Congress established a supplemental funding program to assist tribes in establishing and maintaining transit systems.

With this supplemental funding, providers such as the Chickasaw Nation, based in Ada, Oklahoma, are now able to move beyond the 'status quo' to designing, developing and implementing a system-wide plan for improved transportation services, with automated technologies, new staff and program enhancements.

Federal funding opens up new possibilities

Angie Gilliam, Director for the Chickasaw Nation Transportation Services Department, sees the Federal set-aside funding as opening up a whole new world for transit and tribes.

"Many people have this perception that tribal communities can simply fund transit through revenues pulled in through casinos and those types of businesses," says Gilliam. "But, there are a host of other needed services funded through tribal governments, and unfortunately, transit is not always one of those, so many still face great challenges."

The Chickasaw Nation transit system now delivers 120 trips per day for 13 ½ counties in South Central Oklahoma, spanning about 7648 square miles. With only one tribal hospital in the area to serve a population of 25,000 Native American citizens, 20 vehicles transport citizens over a large area – sometimes up to one hour – to receive medical services. Additionally, the transit system helps move citizens to and from work through its 'Road to Work' program.

Before becoming the grantee of the Federal supplemental funding, the Chickasaw Nation transit system received requests and dispatched drivers via a manual system at two offices. "We had dual manual books, everything was handwritten and we had to track everything manually," stresses Gilliam. "This was very inefficient, and at times, we also had no idea if and where vehicles were at any point in time."

When The Tribal Transit Program (TTP) announced plans to make funds available to federally recognized Indian tribes or Alaska Native villages, groups, or communities as identified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for public transportation capital projects, operating costs and planning activities, the Chickasaw Nation system didn't waste any time – and neither did other tribal systems.

While the FY 2008 program offered a total of \$12 million for the program, \$24 million was actually requested from tribal systems for new transit services, enhancement or expansion of existing transit services and planning studies including operational planning.

As a result, projects had to be selected through a competitive process based on each applicant's response to the program evaluation criteria outlined in FTA's May 21, 2008, **Federal Register** Notice: Notice of Funding Availability and Solicitation for FY 2008 TTP (73 FR 29569). And, the FTA also took into consideration the current status of the FY 2006 and FY 2007 grants for tribes requesting continuation funding.

Don't hold back

Competition for the supplemental funding was high and as Gilliam explains, larger tribal systems might have an advantage. "We're fortunate since we have our own grant writers, and have some resources other systems might not," points out Gilliam. But, she does have advice for smaller systems that are seeking to partake of the set-aside dollars.

"My advice is not to hold back. Be creative, put in projections and detail what your systems need in the future and the growth you expect in your system. Essentially, go for it and try and get the most dollars you can," says Gilliam. Gilliam adds that while tribal systems compete for this additional funding, they must work together, help each other and share tips and advice.

Over the past three years, the Chickasaw Nation received \$964,000 in supplemental funding to implement their Road to Work program, which included operating expenses, purchasing shuttle buses and purchased an automated routing and scheduling system from RouteMatch Software. With both offices online, Gilliam says that "we can automatically schedule, track and report on all transit activity." To simplify the process for customers, everyone requests trips through the main office in Ada, Oklahoma, while trips are then coordinated with their second office in Ardmore.

With the help of automated software, the Chickasaw Nation has been able to go from about 70 trips per day to 120 trips, while improving on-time performance and vehicle route efficiencies.

Future prospects

For, tribal systems, automating transit might just be the beginning. "We hope to receive continued supplemental funding for automated vehicle location and facility improvements," says Gilliam.

In fact, the Chickasaw Nation would like to use AVL or other technologies to track and analyze which routes are needed, which vehicles are experiencing unwanted 'dead-time' and how the system can save on fuel costs. Also, a new transit facility will be needed as demand grows with a more secured parking area and more cost-effective wash area for vehicles.

"We'd also like to use technology to coordinate more on the state and even regional level," says Gilliam. "We have recently expanded and have opened our 'borders' and are helping citizens outside our serving area as needed."

This type of collaboration with local, state and national entities is key, according to Gilliam, and she points to a May seminar held in her State and put on by the Oklahoma Tribal Transportation Council as one way for tribal systems to grow and get the help they need. "We reached out to the FTA, CTAA and local and state officials to attend this seminar so we could share challenges, resources and ideas.

The Chickasaw Nation already sees that its new automated system and 'Road to Work' program are making a difference in people's lives. "When the price of gas was sky high months ago, we had a big increase in people using our service to get to work," says Rick Miller, Road to Work manager. "Now, that the price of gas went down a bit, they are still sticking with our service. They like the service, it is efficient and saves them wear and tear on the vehicle and leaves more in their pocket."

Hope for smaller tribes

Chickasaw Nation's experience can help smaller tribal transit systems get some much needed help. Gilliam says consulting help can make the difference in the grant application process, not only in the writing but also in the description of why and how they will use the supplemental funding.

"Tribal systems know that they need and want funding, but a tribal transit system has to find a way to understand their area's short and long-term needs and be able to define those needs and set goals," said Gilliam. She says look to an organization like CTAA for consulting help or another outside resource and aim high. "Winning the grant isn't guaranteed, but every system, whether small or big, should apply for supplemental funding, so don't hold anything back."