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Aging Americans: Stranded Without Options

Linda Bailey, author of this report prepared for the Surface Transportation Policy Project, presented these findings at the recent Safe Mobility Forum sponsored by the NJ Foundation for Aging and the Voorhees Transportation Center of Rutgers University. The Report was released in April 2004. Ms. Bailey joined a panel of experts at the forum discussing future transportation needs of older adults. Here is the Summary of her reported. The title presents the dilemma clearly, Aging Americans: Stranded Without Options.

Executive Summary

The demographics of the United States will change dramatically during the next 25 years as more baby boomers reach their 60s, 70s and beyond. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the number of Americans age 65 or older will swell from 35 million today to more than 62 million by 2025 - nearly an 80 percent increase. As people grow older, they often become less willing or able to drive, making it necessary to depend on alternative methods of transportation.

Unfortunately, the United States is currently ill prepared to provide adequate transportation choices for our rapidly aging population. Alternatives to driving are sparse, particularly in some regions and in rural and small town communities. As the number of older people increases, so too will their mobility needs. How the nation addresses this issue will have significant social and economic ramifications.

This report presents new findings based on the National Household Transportation Survey of 2001 and places them in the context of other research on mobility in the aging population.

Major Findings:

More than one in five (21%) Americans age 65 and older do not drive. Some reasons include:

- Declining health, eyesight, physical or mental abilities;
- Concern over safety (self-regulation);
- No car or no access to a car;
- Personal preference.

More than 50% of non-drivers age 65 and older - or 3.6 million Americans - stay home on any given day partially because they lack transportation options. The following populations are more heavily affected:

- Rural communities and sprawling suburbs;
- Households with no car;
- Older African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans.

Older non-drivers have a decreased ability to participate in the community and the economy. Compared with older drivers, older non-drivers in the United States make:

- 15% fewer trips to the doctor;
- 59% fewer shopping trips and visits to restaurants;
- 65% fewer trips for social, family and religious activities.

For trips outside their immediate neighborhood, public transportation is the only alternative to asking for a ride for many non-drivers. Where public transportation is available, older Americans make regular use of it.

- Public transportation trips by older non-drivers totaled an estimated 310 million in 2001;
- Older minority populations account for a significant share of these trips, with older African-Americans and Latinos more than twice as likely to use public transportation as their white counterparts.

A safe and inviting walking and bicycling environment provides mobility and health benefits to many older Americans.

- More than half of older Americans make walking a regular activity, and nearly two-thirds walk a half mile at least once a month.
- Four percent of older Americans ride a bicycle at least once a week.
- Research shows that moderate exercise, such as walking or bicycling, can contribute significantly to a healthy lifestyle.
- Improving the walking and bicycling environment is a priority for the general public.

More livable communities have lower rates of staying home, and higher rates of public transportation use and walking among non-drivers aged 65 and over.

- 61% of older non-drivers stay home on a given day in more spread-out areas, as compared to 43% in denser areas;
- More than half of older non-drivers use public transportation occasionally in denser areas, as compared to 1 in 20 in more spread-out areas;
- One in three older non-drivers walks on a given day in denser areas, as compared to 1 in 14 in more spread-out areas.

The Transportation Context:

In too many places, public transportation is still not a practical option for older people.

- Half of all adults cannot choose to take public transportation because service is not available in their area, particularly in rural and small towns.

Public transportation depends on federal, state and local government funding to operate. Making public transportation options available to more people will require additional government funding.

- Maintaining the current public transportation system requires a minimum of \$14.8 billion in capital investments annually.
- To improve the public transportation system would require \$43.9 billion annually.

For frail older persons, paratransit and specialized transportation are the only feasible modes of transportation, other than getting a ride from others.

- Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), public transportation agencies provide complementary paratransit service along fixed routes for people whose disabilities prevent them from using fixed route service.
- The Federal Transit Administration's Specialized Transportation Program for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (Section 5310) was funded at \$90.6 million in 2004, or 0.23 percent of all federal transportation funding.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Public Transportation:

- Substantially increase investment in public transportation systems to expand and improve services to meet the needs of older Americans in metropolitan and rural areas.
- Increase funding for existing specialized transportation programs that provide mobility for older persons, such as FTA's Section 5310 program.

Planning and Coordination:

- Incorporate the mobility needs of older Americans into the planning of transportation projects, services, and streets. Coordinate with land use planning.
- Improve coordination among human services agencies and between those agencies and public transportation agencies.

Road and Street Improvements:

- Complete the streets by providing a place for safe walking and bicycling for people of all ages.
- Urge states to adopt federal guidelines for designing safer roads for older drivers and pedestrians.

- Preserve the flexibility of state and local governments to spend federal transportation funds on improving public transportation, pedestrian and bicycle paths, and other alternatives that will meet the mobility needs of older Americans.
- Support the “Transportation Enhancements” program, which is the only federal source of support for pedestrian and bicycle safety projects and facilities.