



## Helping People with Employment Transportation:

### *A Summary of Transportation Needs, Goals and Accomplishments*

Family Resources Community Action's Way to Work Center

March, 2011

#### **Introduction & Background:**

The Way to Work Transportation Center, a program of Family Resources Community Action (FRCA) in Woonsocket, RI was initiated in 2007 through a three year Strategy Grant from the Rhode Island Foundation that sought to address employment transportation barriers affecting workers in Woonsocket and other areas of Northern Rhode Island. The project was linked with the *SkillUp Rhode Island* project funded by the United Way of RI, a systems-change initiative that established workforce partnerships to meet the needs of low-income, low-skilled individuals and employers. (FRCA administered the northern RI project with several local partners.) During the first two years of the transportation project, an advisory council with representatives from business, local government, transportation and human services organizations was convened, research was conducted on transportation needs and local/national models and a transportation education hub was created in downtown Woonsocket. The program received additional funding in October, 2009 from RIPTA through the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) Program.

The goal of the Way to Work program is to enhance the availability of transportation information, education and resources for low income individuals in Woonsocket/Northern RI in order to help individuals gain access to and maintain employment. The program provides employment transportation education, resources and referrals to help low-income individuals meet their short and long term employment transportation needs. In addition to providing information about public and private transit, Way to Work actively engages various stakeholders (local residents, employers, community organizations, City officials) in the development of solutions to meet employment transportation needs such as evening hour transportation, and promotes alternative modes of transportation such as carpooling and biking.

## **Transportation Needs in Northern Rhode Island:**

### *Unique Geographic and Socio-Economic Challenges*

The City of Woonsocket, once a thriving mill town, is one of the lowest income and lowest educated urban areas in RI. Located in the northern most part of the state and with a population of nearly 44,000 people, Woonsocket is isolated by geographic, economic, and attitudinal barriers. Most good jobs are located outside the city, and public transportation is lacking. While there is currently public transportation through the main routes of town, residents note that the service is insufficient. Buses do not run frequently enough, and the routes and hours of operation do not allow people to get to and from their jobs in a reasonable amount of time. Woonsocket has the:

- Third lowest median household income - In 1999 (the most recent data available), the median family income in Woonsocket was \$34,465, more than \$16,000 less than the state median income of \$50,557
- Second highest dropout rate - As of 2009, the drop out rate reached 24% as compared to 19% statewide
- Second highest teen pregnancy rate - Birth rates for every 1,000 teen girls ages 15-19 in Woonsocket ) is 115.6 per 1,000 births, as compared to 44 per 1,000 statewide rate more than double the state average
- Third highest rate of children living in poverty - 31.8% as compared to 16.9% statewide
- One of the state's highest unemployment rates - Woonsocket's unemployment rate averaged 13.3% in 2009, tied for the third highest unemployment rate in the state, as compared to RI statewide average 2009 unemployment rate of 11.2%. (*Source: Rhode Island Department of Labor State of the State Report, April, 2010*). At 12.5%, Woonsocket's December, 2010 unemployment remained one of the highest in the state. As stark as these numbers are, these statistics represent only those individuals who are currently receiving unemployment benefits, not the many individuals who remain unemployed after their benefits have run out.

These risk factors contribute to Woonsocket's high need for educational and economic advancement.

Community Needs Surveys/Data:

Throughout Northern RI, but specifically in Woonsocket, transportation has been one of the most often cited needs for low and moderate income individuals and families. Transportation challenges and needs have been widely documented in the Community Needs Assessment surveys conducted by FRCA over the past several years, as well as by additional surveys conducted through the Way to Work program. Highlights of a transportation survey completed by 297 Woonsocket-area residents in 2007 revealed the following:

- 29% of respondents rely on a regular bus route to get to school/work
- 22% of respondents reported missing or arriving late to work because of transportation issues
- 12% of respondents reported that transportation restrictions prevented them or family members from working
- 14% of respondents reported that they didn't own a car

A follow up survey conducted in 2008 of 133 Woonsocket-area residents who were either working or looking for work revealed the following:

- 27% of respondents reported they or others in their home had problems getting to work or seeking employment due to transportation problems
- 19% of respondents reported the reason they don't use the bus to get to work or look for work was due to inadequate bus schedules
- 51% of respondents reported they were either currently working or would consider working a job with a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> shift.

Additional transportation needs identified from FRCA's 2010 Community Needs Assessment survey of 226 Woonsocket residents revealed the following:

- 56% noted a need for transportation to access or keep employment
- 50% noted a need for bus routes/transportation to access evening jobs

As seen in the data above, the current Northern RI RIPTA public bus schedule presents challenges for Woonsocket residents in accessing and maintaining employment, particularly in evening hours. There is one RIPTA bus route (#87 Fairmount/Walnut Hill) that services only

Northern Woonsocket. The route ends at 7:18 pm at most stops, at 8:30 pm at selected stops. Individuals working in the Walnut Hill or Diamond Hill shopping area who rely on public transportation have no public transit option in the evenings. Saturday and Sunday evening hours are also limited. In addition, there is currently no public transit option to reach businesses in the Highland Industrial Park on Route 122. Service along the #54 Woonsocket/Lincoln/Providence route runs weekly until midnight (until 11:30 pm on Saturday and 10:45 pm on Sunday). Woonsocket residents that are interested in working outside the community and rely solely on public transit can expect to have a long commute, sometimes upward of two (2) hours one (1) way. Depending on their destination and time of day they are using the public transportation system, the commute can include several transfers and long waiting periods in between the transfers. This can add restrictions on work hours and thus limits employment opportunities and advancements. The Woonsocket FLEX Service operates Monday through Friday only, with service ending at 6:30 pm. A 48 hour advance reservation is required. The service is often full during peak commuting hours, and waiting lists are reported.

The need for improved transportation was also reflected in several focus groups conducted in 2010; sample comments are listed below:

- *Public bus schedule is inconvenient; buses don't run frequently enough & don't run long enough into the evenings.*
- *If you work at night in Diamond Hill area, it is difficult. The stores stay open until 9:00 or 10:00 pm but the buses don't run that late.*
- *It just takes so long to get places. (Infrequent stops and schedule of public service.)*
- *Buses are unreliable; sometimes late, other times early.*
- *Without evening bus service, forced to walk home at night, in cold, near busy streets. Not safe.*
- *Cost of transportation. Hard to get a bus pass.*
- *RIPTA FLEX bus is often full in the mornings; they will only pick up on the afternoons. There is a waiting list for FLEX service.*
- *Lack of access to a car creates challenges for securing employment. I don't drive so I rely on the bus.*
- *Transportation is an issue with getting to and from work*

Data on commuting patterns and access to vehicles also reveals special challenges for Northern RI residents:

- Where Woonsocket residents work: Woonsocket: 34.2%; Massachusetts: 34.2%; Other RI Towns: 30.7%; Connecticut: .5%; Elsewhere: .4% (*RI Department of Labor State of the State Report, April, 2010*)
- 17.3% of Woonsocket residents have no vehicle for transportation (statewide average 10.9%)

### **The Way to Work Center – a model for enhancing employment transportation:**

#### *Alignment with RI State Transportation Plan:*

The Way to Work program was designed to be aligned with the RI State Coordinated Plan for Public Transit-Human Services Transportation. Specific goals & objectives outlined in the state plan that are addressed by Way to Work include:

- *Objective #3 – Enhance Employment Transportation:* Strategy #6: Provide late night/early am transportation to certain key employment sites to support 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> shift workers. Explore use of vanpools, carpools, private transportation, etc., as well as a means to connect these services with RIPTA fixed route serve. Strategy #8: Develop program to identify available jobs along existing public transit routes and match/advertise these jobs with bus access information. Strategy #11: Involve area employers in discussions about transportation issues to identify shared needs and possible solutions. Strategy #12: Explore methods other than public transit to assist workers needing to travel to work outside of RI (vanpools, carpools, volunteer drivers, etc.)
- *Objective #4 – Improve Transportation Options Beyond the ADA,* Strategy #2: Support Mobility Management and coordination programs (including planning activities, service promotion, individualized travel training, information centers, and planning for enhanced technologies.)
- *Objective #6 – Improve Travel Training Programs to Support Public Transportation Use,* Strategy # 2: Implement ‘Train the Trainer’ programs to promote travel training.
- *Objective #7 – Develop Other Programs/Actions to Support Transportation,* Strategy #11: Provide more outreach and information about the FLEX service, the Commuter Resource

RI program and other programs to educate residents about available transportation options.

Summary of Way to Work Program Accomplishments:

Through the provision of transportation education, training and service development, the Way to Work Center has made significant progress in meeting its goal to assist Northern Rhode Islanders with their employment transportation needs. A summary of program accomplishments to date:

- *Transportation Education:*
  - Over 900 individuals have participated in 100+ educational workshops on topics such as public transit, carpooling practices/tips, bicycle commuting and safety and low-income car ownership. Over 35 of these workshops have been conducted at the netWORKri office in Woonsocket, providing critical employment transportation resources to individuals who are actively seeking employment. Workshops have been conducted in Spanish and translated materials have been provided to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking participants.
  - Over 175 people have received transportation consultation and assessment to assist them with planning their employment transportation needs.
  - Way to Work coordinated the first-ever *Transportation Fair* in May, 2010. Over 130 people participated in this event that included educational workshops and transportation information from 20 local transportation vendors/organizations.
- *Evening Hour & Other Transportation assistance:* A pilot evening hour shuttle service was launched in April, 2010 with Valley Transportation Corp. A total of 42 riders registered for the Woonsocket area service that has provided transportation to help workers get to and from their evening shift jobs. In addition, 30 individuals have been linked with short-term transportation subsidy assistance to help get to/from work or job training.
- *Better Biking Initiative:* Among its innovative efforts to promote biking, Way to Work applied for and received funding from the Local Initiative Support Corporation and NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley through the “Our Neighborhoods” Initiative to create and install customized art bicycle racks throughout Woonsocket. Funding was expanded with additional bike racks sponsored by local businesses, bringing the total

number of bike racks to eleven. The project was a collaboration between The Steel Yard, RiverzEdge Arts Project and the City of Woonsocket.

- *Low Income Car Ownership:* In order to make car ownership more available to low income individuals and families, Way to Work has partnered with Good News Garage, an organization that repairs and donates vehicles to low-wage families. The Way to Work transportation coordinator was invited to join the screening committee that reviews applications for vehicles and matches donated vehicles to eligible recipients needing them to commute to full-time employment. A review process ensures that applicants have adequate income to contribute toward the car purchase as well as ongoing costs such as gas, insurance and car maintenance. Way to Work provided support to a recipient of one of the first cars donated in RI, a single mother of four who was able to increase her work hours as a result of receiving the car through this program.
- *Woonsocket Transportation Advisory Committee:* The transportation committee that was formed in 2007 meets on a regular basis to identify local employment transportation needs and solutions. WTAC committee members include Family Resources Community Action, the City of Woonsocket Planning Office, NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, Northwest Transportation Service/Valley Transportation Corp. and the Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce. Other agencies/organizations that have been involved at some time in discussions and planning including RIPTA, RiverzEdge Arts Project, AAA of Southern NE, the Good News Garage, the Coalition for Transportation Choices, and the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission. WTAC was one of the first regionally focused transportation solutions entity in the state and is committed to reducing current employment transportation barriers. WTAC facilitated the development of Way to Work and took an active role in developing the employment shuttle service pilot.

*Making a Difference: Stories from individuals served by the Way to Work program:*

The Way to Work program has provided critical resources and support to help individuals with their employment transportation needs. Here are just some of the quotes and stories from Way to Work clients:

*"I learned many alternate transportation options including the bus services. It is helpful to know how to read a bus map, Google routes and to know I can use for work."*

*"There are a lot of different resources to get around Rhode Island; this was a helpful workshop."*

*"I have never heard of a car donation program. What a great idea. The carpool tips were helpful and I will now consider carpooling in the future."*

*Sandra recently experienced the loss of her husband and at the same time her work hours were cut due to transportation restrictions. Sandra relied on public transit for all her transportation needs. The cut in her hours sent her finances in a downward spiral. She began falling behind in her rent and utility payments, and was anxious about how she was going to find bus fare to get back and forth to her job that she desperately needed. Sandra heard about the Way to Work program and requested a bus subsidy to help her get to work until she could improve her financial situation. Staff worked with Sandra to map out a plan and link her to other resources. The bus subsidy enabled Sandra to receive additional hours at work, add an alternate work location and recover from other financial difficulties.*

*A family served by FRCA was awarded one of the first cars donated in Rhode Island through the Good News Garage low-income car ownership program. The Way to Work Coordinator provided ongoing support to the family with the application process and with finding a bank from which to secure a loan. The single mother of four children was able to expand her work hours as a Certified Nursing Assistant as a direct result of having access to a car.*

*The TeamHealth2 CNA Case Manager at Family Resources was providing support to a man who needed immediate employment to support his family. They had recently moved to the area from Africa, and had limited resources. The Case Manager assisted the man with securing a 2<sup>nd</sup> shift position at St. Antoine's Residence. The man was unsure how to navigate the transit system, and had no personal transportation or the financial means to pay for a vehicle or bus fare. The Way to Work Coordinator was able to set a standing reservation on the FLEX service getting him to work on time, and register him on the new pilot Way to Work Shuttle service to take him home. Way to Work also provided a short term bus subsidy until he began to receive compensation from his new employer.*

As mentioned, a pilot Way to Work Shuttle Service was launched in April, 2010 in response to the expressed need for evening hour employment transportation. The pilot was administered by FRCA's Way to Work program with Valley Transportation Corp., a leading transportation provider serving Northern Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts. The service provided evening hour transportation from key employment areas including Diamond Hill & Walnut Hill in Woonsocket and St. Antoine Residence in North Smithfield to residents' homes. Riders pre-registered for the service, and a demand-response schedule was arranged around the pool of riders between 8:30 and 11:30 pm when public bus service was unavailable.

The service was highly praised by both riders and employers. Way to Work promoted the pilot through a variety of means including news articles, paid advertising, e-news, FRCA's website, fliers and word of mouth. The highest usage of the service was from area nursing homes. The most success was seen with employers such as St. Antoine Residence that promoted the Way to Work Shuttle directly to their employees via paystubs and other ongoing outreach. Limits to direct-employee promotion from some of the national chain employers had an affect on the use of the service. Forty-two individuals registered for the shuttle and approximately 640 rides were provided during the pilot period. Due to a lack of funding, the shuttle service will not continue after April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Below are some testimonials from individuals who used the Woonsocket Shuttle Pilot Service and from an employer that benefited from having the service for its employees:

*"The shuttle has allowed me to keep hours at work when my car broke down. The driver was always friendly. I don't know what I would have done if the shuttle wasn't available."*

*"I owe the shuttle and have recommended to two people already. It's the best thing I could ask for. Before the shuttle, I was paying \$10.00 night/\$50 week for a taxi to work and that's what I'd have to do again if the shuttle wasn't available."*

*"I ride 2-3 times a week...I love it and would not be able to work at Price Rite without it. I wish it was on the weekends too."*

*"I ride weekly and love it. It's been a very positive experience and without it I would be stressed and crying trying to find rides every night. "*

*"The shuttle has allowed me to keep my job at St. Antoine's after I lost my vehicle and license."*

*"I ride the shuttle 1 -2 times a week. The Shuttle is very beneficial and if it was not available I would have to rely on rides from my family and this is a burden. "*

*William, a long time employee at St. Antoine's was seeking comfort on the couches after his shift ended each evening at 11:00 pm., hoping someone would provide him transportation home. William relied on the RIPTA FLEX service 5 days a week to get to his 3:00 pm. shift; however FLEX service is not available for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> shifts. When William learned of the shuttle program, he sought assistance from Way to Work. He shared his embarrassment and the loss of dignity he felt with "couch sitting" and emphasized the need for public transit for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> shift employees in Woonsocket. He was relieved when he realized that, thanks to the shuttle, he could go home right after work and rest peacefully on his own couch after his shift. William said the service was too good to be true; his smile was a sign that unnecessary pressure was finally released.*

*“Way to Work has made a tremendous difference for several of the St. Antoine Residence Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) who utilize this transportation service regularly. (The Shuttle) has allowed these employees to maintain their second shift schedule and to continue in our employ.” – Wendy Fagnoli, Executive Director, Saint Antoine Residence.*

### **Other State Models: Employment Transportation Programs funded by Job Access & Reverse Commute (JARC) Funds:**

JARC funds have been blended with other sources of funding in many communities across the country to enhance employment transportation education and service for low and moderate income individuals. Below is a brief summary of some examples. Additional information on these and other programs can be found on the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) website [www.ctaa.org](http://www.ctaa.org)

- *Rural Rides – Arrowhead region of northeast Minnesota.* This program provides rideshare matching, volunteer driver services and individualized transportation planning for low-income earners in a challenging rural community to help people find new ways to get to work. Each local workforce one-stop center in the region has an in-house transportation representative to work 1:1 with job seekers.
- *Cuyahoga County Work Access and Transportation Program: Linking Area Workers with Transportation.* Primarily formed as a way to help families transition off of welfare and into jobs, the Cuyahoga County Work Access and Transportation Program (WATP) addresses Greater Cleveland's transportation challenges with 1) an extensive van service that provides commuters with access to distant work sites in isolated job corridors and 2) transportation information and referral services, managed by mobility specialists.
- *Riding The WAVE to Work: Wheels to Access Vocation and Education in Sanford, Maine.* Using a JARC grant matched with state and local funds, the WAVE program provides rides for TANF participants and other low-income residents to area jobs, child care and employment training sites in York County, ME. The nature of shift work, which makes up a large portion of the available jobs in the region, complicates job access. In response to these challenges, the WAVE van service maintains flexibility in its operations while adhering to some consistent routes and schedules.

- *Swan Island Evening Shuttle – Portland, Oregon.* The Swan Island Transportation Management Association received JARC funds to extend fixed-route bus service until midnight to provide access to and from jobs in the evenings. A private subcontractor operates the evening shuttle.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

A sound transportation system is a basic tool of the state's economic development plan and a key component to the quality of life of the state's residents. Without adequate transportation services, people do not have access to the employment, job training and educational opportunities they need to better their lives and the lives of their families. In order to meet the transportation needs of the Woonsocket/Northern RI community, we recommend the following:

1. Continue support for transportation education and information to inform residents about the public and private options available to get to work, job training and college. Provide bilingual educational services and materials to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking residents.
2. Expand public transportation service in Woonsocket/Northern RI in the evening hours to increase access to second and third shift jobs.
3. Develop and provide support to other non-public transportation options to fill the current gaps in service (evening hour shuttles, low-income car ownership programs, bicycle commuting, carpooling, transportation service across state lines to access jobs in southern MA.)
4. Continue to involve and educate key stakeholders including local legislators, City Councilors, City officials, human service organizations, state agencies (RIPTA, DHS, DLT), local employers and residents about regional employment transportation barriers and solutions.