Expanding Transportation Options and Sustaining Community Participation:

Experiences of Brookline Seniors

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Introduction

This report describes local transportation experiences of Brookline Seniors in the context of current research on older adults, transportation and community life. Throughout the summer of 2018, a survey was developed and conducted by TRIPPS (Transportation, Resources, Information, Planning and Partnership for Seniors) program volunteers. A program of the Brookline Council on Aging and initially funded by the Mass Department of Transportation, TRIPPS provides information, resources and support on transportation options for seniors who are making the transition from driving to non-driving. Together with a team of volunteers, many of whom are older adults themselves, the project strives to educate seniors on their transportation options while expanding the number of options older adults are prepared to adopt. In addition, TRIPPS staff and volunteers provide one-on-one and group support for older adults looking for more information and guidance on the transportation resources available to them as they transition from driving.

In addition to this survey, the project interviewed three individuals and one couple to provide different viewpoints of seniors who have successfully transitioned from driving to non-driving. These case studies are included in the case studies section of this report.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Town of Brookline offers several specialized and subsidized transportation options for seniors. These include the Elder bus, the Senior Center van, and Brookline Elder Taxi Service (BETS) -- a subsidized taxi service. Another important transportation support for older adults who qualify, is the MBTA Ride service. These special modes of transportation are described in the Council on Aging’s Elder Resource Guide. Despite these supportive transportation options, over the course of the last three years, many of the traditional transportation programs for older adults have ceased (i.e. Springwell’s medical transportation taxi program and a Boston-based ITN). At the same time, because of the onset of new technologies and software, transportation options in the Boston area and beyond are shifting rapidly.

With the expansion of car sharing services such as Uber and Lyft, traditional taxi services have decline. In a Brookline Tab article from 2017, Brookline Transportation Administrator Todd Kirrane was quoted saying that number of licensed cabs in the Town had declined from 187 to 34 since car sharing services have been introduced (Brookline Tab, October 2, 2017). For seniors who have traditionally relied on taxi service both for subsidized and non-subsidized (but on-demand) rides this decline poses a significant challenge.

Simultaneously, municipalities across the US are increasingly looking at on-demand but shared services as part of public transportation plans. Most recently, the Bridg bus was one such private example operating in Boston and surrounding communities including Brookline (Citylab, 2016). In addition, the MBTA’s own RIDE service has partnered with the smartphone apps Uber, Lyft and Curb to provide on-demand service to its customers. The City of Newton has very recently announced a new contract with the transportation network company VIA to provide Newton older residents an expanded
subsidized transportation service. Transportation options for seniors will continue to evolve with the introduction of self-driving vehicles (AARP, 2018).

**Background & Context**

Transportation is of critical importance to successful community living. Contemporary thinking in gerontology is that participation in community life is essential for successful aging. Accessible, cost effective transportation is necessary to assure access to community resources. Older people who lack transportation are vulnerable to isolation that can lead to depression, a major mental health risk for older people (Schaie 2003, Cvitkovich and Wister, 2001).

The current cohort of older people has largely relied on owning and operating a motor vehicle as a basic mode of transportation throughout their adult lives. The heavy dependence on the automobile in the United States is linked to land use. Much of the population is housed in low-density suburbs with the premise that automobiles provide access to community resources. Consequently, many Americans have made housing location decisions premised on driving as their major mode of transportation.

For reasons associated with health and physical functioning, older people tend to stop driving at some point. The age at which older people stop driving varies a great deal (Foley, Heimovitz, Guralnik, & Brock, 2002). While some stop driving abruptly, seniors more often reduce their driving gradually (Dugan et al., 2018). After a period of reduced driving, they stop completely. On average, older people live for seven to ten years after they stop driving (Foley, Heimovitz, Guralnik, & Brock, 2002) with women tending to retire earlier than men.

As seniors who previously relied heavily on driving an automobile for local transportation, other modes of transportation become increasingly important when they begin to reduce their driving. Seniors need access to transportation alternatives not only after driving cessation but during the stage of driving reduction. Most older adults could benefit from education and help adapting to new transportation options whether they cease driving gradually or abruptly.

North Brookline provides exceptionally good resources for older adults who do not drive. Particularly in the Beacon Street corridor, Brookline is relatively densely developed. For that reason, North Brookline is highly walkable. In other words, those who can walk a half-mile or mile, have access on foot to many community resources including good public transportation access points. Most notable are the MBTA trolleys that connect Brookline with both Boston and Newton. North Brookline is also served by MBTA buses. South Brookline has relatively weak public transportation options for those who do not drive due to little or no access to the subway lines and an MBTA bus that only runs once per hour (and not at all on Sundays).

Older people in Brookline vary greatly in their financial resources. Most are capable of making their own transportation arrangements and have sufficient funds to finance their own transportation. Some do need subsidized transportation if they are to travel successfully within and near the Town. 39.4% of the senior population (aged 65+) in Brookline is estimated to be low to moderate income (Healthy Aging Collaborative https://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/wp-content/themes/mhac/pdf/community_profiles/MA_Town
For the last 30 years, the BETS Program has been able to serve low and moderate income older adults with a subsidized taxi program.

Particularly for older people on modest budgets, spending on transportation can be a significant portion of their income. Some may not be fully aware of the cost of owning and operating an automobile. The American Automobile Association publishes information annually to assist consumers calculating driving costs (https://newsroom.aaa.com/auto/your-driving-costs/). These same seniors may not realize the extent to which termination of driving can free up money that can then be used to pay for other modes of transportation. Some resources are available to seniors to assist them in making decisions about how best to spend on transportation. A good example is the Hartford Center for Mature Market Excellence *Safe Driving for a Lifetime*. The TRIPPS Program uses this report as a model in our educational programs to help older adults calculate their transportation costs and transition to new modes. In addition, the case study of Brookline older adult, Pat, highlights the potential financial impact of freeing up transportation costs associated with driving for use with other modes.

**Brookline Senior Transportation Survey Findings**

The survey was designed to provide a broad overview of use of transportation among Brookline seniors. The survey covers the modes of transportation used, satisfaction with modes of transportation, spending on transportation, and participation in community life. The survey was designed for on-line administration. Seniors who were engaged in TRIPPS services and were participants in Senior Center activities were invited to respond. BrooklineCAN members, whether or not they made use of Senior Center or TRIPPS services were also invited to complete the survey. 110 individuals completed the survey over the summer of 2018. Because this is an opportunity sample, there is no scientific basis for generalizing the findings beyond the sample. Nevertheless, the findings offer some interesting suggestions of patterns that may exist among Brookline seniors as a whole. The sample is large enough to permit examination of bivariate relationships; however, it is not large enough to provide a basis for multivariate analysis.

**Findings**

**Respondent characteristics**

- 85% were between age ages of 65 and 85; 55% were over age 75.
- 80% were women
- 89% were comfortable walking at least 3 blocks
- 59% live alone

**Transportation experiences**

- One-third had permanently stopped driving.
- Of those who continued to drive, half had reduced the extent of their driving.
- Driving status was associated with age; those over 75 were more likely to have stopped driving (42% compared to 23%)
Use of multiple modes of transportation was common (Table 1). More than half use the following:
- Walking (99%)
- Subway (86%)
- Rides from family or friends (65%)
- Self-driven automobile (62%)
- MBTA bus (56%)

A minority make use of Brookline-subsidized transportation services
- BETS (subsidized taxi) (26%)
- Senior Center van (21%)
- Elder bus (15%)

A majority of users of most modes of transportation are satisfied or very satisfied with the service. Users are less than satisfied with the following modes
- MBTA The Ride
- Biking

Transportation spending
- Among those who own automobiles, 70% report spending less than $250 per month on driving
- 75% report spending $50 or less per month on other modes of transportation
- Of those who had stopped driving, a majority spent less than $50 per month on transportation and none spent more than $100 per month on transportation.

Consequences of Driving Status

The survey examined three potential consequences of driving status: patterns of leaving home, time of day at which respondents left home, and satisfaction with community participation. Respondents were considered to be more fully engaged in community life when they tended to leave home seven days a week and when they were likely to go out not only mornings and afternoons but also evenings. Respondents rated their community participation on a five-point scale ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. Respondents were classified according to whether they were driving fully (no change in driving patterns), reduced (they had reduced their driving), or they had stopped driving entirely. In analyzing the data, we controlled for possible age effects.

- Those who were driving were more likely than others to leave home daily (64% to 38%)
- Those who were driving “fully” were most likely to go out mornings, afternoons, and evenings; those who had stopped driving were least likely to go out at all times (62%, 34%, and 12%)
- Driving status was associated with satisfaction with community participation; those driving fully were most satisfied; those who had stopped driving were least satisfied.

All of the findings reported above are statistically significant. All of the findings remained statistically significant when we controlled for age.
Case Studies

Most people don’t plan for retirement from driving the way they might plan for retirement from work. And—when people think about the prospect of no longer driving, it’s usually not with the happy anticipation that at least some people experience at the thought of no longer working. Nevertheless, mobility transitions happen (whether planned or unplanned, welcomed or not) and TRIPPS wants to help ensure they are safe and successful.

Let’s learn what we can from people who have traveled down this road.

Case #1: Mary

If you were to ask Mary how she feels about not driving anymore, she would say “relieved.” But beforehand, she was nervous about what it would be like. Mary’s transformation from being a driver (relying solely on her car) to being a “voyager” (using a variety of options to get around) didn’t happen according to a grand plan. It also didn’t happen all at once or all on her own.

Going car-less can start as an experiment. Mary, who lives alone, decided to test the water before diving in. She kept her car keys while experimenting with car-less living. “I didn’t do it cold turkey,” she said. “I left the car and tried doing everything by public transportation and on foot before giving up the car.” Her advice: “If you are worried about how you’re going to get around, then stop driving for a while, let the car sit in the driveway, and try public transportation and using your feet. See how it works out.”

Owning a car costs more than you might think. Cost was important to Mary. “I figured it out. $80 per month for insurance, then AAA, gas, etc. The car was getting older. One time I had to pay $600 for repairs and I could see the end coming. Up to that point, I hadn’t had to do repairs. That was a big factor. It’s more expensive than I thought it would be to do what I’m doing [use public transportation], but it’s still a lot cheaper than it was to have a car.”

Support from peers has special power. Mary turned to friends and acquaintances for support in using new transportation options. “I have a friend who walks all over the whole city and takes a bus or subway if it starts to rain. I travelled with him and got used to being on the bus or the subway.” She added, “There’s a woman [in my apartment building] who has MS and she has used the RIDE for a long time and she has been very helpful. She told me ‘Why not try?’”

There will be challenges AND they can be overcome. Mary encountered and solved a variety of problems as she tried out new types of transportation. Some were logistical/procedural; others were more “psychological.” For example, Mary worried that she would make a mistake using Lyft and end up in the wrong place, with a huge bill; she gained confidence with a class and practice with a staff person from the TRIPPS Program at the Senior Center. Mary resisted getting on the RIDE van, not wanting to be seen as “one of those old people,” but accepted a friend’s urging not to let her pride keep her from taking advantage of the opportunities and support available to her.

Each trip can have unexpected pleasures. Mary had an open attitude toward using alternatives to driving, but the experience turned out to be even better than she anticipated. Not owning a car meant no shoveling, parking, or dealing with traffic. It also felt good to do her part for the environment. On the bus, she met interesting and kind people. “I have gray hair so people smile and give me their seat.”
Walking made her more aware of her surroundings. “I notice spring. I’ve been watching some daffodils coming up.”

**Staying active and involved.** Mary continues to use the variety of transportation modes she adopted during this transition to remain actively engaged in the community. As she states “I get everywhere.” Her participation includes Senior Center activities, a trip out of state, to the beach, and retreats in Milton.

While transitioning from driving can seem overwhelming, pre-planning and testing out new modes can be powerful ways to ease the process. Mary uses the breadth of options available to her (MBTA, Ride, Lyft, taxi vouchers, Senior Center van, Elder Bus, and walking) to get around. She used a variety of supports including from peers who had been through a similar transition to ensure her own success.

**Case #2: Pat**

Many older adults are not enthusiastic about retiring from driving. Whether they give up driving at the advice of family, friends, medical professionals, or by their own recognition, many make this decision reluctantly but may realize the benefits later on. For Pat, “convenience” is the primary reason that she is not driving today.

**Driving retirement versus convenience of car ownership.** Upon retirement from work, Pat had the option to purchase her company car. As a resident of Brookline Village, parking is a challenge, and she would have had to rent a parking spot on a monthly basis at a high cost. Still able to drive, she looked into car-sharing services such as Zipcar but was deterred by the lack of insurance protection. When faced with giving up driving completely, Pat naturally “was feeling hesitant. If [she] wanted to go to the Cape, or on another long distance trip, [she] would have had to rent a car from a traditional rental car company like Enterprise or Hertz.” Despite this, Pat went ahead with a trial period of trying to get around without a personal vehicle.

**Multimodal Transportation (using all available options).** Pat decided to see if using Uber would be a good fit for her, and she has not looked back since. She was able to download the Uber app with the help of her niece. “I’ve been using it for two years beautifully. It has its little glitches but for the most part, it has been a luxury.” In her experience, “the drivers typically come in two or three minutes, sometimes five or six, and they are very gracious. They offer to help you out of the car, help with your groceries.” For Pat, “it is typically easier to use Uber, public transportation and walk, to get to where I need to go, especially around the city.”

Pat has even utilized Uber for long distance trips. She has “taken Uber an hour outside of Brookline to New Hampshire, and then been able to take one back.” While she acknowledges this is not possible to do in some more rural areas, she has still made longer distance trips work without driving.

One issue she has found is that “you can’t get a live voice at Uber if you have an issue, and that is a drawback. You can talk with your driver, which is awesome, but you can’t talk with someone directly at Uber.” Pat pointed out that “it would be great if they had a special option for seniors in the app.”

**Weighing the costs.** While everyone’s transportation expenses are different, Pat has found that her new transportation methods are “more economical than paying for everything that comes with owning a car, even if you factor in long distance trips.” She finds that she spends less money now than she would on
monthly car payments, insurance, gas, parking, and maintenance. While she recognizes the potential savings of getting around without a car, she “doesn’t think about it as a financial decision. It is all about practicality and convenience.” In addition to the expense -- she does not have to worry about shoveling or cleaning off the car in snow and ice.

**Transitioning into driving retirement.** Luckily, Pat’s transition to driving retirement was relatively smooth and she has not found it difficult to continue the community activities she engaged in before giving up her car. She continues to volunteer her time at the Brookline Senior Center, visit family and friends both nearby and farther away and is able to complete all her errands easily and efficiently.

Even though she has not needed too much help in this transition, she believes that the services are there to help other seniors during this change. The Brookline Council on Aging has “exceptional concierge services for the older residents” in order to help seniors setup rides and even learn to use the app themselves. Pat found herself to be “very independent during this process, but if [she] needed help from the Senior Center, family, or friends, it would have been there” for her.

**Case #3: Sheila and James Flint**

When James had a stroke in 2000 that impacted his eyes and cognitive abilities, he gave up driving without much of a fuss, despite being an avid driver for many years. Sheila ended up taking over the driving duties and frequently drove from their home in New Hampshire to Montreal, Boston, New York, Toronto, and all around New Hampshire. They moved from New Hampshire to Brookline in 2005, and Sheila continued to drive until 2008.

**The impact of traffic and costs on drivers in urban areas.** In 2008, Sheila decided that it was time to give up driving. The insurance and maintenance for the vehicle was more expensive than it had been in New Hampshire, and she determined that due to the amount of traffic in the Boston area, it wasn’t worth continuing to own a car.

**Accessible public transit makes transitioning from driving easier.** Sheila and James lived directly across from a T-stop in Brookline, which made the prospect of giving up their personal vehicle less daunting. They both grew up in areas where they used public transportation frequently, and the amount of options in Brookline allowed them to continue to do activities they love to do. “We never had a problem using the T to go to a variety of places. We used the T to go to Harvard Square, Boston, the airport, up to visit friends in Lawrence, and even took the blue line to the beach.” To visit family who lived far away, Sheila and James used the bus.

**Using modern technology to meet your needs.** Although Sheila and James don’t use ridesharing services like some of our other case study participants, they have taken advantage of the service, Peapod, in order to have their groceries delivered to them. They have “been using Peapod since moving to Brookline in 2005, and have found it to be very convenient.” This has allowed them to avoid having to take trips to the store.

**Knowing what services are available to you.** After Sheila gave up driving, James still needed a way to get to doctor’s appointments. The Flint’s were eligible to use The RIDE, which is an ADA-compliant paratransit service. Although they experienced issues with long-wait times with the RIDE a handful of times, they found the service useful most of the time. The Flint’s also have utilized the Brookline Elder
Taxi System (BETS) to get to where they need to go, as well as the van service in the assisted living residence they are currently living in. In addition they use the Elder Bus and Senior Center Van to stay connected to all parts of Brookline.

The Flint’s have found that the transportation services at the Brookline Senior Center “get [them] over the hump at the times they need them,” stating that “the volunteers and staff at the senior center are there for you whenever there is some kind of problem.”

Case #4: Lorraine

Lorraine still has her driver’s license and even has a car that she could dust off and use currently sitting in her garage. However, three years ago when the car was up for a new registration and inspection, she decided to give up driving and only use public transportation to get around. This may be a surprise to some given that she lives in South Brookline where there is only limited bus service. According to Lorraine, she was “using my car two or three times per week” and it did not seem worth it to keep using it when she had access to public transportation close to where she lives.

Calculating costs and benefits. When Lorraine gave up driving and decided to use public transportation, she “calculated the costs of how many trips I take using public transportation and whether it would be worth it for me to get the senior monthly pass.” She found that she used the T so frequently it made sense for her to get a monthly senior CharlieCard. Lorraine also found not driving to be much less stressful because of the current state of traffic and parking in the Brookline/Boston area.

Using all the resources available in your transportation toolbox. In addition to her Senior Charlie Card and the MBTA system, Lorraine takes advantage of the Senior Center Van and the Brookline Elder Bus. She also has BETS coupons but rarely uses them, finding it easier and more interesting to get around on public transportation. She will also ask her children and grandchildren for rides when she needs it. She stated she is “always willing to learn” as evidenced by purchasing and IPad and downloading the Transit app to help with navigation.

Asking for help navigating when you need it. Lorraine is an expert T rider and travels all over Boston and beyond volunteering for various festivals and events. She also travels outside Boston to shopping centers in Dedham, Watertown, and Cambridge on the MBTA. When she is traveling to a new location or somewhere she goes infrequently, she will write down the directions before leaving the house and bring them with her. She also does not hesitate to ask an available MBTA staff person for directions while riding the system. “Everyone I’ve asked for help with navigation has been kind!”

Challenges to geography. Although Lorraine lives in a transportation rich town, her home, in an area of South Brookline, only has one bus line that connects her to transportation hubs like Reservoir station on the MBTA C Line and Forest Hills on the Orange Line. This can be challenging if the bus is running early or late and the line does not run at all on Sundays. In addition, the transportation app Lorraine uses to check the GPS location of the bus is often not functioning well.
Despite these challenges, Lorraine continues to stay extremely active volunteering at the Brookline Senior Center (including supporting the Senior CharlieCard events that occur twice yearly). She also gives her time to other local events like the Wine Expo, Boston Marathon, and local arts festivals. Her transition from driving to non-driving has been smooth and she is even interested in getting her bike out again!

Conclusions/Implications

- The TRIPPS emphasis on a gradual process of reduced driving that leads eventually to termination of driving is useful. This reinforces the work the project has conducted thus far – working with older adults at all stages and causes of driving retirement from those forced to relinquish their keys to those who are making the choice willingly and over time.
- Survey respondents make use of multiple modes of transportation to complement driving or as a substitute for driving. Respondents are generally satisfied with the modes of transportation that they use. However, for those who have stopped driving, the alternate transportation options available are not sufficient to sustain the patterns of movement and satisfaction with participation that prevail among those who drive. Therefore, the goal for TRIPPS is to help older adults expand, strengthen, and utilize all the options available to them.
- Because transportation is ever changing and with a primary source of senior transportation (the taxi industry) in decline, older adults need professionals, peer volunteers and advocates to assist with the transition to new modes and new technologies.
- Survey respondents tend to underestimate the cost of owning and operating an automobile.
- Survey respondents who have stopped driving either understate their spending for alternate modes of transportation or underspend on transportation; underscoring the need for education to reframe how older adults think about their transportation budget.
- As the transportation landscape changes, the value and need for subsidized transportation remains a goal. Brookline currently has a number of subsidized transportation options as mentioned above. But, the possibility of using rideshare revenue to expand subsidized transportation to respond to the decline in the taxi industry is of particular importance.
- The Senior Center currently, through private funding, has developed two pilot programs to begin to address the transition of the transportation industry from taxis to TNCs. However, additional information needs to be gathered from those populations without access to credit cards and smartphones. Specifically, we are concerned about the low to moderate income residents who rely on BETS coupons to get around.
- The use of subsidized services that have a high satisfaction rate but low ridership should be further explored. (i.e. ridership satisfaction on the elder bus is high but ridership tends to be lower).

Given that access to transportation resources is so vital to older adults’ community participation and satisfaction, TRIPPS, BrooklineCAN, Brookline Senior Center, and the Council on Aging will continue to create innovative solutions on these issues in collaboration with public and private stakeholders in the transportation and aging network.
References


Cvitkovich, Yuri, and Andrew Wister. The Importance of Transportation and Prioritization of Environmental Needs to Sustain Well-Being Among Older Adults. Environment and Behavior 33(6): 809-829.


Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative Massachusetts Healthy Aging Data Report https://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/.

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N = 110

*Either “satisfied” or “very satisfied”