

Building a Toolkit: Mitigating Transportation Barriers for New Americans in Chittenden County, Vermont



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Introduction

Burlington, VT is a refugee resettlement community, serving thousands refugees, also known as “New Americans”. For the purposes of this program, we will use the term “New Americans”, rather than refugees, to match the community’s common language. These New Americans have been moving to the greater Burlington area for several decades, and have contributed to the generally homogeneous population of US citizens living in the region. Since the late 1980’s, over 5,000 of these refugees have arrived in Vermont, mostly settling in the Burlington/Winooski area¹. Despite the region’s positive relationship with New Americans, there are still several barriers to meeting basic needs, such as transportation to work, bringing significant economic hardship to this vulnerable population. It has been observed that bus routes are inadequate to serve the transportation needs of New Americans, who often work in areas that are not located on traditional bus routes created by Chittenden Area Transportation Association (CCTA). One of the most significant problems with these urban areas is that Vermont is a rural state, making transportation far more challenging than in larger cities in more populated states. In addition, due to cultural practice, many New Americans are unaccustomed to engaging in the formal economy, and are better suited to less formal practices. Food production for home consumption is not generally considered an acceptable economic activity, however, given the budgetary cost savings, it should be seen as an acceptable economic activity. Finally, given the agricultural skills possessed by New Americans, organizations in the area offer programming that fosters market production opportunities. In many cases, New Americans are producing food for sale, alongside those who are engaged in subsistence farming. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, transportation to these agricultural spaces is inadequate.

As a result of these observations, we have compiled a toolkit to be used by service providers, to assist New Americans in navigating the regional transportation system. The goal of this toolkit is to mitigate barriers to transportation, which ultimately, creates an economic hardship for New Americans in the greater Burlington area. For the purpose of this paper, we will cover three areas: CCTA route selection and how it affects New Americans, case studies of organizations that work with New American farmers, and a, finally, two toolkits- one for service providing agencies, and one for New Americans. The toolkits will comprise of a comprehensive list with detailed instructions of transportation options for those in need of special transportation

in the greater Burlington area, which includes New Americans. We hope that this information will guide the next steps in mitigating transportation barriers for New Americans, by providing valuable information about current practices, peer experiences, and alternative transportation availability in the greater Burlington area.

CCTA ROUTES SELECTION

Background

CCTA sets route selection and planning off of several different factors, including but not limited to: Economic Demographics, Community Need, Neighborhood Accessibility, Distance to bus stop etc. We will first detail the scope covered by existing CCTA Routes, limited to Chittenden County, in order to highlight the extent to which Chittenden County is already covered. We will then discuss how future routes may be explored and implemented. Along the way, preferred routes on the part of CCTA, New Americans, utilizing CCTA's Transportation Development Plan², and first hand interviews with New Americans will be explored. Common ground, and discrepancies will be covered and discussed, in order to find room for accommodation on the part of CCTA for the benefit of New Americans. All of this is done with the goal, and hope, that a formulated plan can lead to a community discussion, between CCTA and New Americans, about ways in which the service can more effectively serve the community.

Scope of access to local commuter busses in Chittenden County:

The towns and cities of Burlington, South Burlington, Colchester, Essex (including Essex Junction), Shelburne, Williston, and Winooski, are served by CCTA Local Commuter Routes. These municipalities, when taken together, had an estimated population of approx. 124,000 residents, or 81% of the county's total population³. According to CCTA, which utilized the year 2000's census data:

“At the block level was used to determine the approximate number of persons within easy walking distance of CCTA fixed route service (not including the LINK Express or Milton commuter routes). Assuming an even population distribution within individual Census blocks, nearly 65,000 persons, or 44% of the county population, live within a ¼ mile radius of CCTA's fixed-route services (equivalent to a 5-minute walk). Another 21,000 people (15% of the total) live within ¾ of mile from a CCTA local bus route (equivalent to a 15-minute walk). By town, 88% of Burlington residents, 93% of Winooski residents, and 58% of South Burlington residents are within ¼ mile of a bus route. For the ¾ mile buffer, the figures are 97%, 99% and 86%, respectively. Though only one route travels into Shelburne, about 35% of the town's population is within ¼ mile of that route and 73% is within ¾ of a mile. The percentage for Essex, including

Essex Junction, is 47% within ¼ mile (85% within ¾ mile) and for Williston, it is 22% within ¼ mile and 38% within ¾ mile.”³

The schedule, and frequency of these routes, which seems to be the center of concern for many New Americans, is formulated based on a variety of differing factors.

CCTA Preferred Routes

CCTA chooses preferred routes off of several factors detailed in their Transit Development Plan, including population density, demand, traffic flow, and other logistics. CCTA recognizes the needs of the community and has identified frequency and wider service coverage as the biggest needs identified for the market⁴. Although CCTA recognizes frequency of routes as the biggest concern of their riders, they also identify the fact that those who they identify as “transit dependent”, meaning those who have no other choices other than to ride the bus, have no choice but to wait for the bus to arrive, especially on routes that already have 15 minute service (Currently the Williston/UMall/Walmart, Pine St, Essex Jct, and City Loop) during peak times, which the organization has identified as the “minimum amount of time acceptable to most riders” based on national surveys.⁴

In 2008, CCTA conducted on-board passenger surveys in order to identify needs and improve service. This was followed up by telephone and internet surveys in 2009. However, the on-bus surveys were determined to better represent frequent, transit dependent riders. The results were as follows:

- 1. More service on Sunday 55%**
- 2. Later hours in PM 44%**
- 3. More frequency 35%**
- 4. More service on Saturday 31%**
- 5. Faster, more direct 19%**
- 6. More shelters 19%**
- 7. Routes to more locations 15%**
- 8. Earlier hours in AM 15%**

After conducting this survey, CCTA determined 15-minute service to be the most cost effective solution when 15-Minute service was implemented in 2010, with the majority of the communities identified (except for Shelburne Rd.) were moved to 15-minute service during peak hours.⁴

Through this assessment, and the needs identified by CCTA, it is evident that CCTA chooses routes based off of the preferences of its passengers, as long as they are economically feasible. This bodes well when considering whether a compromise can be found between the two parties, as many of the needs they have identified are the same and can be seen as important to an effective transportation model.

New Americans Preferred Routes

First hand, primary interviews, were conducted with several New Americans at the VNA Family Room, who rely on CCTA in order to travel to child care and work. Through this, we saw a common thread of issues including, but not limited to:

- Direct Buses not going to certain key areas (Colchester and Tilley Dr. in South Burlington in particular)
- Inconvenient schedules, especially during Non-Peak Hours
- Sporadic service serving all of Winooski (Only certain buses during the day serve the whole City of Winooski)
- Buses in NNE often too full to pick up new passengers, especially in the afternoon
- Difficult to navigate, especially if they speak limited English
- CCTA does not serve areas where New American's participate in farming/gardening including the Ethan Allen Homestead
- Feel like they have no voice in the process

Through these conversations, and the identification of these issues, we were able to come up with some priorities on the part of New Americans, including:

- Expanded service throughout the day in Winooski/Riverside/NNE areas in particular
- Service in Colchester, in order to travel to job resources
- Direct service to Tilley Dr.
- More frequent routes in the areas identified as "High Need" (Winooski, Riverside, NNE)
- Translation services for those with limited English
- Selective service to areas where farming/gardening occurs
- Would like a say in how to better serve the areas identified

As identified above, these are some of the main concerns on the part of New Americans, and some of the priorities they would like to see addressed, identified through our first hand interviews

Common Ground/Accommodations

Both CCTA and New Americans have the shared value of serving at need populations and ensuring that the citizens of Chittenden County have the access to services that they need. Currently, 15-minute service during peak hours is available to areas identified such as the Winooski Roundabout, South Burlington, Essex, and the Old North End of Burlington. This is a place of common ground between the two parties, however the expansion of the 15 minute service to Non-Peak hours is still a need on the part of New Americans.

It would be beneficial for CCTA to implement a survey amongst the New American community, offered through community partners such as the VNA and the O'Brien Community Center, in order to understand the needs of some of their most transit dependent riders, which can in turn lead to a meeting between the two groups.

A meeting between advocates for New Americans and CCTA management would lead to further identification of goals and shared values. As one of the identified priorities on the part of New Americans is the desire to have a say in the process and to be heard, a meeting would accomplish these goals.

CASE STUDIES

Background

Several organizations around the United States work to assist refugees in the transition to their new home, following the short-term assistance they receive from refugee resettlement agencies. In the interest of learning from organizations that work with New American farmers (whether for subsistence or market), we reached out to several national organizations that provide services similar to those offered in the greater Burlington area. During phone interviews with three national organizations, many consistencies were noted, related to the barriers to accessible transportation for this population. Interviews with organizational representatives were conducted in: Portland, ME; Chicago, IL; Sioux Falls, ND; Buffalo, NY. Case studies and findings are outlined below.

Portland, ME

Daniel Ungier, a program specialist working with farming refugees in their community garden system, represented the Maine organization, Cultivating Community. Ungier noted that the organization coordinated two main plots. One plot, less than 1 acre, was within the Portland Metro area transit system, and the other, a 30-acre site outside of a smaller city north of Portland which has no public transportation. Despite the public transit system access for the smaller, city plot, users generally rely on rides from people with cars, in order to avoid a 50-minute increase

in travel time. Ungier explained that the routing system in Portland is less than ideal, creating a hub-and-spoke model, inducing great inefficiencies. On the other hand, the larger plot without public transit is large enough to help produce a profit for the users, and is close enough to town to make ride networks possible. While the organization did pilot a van program, they do not presently provide any formalized transportation. The organization found that the time and resources needed to put into the van program were too intense. Finally, Ungier talked about a program in Kansas City, MO, that has seen great success because of the city's well-developed transit system and larger plots of land available for sale or lease thanks to the city's demand for development. It can be assumed that this kind of cheap and available land/adequate transit system relationship is seen in Detroit, where there is very little economic activity, following years of growth.⁵

Chicago, IL

Linda Seyler, program specialist, working with farming refugees in a community gardening system, represented the Chicago organization, Global Garden Refugee Training Farm. Seyler explained that her organization worked with two main plots. One, at 1.5 acres, is located in a densely populated section of the city within the fabric of the transportation system. The other, a much larger plot, is located in the city suburbs with good public transportation access. Despite the sophisticated public transit system in the large urban area of greater Chicago, she noted that those who use the smaller plot rarely take the bus, mostly due to its high cost and confusing nature. For this population, a 1.5-mile walk to the plot, after a long work day, is an acceptable family activity. For others, bicycling is preferred, though Seyler noted the city's traffic patterns are extremely dangerous for bikers. Regarding the larger, suburban plot, users were very reluctant to use the bus due to the cost, but changed their minds when profits were made and the cost could be offset. There is a resettlement agency that has a van that can be rented for refugees, but it is costly and requires coordination.⁵

Sioux Falls, SD

Abdullahi Sidow, who works with refugee farmers, is the director of the Somali-Bantu Community Development Council of South Dakota, located in Sioux Falls. Sidow, who lived in White River Junction, Vermont for the last three years of high school, is also a Somali-Bantu refugee, with many connections and family members in Burlington and Winooski. Sidow, currently finishing his undergraduate degree in political philosophy and social work, explained that the main problem with the city's transportation system is its lack of service on the weekends, with limited service during the week, running between 5:30 AM to 6:30 PM. Shedding light on

the inadequate transportation system, Sidow led an effort called “Walk-A-Mile” to raise awareness around the issue. The farming program, started last year, has grown significantly and will continue to expand with demand. Due to the lack of transportation, Sidow and staff spend a good deal of time transporting members of the refugee community to and from the farm, and to various appointments and training. This interview displayed the most challenging transportation system for refugees. Sidow says that his organization will buy a vehicle for transporting clients.⁶

Buffalo, NY

Rebecca Severson, Executive Assistant of Journey’s End Refugee Services Inc. in Buffalo, NY responded via email, on information learned from the organization’s match grant specialist, who works in employment services. He indicated that the routes are not a problem, after initial apprehension. The issue for his clients is that entry-level employment is located in the suburbs, where transportation is challenging. He noted that routes are 1-1.5 hours, one-way, making the return on investment for a low-wage job very low.⁷

Common similarities in barriers to successful transportation:

- Lack of understanding of complex transportation systems making navigation difficult
- The increased travel time, when using public transportation
- Lack of fluency in the English language, adding complexity to travel
- High cost of public transportation combined with little income within these communities
- Lack of adequate stops in regard to choice of destination

Next Steps

Through these case studies, along with observations learned at the VNA Family Room, it is clear that farming, whether for profit or subsistence, is a very important activity for New Americans. Therefore, it is imperative that toolkit development include this as a basic economic activity for New Americans, when considering work transportation.

BUILDING A TOOLKIT

In order to effectively address the transportation challenges faced by New Americans during their commute to work, two comprehensive toolkits must be developed. The first toolkit must be specifically designed to assist New Americans in their commute. The other toolkit will assist city officials, transportation industry stakeholders, and members of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission in their efforts to serve the needs of New Americans as mandated in the 2008 Public Participation Plan.

Tooklit for New Americans

While it is easy to identify different means through which the transportation scenario could be improved, these innumerable policy recommendations often lack the feasibility that is necessary to allow for implementation. Recognizing present services in place, and the specific scenarios in which sufficient services are not available will allow for greater improvement of the overall quality of comprehensive transportation options available to New Americans in Chittenden County. Aligning these services in a way that better covers the needs of New Americans, will serve the immediate transportation needs of this demographic and improve the extent of economic opportunity available throughout the greater community.

While the central focus of transportation challenges for New Americans in the Burlington and Winooski areas has historically been on Chittenden County Transit Authority (CCTA), the public bus system is only one of several ways through which New Americans travel, or could travel, to work. Through personal interviews with New Americans at the VNA Family Room, we identified several major gaps in the availability of bus service to areas with high populations of individuals from this demographic. While increasing the presence of CCTA services in these areas would be highly beneficial to New Americans in the Burlington and Winooski areas, we recognize that in a city that is situated in a rural state, expansion of such services is extremely costly, and not always easily feasible. In order to develop a toolkit that addresses similar issues without relying solely upon the public bus system for transportation services, we can better address these challenges by looking to other potential transportation service providers as well.

On an even larger scale than CCTA is the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC). The CCRPC Public Participation Plan (2008) is a federally mandated effort to involve the community in decision making related to the use of federal transit funds. In order to comply with such practices, a committee known as the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Authority (CCMPO) was created in 1983. While the 2008 Public Participation Plan includes a deliberate intent to involve New Americans in the information gathering and planning process⁴ there still seem to be significant gaps in services to such populations based upon our interviews with individuals at the VNA Family Room. It will be extremely important to assure these voices are well-represented, as this population's makes significant use of public transit systems.

Among the major employers of New American families within Chittenden County are Fletcher Allen, UVM (custodial and physical plant), Rhino Foods, Twincraft, Shelburne Farms (seasonally), Vermont Teddy Bear (seasonally), and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. Regarding agricultural production, New Farms for New Americans (NFNA), a program of the

Association of Africans living in Vermont (AALV), plays a major role in the New American workforce in the Burlington and Winooski areas. With a 3.5 acre farm plot in Burlington's Intervale, NFNA provides employment for 50 New American residents of the community⁹. When possible, NFNA provides a shuttle to bring New American farmers to the plot. In addition, AALV and UVM Extension work with New Americans farming in the Winooski Parks district and Ethan Allen Homestead.

One program that could prove beneficial in aiding in the alignment of transportation with employment for New Americans is Go! Vermont's Van Pool program. Go! Chittenden, a local subsidiary of Go! Vermont, is an organization aimed at improving the efficiency and environmental impact of community members commutes. For about one hundred dollars per month, program participants can participate in a van pool to work every day. This equates to approximately five dollars per day for an assumed five day work week¹⁰. Through this program rides are also available to van pool participants who have different commute plans than the rest of their vanpool on a specific day. Go! Vermont will cover commute transportation costs of up to seventy dollars for individuals in this situation⁸. If affordable and convenient, this program could be extremely valuable to New Americans on their way to and from work, especially those working at the NFNA farm.

Collectively, CCTA, the CCMPO, the NFNA shuttle (in conjunction with UVM Extension), and Go! Chittenden van pool can help to provide valuable transportation options, useful for the development of both toolkits. The purpose of the toolkit for New Americans is to provide a comprehensive set of services that can come together to provide transportation services, while also recognizing gaps where transportation services are not available.

Through this framework, CCTA provides a framework for general transportation services via the public bus system. At times when bus service is not available, the NFNA Van Pool and Go! Chittenden can help to provide alternative transportation services. At the point at which these services fall short of fulfilling the transportation needs of New Americans, the CCMPO provides an opportunity for New Americans to engage in self-advocacy and express the issues at hand. In order to educate the New American community on the toolkit, and more specifically, the availability of these opportunities, workshop training sessions may be necessary.

Toolkit for Service Providers and Planners

The second toolkit we propose will be designed to inform regional planning commissions, service providing organizations, and other stakeholders that serve New Americans. As The Chittenden County Municipal Planning Organization and the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission serve the public by organizing services in an effective and efficient way, this toolkit is intended to present services to assist these stakeholders in examining

the overlap and gaps that exist in transportation opportunities to the public. As the 2008 Public Participation Plan requires the perspectives of New Americans to be taken into account, proactively seeking out New Americans to educate them on the availability of these services would only further help the committee to hear the perspectives of well-informed community members as opposed to those that only know of half of the services available to them. Coordinating such previously mentioned training workshops creates a great opportunity for this bilateral education. It allows for listening and sharing on the part of both parties. By working with New Americans, city officials, transportation industry stakeholders, and members of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission to identify and develop a practical system of comprehensive transportation services, we can identify and further address the detailed issues contributing to the challenges New Americans face in their commute to and from work.

Toolkit Design and Implementation

Unfortunately, New Americans are often less involved in or even aware of their opportunity to become involved in such committees and the local democratic process. In working to align transportation with employment for New Americans, it will be especially important to assure that the voice and needs of the New American community are taken into account, both to serve the needs of these individuals and to implement an effective transportation system that benefits the community using its services. It is extremely important that these toolkits be designed with the participation of the New American community. Authentic and robust participation will ensure that these projects are both comprehensive and realistic. Whenever possible, members of the New American community will be involved in developing and implementing these efforts. When New Americans are not involved in this process, experts in communicating with these, specific, refugee communities should be used, instead.

Conclusion

The preceding research should provide adequate background and analysis to develop next steps, in an effort to break the barriers that New Americans face, when accessing economic activity. This report does not provide an exhaustive list of options for either toolkit, but instead, provides a basic overlay of two projects that should be completed, in an effort to make ameliorate transportation for New Americans. Whatever entity ultimately develops the toolkits, they should dig deeper into the barriers to transportation, providing an exhaustive list of all options.

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