



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Buffalo Commons

Centers, Institutes, Programs

---

9-2006

# Left Behind: How Difficulties with Transportation are a Roadblock to Self-Sufficiency

Homeless Alliance of Western New York

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/buffalocommons>

**Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.**

**Support this valuable resource today!**

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centers, Institutes, Programs at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Buffalo Commons by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [hlmdigital@cornell.edu](mailto:hlmdigital@cornell.edu).

---

# Left Behind: How Difficulties with Transportation are a Roadblock to Self-Sufficiency

## **Abstract**

The Transportation Task Force, a project of the Homeless Alliance of Western New York, completed a transportation needs assessment among homeless and very low-income persons at sites around Erie County. The assessment was in survey form and was administered to approximately 800 people over a 5-day period. From earlier focus groups with homeless individuals and the workers who directly serve them, the Task Force found that problems with affording public transportation and with accessing appropriate transit to and from suburban worksites were key issues of concern. Results from the needs assessment indicated that this was a correct conclusion. Homeless and very-low income persons in Buffalo and Erie County are “left behind,” unable to keep personal appointments, search for housing, secure a job, and attain self-sufficiency due to problems with accessing transportation. These difficulties can lead to longer stays in the costly homeless service system; less income for those who need it most in the Buffalo and Erie County community; and trouble for employers looking for entry-level workers, many of whom live in the City.

## **Keywords**

Buffalo, Housing/Neighborhoods, Homelessness, Environment, Transit, Report, Other, PDF



# Left Behind:

*How Difficulties with  
Transportation are a  
Roadblock to  
Self-Sufficiency*

September 2006



Needs Assessment completed by the Transportation Task Force,  
A Project of the Homeless Alliance of Western New York

## **Summary and Key Findings**

The Transportation Task Force, a project of the Homeless Alliance of Western New York, completed a transportation needs assessment among homeless and very low-income persons at sites around Erie County. The assessment was in survey form and was administered to approximately 800 people over a 5-day period.

From earlier focus groups with homeless individuals and the workers who directly serve them, the Task Force found that problems with affording public transportation and with accessing appropriate transit to and from suburban worksites were key issues of concern. Results from the needs assessment indicated that this was a correct conclusion. Homeless and very-low income persons in Buffalo and Erie County are “left behind,” unable to keep personal appointments, search for housing, secure a job, and attain self-sufficiency due to problems with accessing transportation. These difficulties can lead to longer stays in the costly homeless service system; less income for those who need it most in the Buffalo and Erie County community; and trouble for employers looking for entry-level workers, many of whom live in the City.

The median income of those who participated in the study was \$489/month, well below the Federal Poverty Guideline (\$798/month for a single individual). Over half (53%) of respondents reported having difficulty paying for transportation, and a shocking 42% were forced to turn down an employment opportunity in the past year due to a lack of a route to get to a job site. 21% had missed a job interview, citing difficulties with public transportation as the reason.

To remedy these problems, the study suggests looking to best practices from other metropolitan areas around the country and creating low-income subsidized bus passes, modeling innovative transportation solutions, and using federal transportation funding more creatively. In addition, developers and eventual employers building worksites in the suburbs must pay attention to the transportation needs of potential employees and plan accordingly *before* an industrial park or worksite is built.

As cities and counties across the country become regionalized, transportation becomes a basic need in line with food, clothing, and shelter. In Buffalo and Erie County, accessing the services, resources, and jobs available in the community is often contingent upon having transportation to and from those sites.

## **Background**

In 2004, the Homeless Alliance of Western New York began discussing how it would oversee the development of a Ten-Year Plan to End Long-Term Homelessness in Buffalo and Erie County, termed the PRISM Project.<sup>1</sup> Influenced by a national movement toward strategic planning to end

---

<sup>1</sup> View the Ten-Year Plan at <http://wnyhomeless.org/sitepages/publications/prism/Plan.pdf>.

homelessness<sup>2</sup> and under directive from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the group began to plan for a large-scale 24-hour community survey of homeless and low-income persons at high risk of homelessness to collect baseline data on the population.

At the end of the day on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004, one hundred sixty Homeless Alliance members and volunteers had interviewed over one thousand homeless and low-income persons at locations all over Erie County. Of those survey respondents that completed a more detailed long-form version of the PRISM Survey (one hundred twenty-four persons of the total one thousand), a remarkable 68% identified more affordable/easier to use transportation as an unmet need. The frequency of this identified need came second only to the need for affordable housing (74%).<sup>3</sup>

As the PRISM planning process progressed, it was suggested that an action group form around the issue of transportation. The Homeless Alliance developed a group called the Transportation Task Force to discuss the transportation challenges for homeless persons and those at risk of homelessness.

The Task Force began its work by holding focus groups about transportation issues with service providers and homeless persons at various service and housing sites. From this initial research, it became clear that clients were having significant difficulty with the affordability and accessibility of transportation in Erie County.

The following were the most prominent problems with transportation identified in preliminary focus groups:

- *Employment* –  
Actually finding a way to get to a job or job interview. One man revealed that he lost a job because he could not get there. His shelter worker had run out of tokens, so he called in to work and was fired for “not being dependable.”
- *Missing other appointments* –  
Many of the focus group participants mentioned that they had missed doctor’s appointments and mental health and substance abuse treatment appointments, along with work and job interviews.
- *Difficulty with access* –  
*Trouble getting to suburban and rural areas from the city* –

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness, visit the National Alliance to End Homelessness’ website at <http://www.naeh.org>.

<sup>3</sup> More comprehensive results from the PRISM Survey are available at <http://wnyhomeless.org/sitepages/publications/research/PRISMSurveyReport.pdf>.

Job choices and housing options are limited. Many cannot afford to pay for the transfers<sup>4</sup> to reach outside of the city borders where many of the employment opportunities are located. One participant with a disability said that he could not keep a medical appointment with a specialist in the suburbs because he could not get there.

*Problems accessing transportation from suburban and rural areas –*

People in these areas often cannot get to bus stops due to geographical difficulties or inconvenient bus schedules. This affects their ability to receive much-needed services that are located in the city. This is magnified for the elderly or those who are physically handicapped.

- *Bus tokens or passes –*

All participants noted that receiving bus tokens or passes was an extremely complicated process. They are too expensive to purchase and not many organizations will give out tokens or passes for free.

After reviewing the outcomes of the focus groups, the Task Force determined that it would complete a detailed survey-based needs assessment with homeless persons and persons at-risk of homelessness<sup>5</sup>, and pinpoint what types of transportation assistance and services are most needed. The Task Force hoped to discover if the conclusions reached from the focus groups would bear out in a larger sample of the target population.

First the group developed a survey instrument, and then reached out to service and housing providers to inquire whether they would agree to administer the survey on-site. Thirty-four sites in Erie County were selected. Though the majority of the sites were in the City of Buffalo, several sites were selected in various communities outside of the City. Some other sites, though located in the City, attract clientele from the County as a whole. Surveys were administered by program staff or Transportation Task Force volunteers, beginning at 9am on Monday, May 15<sup>th</sup> through 5pm on Friday, May 19<sup>th</sup>.

Thanks to a generous donation from the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA), small thank-you gifts of two bus or rail tokens were given to participants at select survey locations. Over eight hundred surveys were collected, and were then filtered for duplicates.

The following document details the findings of the Transportation Task Force Needs Assessment.

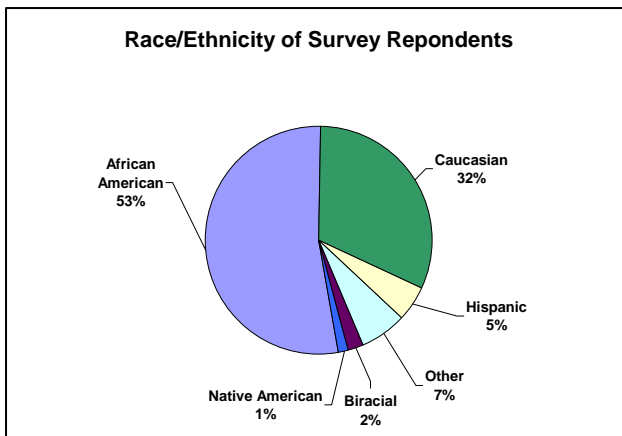
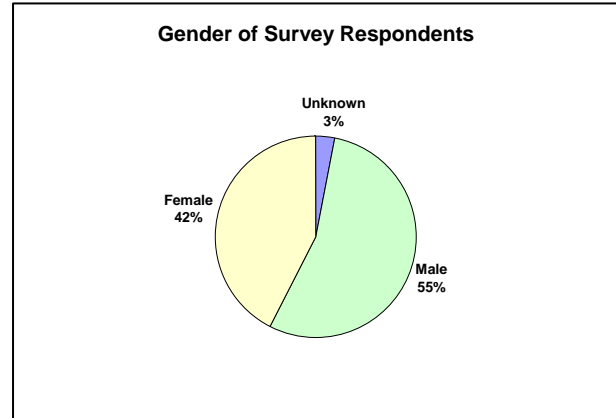
---

<sup>4</sup> Each transfer into another one of the four NFTA “Zones” costs twenty-five cents, with a maximum charge of seventy-five cents.

<sup>5</sup> For Homeless Alliance purposes, a person is considered “at-risk” of homelessness if they are low-income and accessing community supportive services, such as an emergency feeding program. The assumption is that if an individual or family is accessing such a program, they are having difficulties meeting their financial obligations (i.e. choosing between paying a heating bill or buying food).

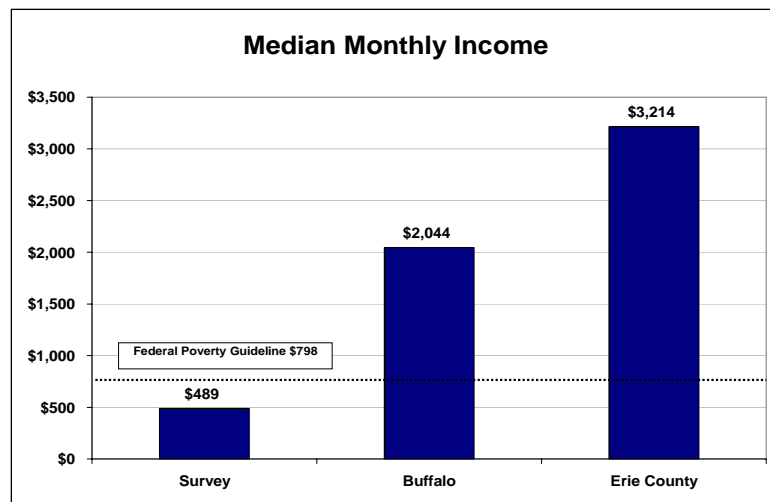
## Participant Demographics

The survey respondents were 42% female and 55% male, while the City of Buffalo's population is 53% female and 43% male (Census 2000). This discrepancy may point to a disproportionate number of men seeking services. Although men may be overrepresented among survey respondents compared to the city's population, this figure mirrors the gender distribution of the local homeless population<sup>6</sup>, which is also 55% male. Similarly, the racial and ethnic makeup of the survey respondents



does not reflect that of the City, but does reflect that of the local homeless population, which is 58% African-American and 34% Caucasian. Just over half of survey respondents identified as African-American (53%) and almost one-third as Caucasian. All other racial/ethnic categories, including Hispanic, Native American and other, represented only 15% of respondents.

19% of respondents reported they had no income at the time they were interviewed. The median monthly household income of respondents was \$489.00, which is 39% lower than the federal poverty guideline of \$798.00. The median monthly incomes in Buffalo and in Erie County are much

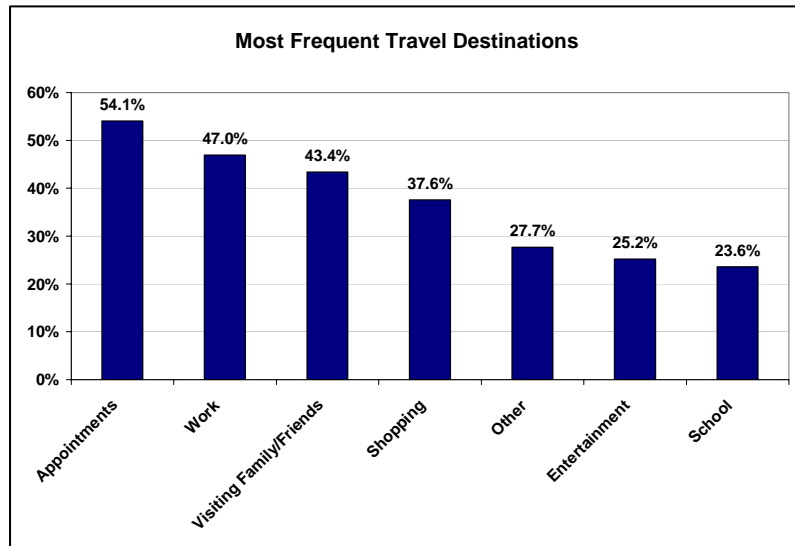


<sup>6</sup> Percentages determined through Buffalo and Erie County's Homeless Management Information System, Buffalo Area Services Network (BAS-Net). For more information on BAS-Net, visit [http://wnyhomeless.org/sitepages/programs\\_BAS-NET.html](http://wnyhomeless.org/sitepages/programs_BAS-NET.html)

higher than the survey's median, at \$2,044 and \$3,214 respectively.<sup>7</sup> 15% of respondents chose not to disclose their monthly income.

### Destinations

Respondents were asked to identify how often they used public transportation for a variety of activities. Among survey participants, public transportation was used most often for travel to and from appointments (e.g. social services, medical), with 54.1% reporting this use on a regular basis.<sup>8</sup> 47% stated frequent use for



work, 43.4% for visiting friends or family, and 37.6% for shopping. 27.7% of respondents identified other destinations, approximately 24% used public transportation to go to school, and another 24% reported using public transit for entertainment purposes as well.

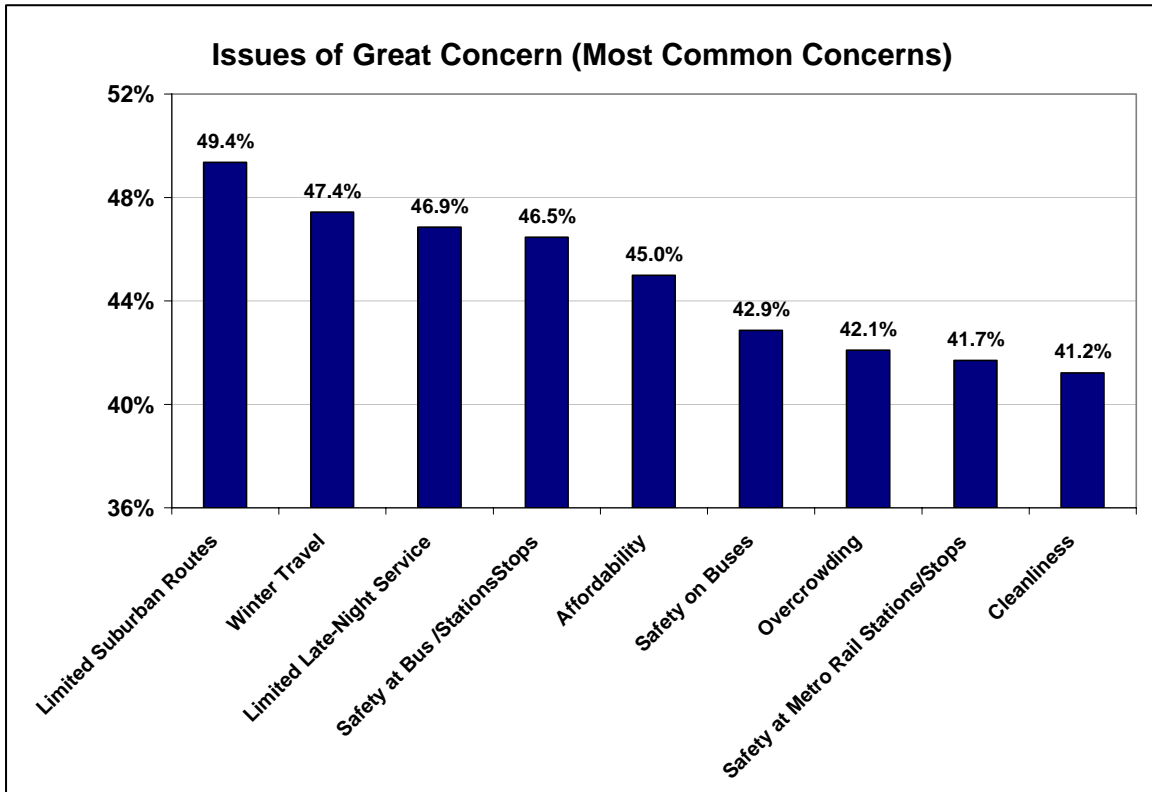
### Concerns

The Needs Assessment Survey asked respondents to rate their level of concern about a list of common transportation issues identified in focus groups held prior to the needs assessment. Participants were given the option of answering that they had “Great Concern,” “Some Concern,” or “No Concern” regarding these issues. Respondents overwhelmingly identified limited suburban routes as a great concern, with 49.4% identifying this as an issue. Other topics with high levels of “great concern” reported include winter travel (47.4%), limited late-night service (46.9%), safety at bus stations/stops (46.5%) and affordability (45%). It is worth noting that, while not in the top five reasons, safety on buses, overcrowding, safety at Metro Rail stations/stops and cleanliness also ranked high on the list of concerns.

<sup>7</sup> Median monthly income for Buffalo and Erie County was calculated using Census 2000 data. Median household income was divided by twelve for the monthly figure.

<sup>8</sup> Regular basis is defined as answering often (3-4 times/week), very often (5-6 times/week), and daily.





Four different safety concerns were identified in the survey; safety on buses, safety on the Metro Rail, safety at bus stops/stations, and safety at Metro Rail stops/stations. Safety at bus stops/stations ranked as the highest concern of the four with almost half of respondents stating that as an issue of great concern. 75.9% of respondents felt it was of “some” or “great” concern. 42.9% of respondents were also greatly concerned with safety on buses and 71% rated it as warranting some or great concern. Although safety on Metro Rail and at Metro Rail stops/stations did not rank as highly, just over 70% responded that this was of some or great concern and over 40% felt it was a great concern.

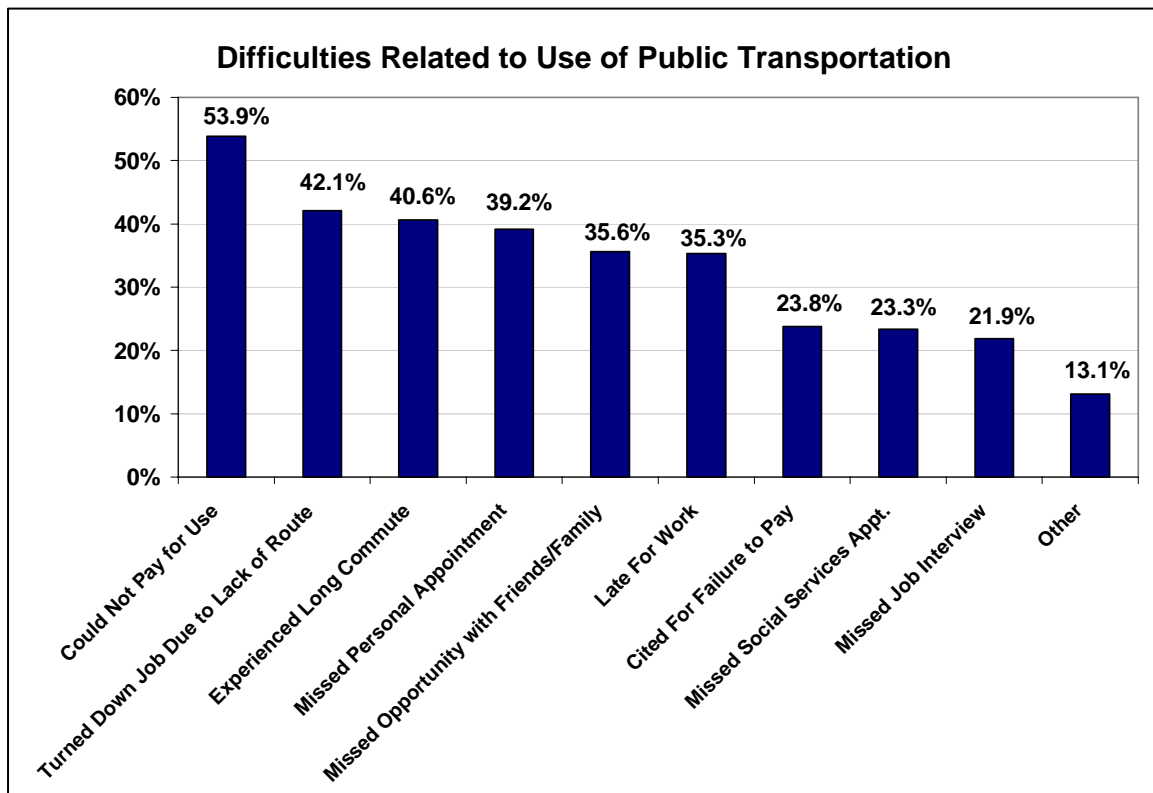
Late arrival of Metro buses (39%), limited rural routes (36.3%), paying for transfers (35.3%), and accessibility for persons with disabilities (31.5%) were all issues of great concern to survey participants.

### **Difficulties Related to Use of Public Transportation**

Respondents were asked if they experienced any of a list of difficulties related to their use of public transportation at least once in the past year. The most common problem—identified by over half of the respondents (53.9%)—was the inability to pay for the use of public transportation. The second most frequently identified response was that the respondent had turned down a job due to a lack of a public transit route to get there (42.1%), followed closely by the experience of a long commute of over an hour (40.6%). Thirty-nine percent reported that they had missed a personal appointment (e.g. medical, addiction or mental

health treatment, legal, etc.), thirty-five percent noted that due to difficulties with public transportation they had missed opportunities to spend time with their friends or family, and thirty-five percent reported that they had been late for work.

Ranking somewhat lower than the aforementioned responses, but still striking in frequency, were that respondents had missed an appointment at the Department of Social Services (23.3%) and had missed a job interview (21.9%). It is important to note that missing an appointment at the Department of Social Services can cause a person to be sanctioned from public assistance, and could potentially result in a loss of stable housing. Persons receiving mainstream resources such as food stamps, public assistance, and Medicaid are less likely to be homeless than those who do not receive these benefits<sup>9</sup>.



Almost a quarter of respondents (23.8%) reported having been cited for failure to pay for public transportation in the past year. This high number, when noted together with the 53.9% of respondents who admitted having trouble paying for transportation, may reveal that some very low-income persons, having no other transportation options, ride the Metro Rail even if they do not have money to pay for the trip. If this population has no money to pay for transportation in the first place, there is little chance of them having the resources to pay a fine of \$20 or more. For example, a person may risk a citation in order to keep a medical or personal appointment, job interview, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Homeless Alliance of Western New York. 15 Aug. 2006.  
<http://wnyhomeless.org/sitepages/publications/research/MainstreamResourcesBrief.pdf>

## **Conclusions**

The Transportation Task Force assessment suggests that homeless and very low-income persons are missing personal appointments, turning down jobs, missing job interviews, losing out on opportunities for support from friends and family, and facing possible sanction from the Department of Social Services due to trouble with paying for and accessing adequate public transportation. It follows then, that the lack of appropriate transportation may be contributing to increased numbers and longer stays in the homeless system. Income from employment could lift a family from a homeless situation into their own home, and the ability to get from place to place for a housing search could speed placement into permanent housing.

Emergency housing is not without great cost to the community. A placement by the Erie County Department of Social Services into an emergency shelter or hotel can cost anywhere from \$30-\$70 a night. An NFTA Metro Pass, which is good for one month, costs \$55 (\$66 for an all-zone pass) or \$27.50 for seniors or persons with disabilities (\$33 for all-zone). For some survey respondents, a simple Metro Pass could mean the difference between homelessness and housing.

From the needs assessment survey data, two clear needs emerge:

- 1. The need for transportation that is affordable to those who are most economically disadvantaged**
- 2. The need for public transit routes from urban areas to suburban (and to a slightly lesser degree) rural worksites**

In addition, concerns regarding limited nighttime routes, safety while accessing public transit, difficulties associated with winter travel, overcrowding, and accessibility issues for persons with disabilities should also be addressed.

## **Recommendations**

As cities continue to spread out and become regionalized with their suburban neighbors, jobs and affordable housing move increasingly further away from each other, and access to transportation becomes a basic need in line with food, clothing, and shelter.

Regions around the country including Lincoln, Nebraska; Kitsap County, Washington; Honolulu, Hawaii; Tucson, Arizona; and Iowa City, Iowa have instituted reduced-fare or sliding-scale bus passes for persons who qualify as low-income. A similar program, funded through federal or private grant dollars would provide much-needed relief to Buffalo and Erie County's neediest neighbors.

The Federal Interagency Council on Access and Mobility has highlighted a Toledo, Ohio project as a best practice in the area of transporting urban workers to suburban worksites:

**The Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments: Coordination at Work**

In the late 1990s over 20,000 people in the Toledo, Ohio area were moving from welfare to work, and suburban sprawl was creating new job locations far from the urban areas where entry-level workers lived. Toledo had the need for more human service transportation, but not the means to achieve it. In March of 1999 the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments (TMACOG) created Northwest Ohio CommuterLINK with different funding resources. The Toledo regional council developed an ambitious plan that included demand-response, door-to-door service (including day care stops). The Council set up transportation services with local taxi and van companies, and grouped customers with common destinations. To encourage true independence and opportunity for individuals with lower incomes, TMACOG also initiated a Car-Buy program that would provide vehicles for individuals with lower incomes at reasonable rates.<sup>10</sup> Today, CommuterLINK has almost 3,300 riders and has delivered 266 cars, 169 that have been paid off. Not only has the TMACOG delivered better transportation options and services, their efforts have also benefited the community as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Virtually the only federal funds available to subsidize these types of initiatives are Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) grants, administered by the Federal Transit Authority (FTA). Job Access funds are to “transport welfare recipients and low-income individuals in urban, suburban, or rural areas to and from jobs and activities related to their employment,” while Reverse Commute dollars “transport the general public from urban, suburban, or rural areas to suburban employment opportunities.”<sup>12</sup>

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) administers rural JARC funds for the state, and works with Metropolitan Planning Organizations, such as the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council (GBNRTC), and transportation authorities in urban areas to assist in their JARC programs.

Historically, local JARC dollars have gone directly to the NFTA, and have been used to extend existing Metro line routes and add additional capacity to busy rush-hour lines. While acknowledging the importance of these services, it must be noted that municipalities across the state are utilizing JARC funds more creatively and diversely. Examples include helping nonprofits that assist with job training and placement transport clients to and from work, assisting low-income riders to high-volume work sites, and transporting rural clients to existing bus lines. In 2005, New York City’s Project Renewal received a substantial grant to

---

<sup>10</sup> Much like Erie County’s Child and Family Services’ Ways to Work Loan Program.

<sup>11</sup> *Federal Interagency Council on Access and Mobility*. 28 Aug. 2006.

[http://www.unitedweride.gov/1\\_866\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.unitedweride.gov/1_866_ENG_HTML.htm)

<sup>12</sup> *Federal Transit Authority*. 28 Aug. 2006.

[http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants\\_financing\\_3629.html](http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_3629.html)

help homeless persons with job transportation and placement. Innovative solutions to transportation problems attract foundation support and private investment sorely needed to improve Buffalo and Erie County's infrastructure.

Private-sector involvement is vital to secure the economic future of the community, and as the trend of suburban sprawl continues and industry moves farther away from the city center, developers and employers must address the issue of transporting their workforce as a top priority, not as an afterthought. In some cases, businesses, factories, and care facilities are built so far off Metro routes that it is impossible to reach them. Other times, driveways and parking lots are not built to accommodate NFTA vehicles. These concerns must be addressed as projects are being developed, not as they are being staffed.

### **Transportation Task Force**

Megan Connelly, Neighborhood Legal Services	Jo-Ann Pressberg, VA Homeless Program
Doris Corley, Catholic Charities	Donna Propis, Veterans LifeOps
Jerry Evans, VA Homeless Program	Rebecca Rybak, Cazenovia Recovery Systems
Joan Dutchess Freidson, Compass House	Lisa Jo Schaeffer, Gerard Place
Carolyn Hillman, Salvation Army Family Shelter	Penny Selmonsky, Neighborhood Legal Services
Jean Jones, BFNC	Sarah Smith, Neighborhood Legal Services
Heather Laney, Mental Health Peer Connection	Rick Wright, Veterans LifeOps
Elizabeth McClam, Lake Shore Behavioral Health	Audrey Wysocki, Catholic Charities
Katie McHugh Connolly, Homeless Alliance	Candace Young, Homespace

### **Transportation Task Force Needs Assessment Volunteers**

Jeff Albert	Katie McHugh Connolly
Laila Bondi-Marschener	Bill O'Connell
Cathy Braniecki	Dennis Pelc
Gail Calista	Rebecca Rybak
Megan Connelly	Charlie Scarpine
Tim Connolly	Lisa Jo Schaeffer
Doris Corley	Penny Selmonsky
Nancy Dux	Christine Souter
Joan Dutchess Freidson	Veterans LifeOps Staff
Bonnie Lockwood	Pam Ybanez
Frances May	Candace Young
Elizabeth McClam	

### **Transportation Task Force Needs Assessment Survey Sites**

Alcohol and Drug Dependency Services	Gerard Place
American Red Cross	Goodwill Industries
Belmont Shelter Corp.	Harbor House
Benedict House	Homespace
Buffalo City Mission	Housing Options Made Easy
Buffalo Urban League	Living Opportunities of DePaul
Cazenovia Recovery Systems	Loaves and Fishes
Child and Family Services	Mental Health Peer Connection
Community Services for the Developmentally Disabled	Paradise Opportunities
Compass House	Planned Parenthood
Consumer Credit Counseling	Salvation Army Family Shelter
Cornerstone Manor	South Buffalo Community Table
Crisis Services Homeless Outreach Program	St. Luke's Mission of Mercy
Food for All	Transitional Services, Inc.
Franciscan Center	Veterans LifeOps
Friends of the Night People	YWCA

*Special thanks to Diane Bessel, who assisted with the development of the Needs Assessment survey instrument; to Tara Chen, who assisted in planning the focus groups and Needs Assessment; and to Kelly Dixon of the Center for Transportation Excellence for her invaluable input.*