ExploreVR
INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY INCLUSION, UMASS BOSTON

RURAL YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP
QUICK GUIDE

MOBILITY ON DEMAND TIPS FROM FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH

This **Rural Youth Apprenticeship Quick Guide** is a product of the Rural Youth Apprenticeship Toolkit, an online collection on tools and resources developed for vocational rehabilitation staff interested in creating new or adapting existing apprenticeship programs for youth with disabilities in the rural communities they serve. The quick guides present strategies to address apprenticeship program development challenges and enhance inclusion and accessibility for youth with disabilities in rural areas.

Background

What is Mobility on Demand (MOD)? MOD is a way of looking at the different options for getting where you need to go. It is kind of like ordering a ride from a car service, but with even more options. Imagine you have a special app on your phone that you can tell where you want to go and when you want to get there. The app figures out the best way for you to get there, and how.

Sometimes, it might suggest a bus or a train. Other times, it might suggest sharing a car with other people who are going in the same direction as you. If you are in a hurry and in a city, it might even suggest a taxi or a ride-sharing service. Mobility on Demand can help people save money, share rides, and use transportation more efficiently. It makes transportation easier and more convenient!

MOD can be a promising idea for youth with disabilities served by vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs. Learning how to get to work is a job skill, and reliable transportation is important to finding work. How can MOD help support youth with disabilities in VR?

- MOD can help improve the independence of young people with disabilities. They have more control and don't have to depend on others for rides.
- MOD is flexible. The youth can request a ride or plan their transportation around their work and training schedules. This builds good work habits and removes stress.
- MOD can improve accessibility. Many MOD services offer accessible vehicles for people with disabilities. This means being able to easily find a ride that suits their needs.

Mobility on Demand is a helpful tool that can help youth with disabilities and their VR providers. It can help youth with disabilities learn new job skills and be dependable workers. It can help youth with disabilities expand their independent living skills and increase participation in community life. It can also help employers hire more people with disabilities, which is good business and good for the community.

In 2022–2023, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) explored *mobility innovation* through the Mobility on Demand (MOD) Sandbox Demonstration. Mobility innovation is about making transportation more accessible and better for everyone. The FTA's strategic research "*allows communities to creatively leverage a range of mobility options from bike- and car-sharing systems to demands-responsive bus services.*" The goals of FTA's MOD Sandbox Program are to:

- Make transportation more responsive, easier to use, and more accessible to people with disabilities in rural areas by working with creative technology and partners
- Help cities and towns provide consistent and reliable transportation to everyone, making it easier to travel within and between cities and towns
  - Provide person-centered transportation services that help each individual get where they need to go

The MOD Sandbox Program aims to prepare the transit industry for MOD by sharing these practices with others and helping transportation systems include these best practices into existing transit services.

The Sandbox Program is trying out different ideas to see what works. An outside evaluator interviewed people who work in transportation at different sites. The evaluator tested and evaluated the ideas they shared. Then, the evaluator shared some lessons and ideas for future MOD programs. These lessons and ideas can be a helpful resource for you!



Considerations for Similar Future MOD Programs

- Make flexible contracts
  - » With flexible contract agreements, projects can be more responsive to the needs and goals of people who use transportation. Projects can also be more responsive to vendors and partners.
- Take time to talk to the public and get their feedback
  - » It is important to ask for feedback at the right times in the planning process. Meet with the public and with people that work in transportation one-on-one or in small groups to listen to their specific needs.
- Be clear about your agency's goals and needs before you get started
  - » Some interviewees recommended that agencies figure out their ability to work in partnership with technology providers first. This way, the agency can be clear about their needs and the needs they are trying to address with the project.
- We still need more research and guidance to better understand the following:
  - » Policies and practices to prepare for MOD automated vehicle deployments and their impacts on public transportation. MOD automated vehicle deployments allow autonomous vehicles to be routed to specific areas.
  - » Potential impacts, opportunities, and challenges of artificial intelligence and machine learning (in other words, computers learning how to do tasks without being told exactly how to do them).
  - » How much MOD costs over in the long term.
  - » Impacts of MOD on communities (for example, on land use and travel behavior).
  - » Physical and digital support structures for MOD.
  - » Guidance for how to use MOD in planning scenarios, for example, how can a transportation company think about MOD when they are mapping a new route?
  - » Best practices for making sure MOD meets the needs of all users, including people who are just beginning to learn technology, for example.

Lessons Learned Across Sites

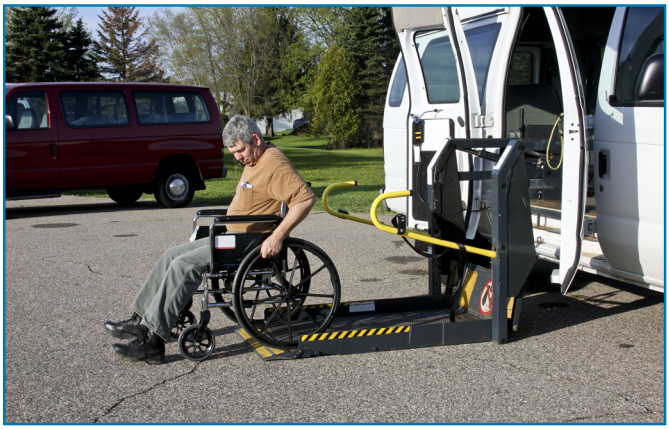
Partnerships between Public & Private Agencies

- Working with technology providers can be risky
  - » There may be risks that are not obvious when working with a technology provider. For example, if the technology company merges with another company, acquires (buys) another company, or gets acquired (gets bought) by another company, it might change the contracts with your agency:

        - Make sure you and the technology provider have shared continuous, consistent, and personal communication and commitment to the project's goals.
- Bringing in new technology requires patience:
    - » Complex technology for things like payment and trip planning can be challenging. People who take transportation have different needs from each other. It can be complicated and take time to work out these details that allow the technology to address these individual needs.
    - » Branding and marketing can pose issues. Be patient with partners.
- Working with Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) can pose contracting difficulties
    - » Several MOD Sandbox sites had challenges working with the private sector, including contracting with TNCs:
        - › You may need to change the contracting terms your agency normally uses with vendors. You may have different types of relationships with TNC vendors than your agency is used to.
        - › Consider forming a relationship directly with the TNC partner.
- Other risks include project possibilities and data-sharing
    - » Make sure your project goals are realistic from the start:
        - › You may have to re-work plans, which can take extra time and cause delays.
            - This is another reason why it is important for your agency to have good relationships with technology providers. You can stay on task and be more realistic together.
            - Along with good relationships comes a clear and defined vision. This can help guide the project goals from the start.
    - » Data sharing can also be risky:
        - › Partnerships with TNCs can also pose issues with data agreements
            - Be very specific with your data-sharing requests to protect consumer information and vendor information.

Choosing a Service Area for Demand-Responsive Service

- A *Demand-Responsive Service* is a transportation option people can call or request in an app when they want to go somewhere. Unlike a typical city bus that follows a route on a schedule, a demand-responsive service comes only when you ask it to.
- *Who* uses transportation depends on how the transportation service area is laid out. This is referred to as *land use*.
    - » One challenge is the combination of a lot of people in an area owning cars, and a rural environment with fewer people living there, for example.
    - » Another challenge is an environment with little to no mixed-use development. This means the area is mostly housing, for example, with fewer businesses or other types of services. In this area, people might need to travel farther to access to what they need. You will need to think about how this affects the types of transportation services people need and how often they need them.
- Do not assume there is a hidden need for transportation in areas with fewer people or fewer places to go.
    - » Each area has specific needs. When you are defining a service area, It can be hard to come up with an "ideal":
        - › Create a service area that includes fixed-route service that can help get a lot of people where they need to go and that can connect travelers to areas outside of the demand-responsive service area.



Accessibility

- Consider having people test the accessibility of a technology. The testers should not be the same people who work on the project.
  - » Make sure the technology is accessible digitally as well as physically
- One goal of the private technology company will be to improve their business. Your agency's goals are to help people access services. Sometimes these goals conflict with each other.
  - » It is helpful for VR and other public agencies to partner with private transportation companies. Agencies like yours can help connect people to services like job training and placement, economic development, affordable housing, and transportation:
    - › VR and public agencies play an important role in making sure MOD programs serve people who need transportation most.
- Help to balance program goals.
  - » Programs might favor some geographic areas over others:
    - › Try to make routes based on need and other factors, like where people live and where people travel. Avoid creating the same kinds of routes over and over.

Customer Awareness of Services

- Trip planners are especially helpful for people who don't typically take transportation.
  - » There are more mobility challenges in rural areas, especially in households without cars or among people who share cars in the same household:
    - › *VTrans*, the Vermont Agency of Transportation, trained dispatchers and case workers on how to use the trip planner to provide mobility information over the phone so households can access jobs, training, and healthcare.
    - › In Vermont, trip planning platforms were helpful to travelers who access their trip information over the phone in rural communities.
- It is important for your agency and the transportation companies to help educate and talk to customers. It is also important to understand customer interactions to help with marketing the MOD services.
  - » New app-based and demand response services may require new ways of marketing:
    - › Consider whether current marketing is tailored to the people you are trying to reach.
    - › Figure out how to market new app-based and demand responsive services.
    - › Often, you are measuring individual trips, but you will want to move to measuring the "mobility relationship" with customers. This means measuring how the customer interacts with the mobility technology services. This includes services from partners.
    - › Reach out to community members and have them test the MOD strategies to see what works. This can help you learn how to improve the services or encourage its use.

Mobility on Demand (MOD) and VR are a great match. Creating an MOD program is like building a road to work for rural youth with disabilities. There are a lot of options for MOD, and a lot to think about. Each rural area is different, so all those options mean that you can find the right one for each community. Rural businesses need employees, and many rural youths with disabilities want jobs. MOD can help overcome the transportation challenges in rural areas. That removes one of the biggest obstacles to connecting rural youth with disabilities with jobs and job training. With local planning and partnerships, MOD and VR can complement each other for long-term rural employment.

Project Partners

The RYAD Project is a project of ExploreVR at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, in partnership with:

- Mathematica Policy Research
- Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities
- Arkansas Rehabilitation Services
- Arkansas Career Development Center

ExploreVR offers VR agencies easy and convenient access to a range of VR research, related data, training and tools for planning, evaluation, and decision-making.

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