

Program Data

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OVERVIEW

Program data are essential to assess the performance of federal programs and communicate the success to members of Congress and other interested parties. The lack of comprehensive and consistent data on the services funded by FTA's three specialized transportation grant programs makes it difficult to quantify program success and identify areas of improvement. These data issues stem from several reasons:

- The federal programs are state-administered, with each state taking its own approach to the data function within broad parameters;
- Data elements are not always clearly defined; and
- Certain program data are difficult to collect, for example, the number of jobs accessed by JARC services.

The FTA has recently (July 2009) implemented new, extensive data reporting procedures for the JARC and New Freedom programs, which should facilitate more comprehensive assessments of these two programs. Section 5310's program guidance refers to FTA plans to capture data to measure the program, but currently such data appear to be a state responsibility.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS

The Government Performance Results Act of 1993 requires that the FTA establish performance goals and performance indicators to measure "outputs, service levels, and outcomes" for its programs.ⁱ To meet this requirement, the FTA has defined specific measures for its three specialized transportation grant programs, which in turn determine the data needed from recipients and subrecipients of grant funds. FTA guidance for the programs notes that the performance data will be used at a program level and not to assess individual projects that are funded.

For Section 5310, the FTA has established two measures:ⁱⁱ

- **Gaps in Service Filled.** Provision of transportation options that would not otherwise be available for older adults and individuals with disabilities, measured in numbers of older adults and individuals with disabilities afforded mobility they would not have without program support.
- **Ridership.** Actual or estimated number of rides (as measured by one-way trips) provided annually for individuals with disabilities and older adults on Section 5310-supported vehicles and services.

The JARC program has established two measures, according to the program's circular:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Actual or estimated **number of jobs** that can be accessed as a result of geographic or temporal coverage of JARC projects, and
- Actual or estimated **number of rides** as measured by one-way trips provided as a result of the JARC projects.

For New Freedom, the circular defines three measures:^{iv}

- Increases or enhancements in **geographic coverage, service quality and/or service times** that improve the availability of transportation services for individuals with disabilities,
- Additions or changes to the **environmental infrastructure**, such as transportation facilities and sidewalks; **technology; and vehicles** that affect the availability of transportation services, and
- Actual or estimated **number of rides** (as measured by one-way trips) provided for individuals with disabilities.

DATA REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

The Section 5310 circular provides instructions to program recipients (the states) for program data, citing the Government Performance Results Act, and specifies that a state ensure that all 5310-funded projects report quantitative (actual or estimated one-way trips) and qualitative data (gaps in service) for the two defined program measures. Currently, however, the reporting requirements do not appear to lead to the provision of those data to the FTA.

The FTA's website details the new reporting requirements for JARC and New Freedom, which are quite extensive^v (See Exhibit 1). Recipients must report basic program parameters, including geographic coverage and units of service provided, depending on the type of program. For example, recipients would report ridership for a trip-based service such as fixed-route or demand response service, or customer contacts for an information-based service such as a one-stop center. Recipients must also provide more qualitative information for their service projects, for example, a service description, the local evaluation process used to assess the service, and lessons learned.

The FTA plans to use this information to develop project profiles, which it will then share with JARC and New Freedom recipients and others. The FTA has indicated that it will also use the profile information to assess the degree of coordination among its specialized transportation grant programs.

JARC and New Freedom recipients must report project data through a special website hosted by an FTA consultant. This new reporting process had been expected in early 2009 but was delayed; the first reports were due August 2009. Designated recipients of JARC and New Freedom funds can report on behalf of subrecipients or have their subrecipients report directly through the website. This site also provides information and

guidance for entering data and filing the annual reports. Since the reporting requirements are new, many recipients have questions about the process.

DO PROGRAM DATA REPRESENT PROGRAM RESULTS?

DATA ISSUES WITH SECTION 5310

Data collection and reporting for the Section 5310 program vary considerably from state to state, which means, at the least, inconsistent information for assessing the program. As a state-administered grant program with a 34-year history, it is perhaps not surprising that the Section 5310 program varies across states, as each state has developed and revised or refined its state management practices over the years.^{vi} Data reporting is just one of a number of areas where states differ considerably.

Recent research conducted by the University of Montana Rural Institute on state management practices of the Section 5310 program found large differences in data and reporting procedures state to state.^{vii} For example, states do not count or categorize ridership in the same way, with no uniformity across states or, even in some cases, within states. An issue of particular note is the reporting of trips made by riders who meet the definition of both elderly and disabled. For reporting purposes, is the rider elderly or disabled? Some states have categories to capture all possible rider types (e.g., elderly not disabled, elderly disabled but ambulatory, elderly disabled using wheelchair, disabled not elderly, etc.). But in at least several states, riders are counted as either elderly or disabled, but not both. To the extent that this occurs in other states and since it is likely easier for a vehicle operator to determine age rather than disability, trips by riders with disabilities may be undercounted through the Section 5310 program.^{viii}

This research also discovered little consistency in the reporting forms and numerous variations in the reporting cycle. Based on the 37 states that described reporting requirements in their state management plans, the research found the following:^{ix}

“Eighteen require quarterly reports, with five of these having additional requirements (e.g. a semi-annual report). Eleven require a monthly report. Four require a semi-annual report, with an additional two states requiring semi-annual reports in addition to quarterly reports. Six require annual reports. Three states require reports periodically or upon request.”

Thus, the lack of data for the Section 5310 problem is not the issue. What is lacking is consistent, centralized data that indicate the “gaps in service filled” (one of the two program measures) and overall program results – what is working? what is effective?

The University of Montana researchers suggest that Section 5310 program data should be included in the National Transit Database (NTD), which would facilitate both performance measurement and resource management.^x The NTD is the FTA’s national database of statistics for the transit industry. Every transit system in the country that receives federal transit money must report information pertaining to its operational and service characteristics, capital revenue and assets, and financial operating statistics for its transit services. NTD reporting would require that Section 5310 data elements, such as ridership, be reported on an annual basis. Such reporting would also include clearly defined reporting procedures for reporters to help ensure data consistency and reasonable

accuracy. It would also make the data more available to researchers and the general public.

DATA ISSUES WITH JARC

Data reporting for the JARC program has been problematic.^{xi} The JARC program was intended to support welfare reform when it was implemented in 1998 as a competitive, discretionary grant program. In the early years, the program required planning for JARC projects through Area-Wide Job Access and Reverse Commute Transportation Plans. The planning requirements included monitoring procedures.^{xii}

With SAFETEA-LU in 2005, the JARC program became a formula program, and the legislation's new coordinated planning requirements apply to JARC along with the Section 5310 and New Freedom programs. While the program retains a focus on employment-related transportation services for welfare recipients and others with lower incomes, coordination of JARC with FTA's other specialized transportation programs has become an added focus. Data reporting described in the circular, however, does not reflect this new perspective.

Based on earlier reviews of the JARC program by the U. S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), which identified difficulties with the FTA's evaluation of the grant program,^{xiii} the FTA proposed new performance data for JARC with reauthorization of the transportation bill in 2005. The FTA also suggested that JARC reporting be included in the NTD. However, in response to input received to the proposed changes during the review process, it was determined that the proposed data were either too onerous to collect or not useful for measuring program results.^{xiv}

The SAFETEA-LU guidance provided in the current JARC circular concerning data and reporting includes the two performance measures identified above – actual or estimated number of jobs that can be accessed and actual or estimated number of one-way trips provided. However, a 2009 GAO report stresses limitations with the two measures. Specifically, it is difficult to know how many one-way trips on a JARC service are related to employment. If the service travels to the local mall, for example, some trips may be employment related but others may be shopping trips.^{xv}

It is also difficult to determine jobs accessed through a JARC service. The FTA has indicated, however, that recipients and subrecipients will not report this data element with the new reporting requirements just recently implemented. Instead, using other reported information (e.g., the geographic area where the service is provided, such as the neighborhood, city, or county), the FTA's JARC consultants will *estimate* the number of jobs accessed. If the actual number of jobs is known, that number will be used.^{xvi}

Yet again, however, the GAO has questioned the validity of the methodology that the FTA consultants developed to determine jobs accessed. While acknowledging that the consultants made efforts to address the weaknesses in collecting difficult data, the GAO believes that the methodology may still “misstate the extent to which the target population benefits from the JARC program.”^{xvii}

DATA ISSUES WITH NEW FREEDOM

While various states have been collecting data on their New Freedom projects, the federal reporting process began recently, with the first reports due in August 2009. Therefore, no

data are currently available at the federal level. However, states with established data reporting procedures for their New Freedom programs, such as Wisconsin, are able to report New Freedom program results.

PROGRAM DATA FROM THE LOCAL PROVIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

A discussion of FTA program data would be remiss without mention of the local transportation providers' perspective – the subrecipients of Section 5310, JARC and New Freedom funding. Some local providers that receive funding from more than one of the FTA-state administered programs (relatively common in small urban and rural areas) report greater administrative burdens. In common with the states, their efforts to collect and report data for the separate programs have increased.

Another data reporting issue is the double-counting of certain data, again where local providers receive funding from more than one of the FTA specialized transportation programs. For example, if a provider operates a vehicle purchased with Section 5310 assistance, the provider reports trips provided with that vehicle for Section 5310 reporting purposes. If the provider receives operating support for the vehicle through JARC or New Freedom, it reports trips provided with that vehicle for the appropriate program. The result is that the trips provided are reported twice – to the two separate programs. While the data are correct for the two separate programs, the data overstate total ridership.

Finally, given the current legislative focus on tying funding to performance, subrecipients are concerned that data may be used to compare one program with another in an attempt to measure effectiveness. There is great variation in a number of measures, driven by differences in geographic location and community size and population density that makes meaningful comparisons of data elements such as cost per trip very difficult, if not virtually impossible.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has an obvious role in facilitating data collection and data reporting. A number of the technology tools listed in the discussion paper on mobility management can serve both to improve and to ease the data collection and reporting process for program recipients and subrecipients. In fact, a number of the Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) applications can greatly facilitate data collection, for example, computer-assisted scheduling/dispatch systems (CASD) and mobile data terminals (MDTs), which together, allow electronic collection of operating data such as one-way trips and trip length data. All three of the FTA's specialized transportation programs permit purchase of ITS technologies as a capital expense.

SUMMARY

Improved data collection and reporting for the FTA's specialized transportation programs will allow more robust assessment of program outcomes. Towards this end, efforts are underway with the new FTA reporting requirements for JARC and New Freedom,

implemented in July 2009. Comparable efforts for the Section 5310 program would help resolve the large variations state to state in that program's data, as well as provide summary information at the federal level. Technology can assist in the data collection effort, but technology is only a tool. What is more important is developing and defining data elements and reporting procedures that represent program outcomes and that are workable for the range of local agencies that receive FTA program funds, including the very small transportation programs with limited staff.

Each of the three FTA programs requires the reporting of either actual or estimated ridership — obviously an important data element that is standard for transportation programs. Beyond that, what other data elements that assess performance outcomes might be considered? The recent study of the Section 5310 program notes a need “to move beyond vehicle/ride oriented measures”^{xviii} to measures that identify how the program is meeting its stated goals. Such measures may need federal guidance to provide common terminology and definitions as well as consistency with other state-managed FTA programs to minimize state administrative burden.^{xix} A number of less traditional data elements and performance measures might be considered^{xx} but defining practical data that transit programs of varying sizes can realistically collect and meaningful measures will require thought and probably some compromise.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How can the statutory reauthorization and program guidance improve data collection and evaluation?
- What data should be collected to ensure that the specialized transportation services are cost-effective and responsive to consumers, particularly older Americans, people with disabilities and those with lower incomes? What person-oriented data points are needed? What benchmarks should be developed?
- How can terms be more clearly defined and standardized so that there is consistency across states; for example, how do we define “elderly and disabled”? How do we define “transportation need” to identify “gaps in service”?
- How do we balance the need for data to support performance measurement with the need to not over-burden transportation providers with limited resources, including administrative staff?
- Should grant recipients be required to report into the National Transit Database?

SPEAKERS

David Schneider is the Team Leader of the Data Analysis and Support Team within the Federal Transit Administration's Office of Transit Programs. David joined the FTA in 2003 as a Presidential Management Fellow and worked in FTA's Office of Civil Rights as well as the FTA Office of 'Transit Programs as the program specialist for the Section 5310, JARC, and New Freedom programs. David has a B.A. from Oberlin College and a Master's of Public Policy from the University of Maryland-College Park.

Rod Clark is Director of the Bureau of Transit, Local Roads, Railroads and Harbors in Wisconsin DOT's Division of Transportation Investment Management. The Bureau is

responsible for administering all of WisDOT's state and federal aid programs for local government for all modes except aviation, with annual expenditures totaling about \$800 million (excluding ARRA). He has worked for the State of Wisconsin for almost 35 years, 31 of them with the WisDOT. He has been Director of the Bureau of Transit, Local Roads, Railroads and Harbors since 1997. He has also served as the department's Federal Relations Coordinator and as a team supervisor in the Department's Budget and Policy Office.

Mary Leary joined the Easter Seals, Inc., Office of Public Affairs in November of 2007 as Senior Director of Project ACTION, the National Center on Senior Transportation and other transportation technical assistance activities. Mary has had a diverse career including federal service at the Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging; academic work as an Adjunct Professor at George Mason University; as a researcher in the field of informatics and human services policy; in gerontology community education and service; and experience as a corporate executive in the information technology field. She has worked to expand transportation options for all at the federal level since 2004 as a member of the United We Ride interagency initiative.

**Exhibit 1: Required Reporting Elements for JARC and New Freedom
as of July 2009**

Service Type	JARC-Funded Services	New Freedom-Funded Services
Fixed route, flexible route, shuttle, feeder	# of one-way trips # of revenue hours Route length (one way in miles) # of vehicles in service Average seats per vehicle # of jobs targeted (if applicable)	# of one-way trips (shuttle & feeder service only)
Demand response	# of one-way trips # of revenue hours Geographic coverage (state, county, city, or town) Service area (square miles) # of vehicles in service Average seats per vehicle # of jobs targeted (if applicable)	# of one-way trips (e.g., same-day ADA paratransit service, volunteer programs, aide/escort programs)
User-side subsidy/ vouchers (e.g., taxi)	# of one-way trips # of jobs targeted (if applicable)	# of one-way trips
Mobility manager	# of customer contacts # of one-way trips (if mobility manager also provides service)	# of customer contacts # of one-way trips (if mobility manager also provides service)
One-stop center/ customer referral	# of customer contacts	# of customer contacts
Trip/ itinerary planning	# of customer contacts	# of customer contacts
One-on-one travel training	# of persons trained	# of persons trained
Group training	# of persons trained	# of persons trained
Internet-based information	# of web hits	# of web hits
Information materials/marketing	Project description/target audience(s) # of units (if applicable)	Project description/target audience(s) # of units (if applicable)
Vehicles for individuals	# of one-way trips (if applicable) # of vehicles/loans (or repairs) provided/subsidized (as applicable)	# of one-way trips (if applicable) # of vehicles/loans (or repairs) provided/subsidized (as applicable)
Vehicles for agencies	# of one-way trips (if applicable) # of vehicles added	# of one-way trips (if applicable) # of vehicles added
Vanpool	# of one-way trips # of vehicles added (if applicable)	# of one-way trips # of vehicles added (if applicable)
Car-sharing	# of vehicles added (if applicable) # of one-way trips	# of vehicles added (if applicable) # of one-way trips
Other capital projects	Description # of units added (if applicable)	Description (e.g., ITS improvements, large capacity wheelchair lifts and/or additional securement areas beyond required) # of units added (if applicable)

Source: FTA website at [HTTP://FTAJARC.NCF.CESNN.COM/CATEGORY/FREQUENTLY-ASKED-QUESTIONS/](http://FTAJARC.NCF.CESNN.COM/CATEGORY/FREQUENTLY-ASKED-QUESTIONS/)

ENDNOTES

ⁱ FTA C 9070.1f Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities Program Guidance and Application Instructions, May 1, 2007; FTA C 9050.1 The Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) Program Guidance and Application Instructions, May 1, 2007; FTA C 9045.1 New Freedom Program Guidance And Application Instructions, May 1, 2007.

ⁱⁱ FTA C 9070.1f Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities Program Guidance and Application Instructions, May 1, 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ FTA C 9050.1 The Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) Program Guidance and Application Instructions, May 1, 2007

^{iv} FTA C 9045.1 New Freedom Program Guidance And Application Instructions, May 1, 2007

^v “Data Collection for the FY 2007/2008 JARC and New Freedom Program Evaluation is Underway” http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_3549.html

^{vi} A 2002 article in the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) publication stated that there is so much variation in state management of the S. 5310 program that it seems more a network of 50+ separate, federally-assisted programs operated by the states: “How We Assure Senior Mobility,” by C. Zeilinger, *Community Transportation*, September-October, 2002.

^{vii} “A Review of FTA Section 5310 Program’s State Management Plans: A Legacy Program in Transition,” by A. Enders and T. Seekins, Technical Report, The University of Montana Rural Institute, Missoula, Montana, February 2009.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid, page 64.

^x Ibid, page 123.

^{xi} “Progress Made in Implementing Changes to the Job Access Program, but Evaluation and Oversight Processes Need Improvement,” U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), Report to Congressional Committees, November 2006.

^{xii} “Partnerships for the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program: A Multi-Site Study of the Institutional and Coordination Processes Behind Employment Transportation for Low-Income Workers,” P. Thakuriah et al., Urban Transportation Center, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, June 2008.

^{xiii} 2006 GAO report, page 2. This GAO report references three earlier GAO evaluations of the JARC program; one was conducted in 2004 and two in 2002.

^{xiv} 2006 GAO report, page 6.

^{xv} “Federal Transit Administration-Progress and Challenges in Implementing and Evaluating the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program, U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), Report to Congressional Committees, May 2009, page 33.

^{xvi} 2009 GAO report, page 33.

^{xvii} 2009 GAO report, page 34.

^{xviii} University of Montana Rural Institute Report, page 112.

^{xix} Ibid, page 112.

^{xx} “Guidebook for Rural Demand Response Transportation: Measuring, Assessing, and Improving Performance,” Draft Final Report, by the KFH Group, Inc. and McCollom Management Consulting, prepared for Transit Cooperative Research Program, Transportation Research Program, July 2009.