Rural areas present special challenges for meeting the transportation needs of individuals, especially people without cars. Recognizing this, the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program was established in 1998 to assist states and localities develop transportation services to connect welfare recipients and other low-income residents to jobs and other support programs. This study documents case studies of eight rural areas receiving JARC funding in 1999. The report highlights specific program elements, including the implementation process, transportation services provided, and the solutions developed to deal with the challenges of distance and low population densities that rural transit systems frequently face.

Keywords: JARC; job access; partnerships; rural transportation; sustainability

Transportation is key to moving rural residents to employment and related services. Access to employment is often limited for individuals without cars who live in areas without public transit. Even in areas with public transit, spatial and temporal mismatches can limit access to employment. Rural areas, in particular, present additional transportation challenges. Dewees (1998) reports that close to 40% of all rural counties are not served by rural transit, and another 28% have limited service. Nearly 57% of the rural poor do not own a car, whereas 1 in every 14 households in rural America has no vehicle.

Rural transit can be generally categorized as providing public transit, specialized transit for the elderly and disabled, and transit by human services agencies packaged into client service. Many existing rural transit systems are funded under Section 5311 of the Federal Transit Act (FTA), a formula grant program that authorizes both capital and operating assistance grants to public transit systems in areas with populations less than 50,000. Such transit systems are county based and tend to be found in the more populated rural areas. Few are found in the most rural, isolated areas. These systems range in size from 1 to more than 50 vehicles. According to a recent survey, from 1994 to 1999 the average fleet size in rural areas increased by 60% and ridership by 62% (Stommes & Brown, 2002).

Specialized transportation services for the elderly and persons with disabilities are available under the FTA-funded Section 5310 program. The program provides capital assistance (not operating expenses) to states, which in turn distribute the funding in both rural and urban areas.
to nonprofit organizations or lead agencies in coordinated transportation programs equaling approximately 3,700 systems.

Human service agencies also often provide public transportation in rural communities. Their role varies, whereby some agencies purchase vehicles and hire drivers and others contract with rural transit operators. It is difficult to measure the magnitude of these services because transportation costs are often bundled with the overall cost of providing service to the client.

Limited rural transit options may constrain the ability of human service agencies to transport Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income residents to jobs, training opportunities, and other support services. Insufficient or nonexistent transit may also affect the local economy and its ability to support employment opportunities (Burkhardt, Hedrick, & McGavock, 1998; U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 1998).

To deal with these issues, Congress created the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program in 1998 to move TANF recipients and low-income residents to employment, training, and other support services. Designed to encourage development of new transit (passenger) services or expand existing transit, JARC was to complement individualized transportation assistance provided by human service agencies.

To better understand how different rural areas implemented this federally funded transit program, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture examined 8 of 47 rural JARC projects funded in fiscal year 1999. Case studies were nonrandomly selected to represent differences among JARC implementing organizations, program partners, regions of the country, degrees of rurality, demographics, and clients. This article highlights the opportunities and challenges faced by rural communities establishing this new program to illustrate common issues facing rural transit nationwide.

**Literature Review**

Coordination, funding sustainability, and collaboration have long been critical issues in rural public transportation. Effective coordination is often constrained by multiple funding sources dedicated to specific patrons of narrowly tailored human service programs (Schlossberg, 2004). Examples include services provided to children (Head Start), the elderly (Medicare and the FTA 5310 program funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation [DOT]), welfare recipients (TANF), the disabled (FTA’s 5310 program), and other low-income individuals (FTA’s 5311 program). However, Blumenberg (2002) indicates that new federal funds have encouraged agencies to resolve the transportation needs of welfare recipients. And both government agencies and researchers have provided transit providers with guidelines on how to coordinate rural transportation services (Burkhardt, Nelson, Murray, & Koffman, 2004; DOT, 2002; Simon, 1998).

As a new program supplementing the efforts of TANF to move welfare recipients and other low-income individuals into employment, JARC required coordination of multiple partners as a condition for funding. JARC responded to the recognition of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and FTA that lack of coordination among human service transportation providers and public transit operators contributes to duplication and overlap of transportation services (GAO, 1999). JARC also responded to the need of TANF recipients for a dependable source of transportation. JARC addressed, as well, the long-standing criticism voiced by some (Sanchez, Peng, & Shen, 2003) that low-income individuals frequently face lower quality transportation service by requiring new, flexible routing to employment centers and other support services.

In addition, JARC required programs to develop self-sustaining funding streams after initial project implementation. Simon (1998) identified and described federal programs that can fund transportation for a range of purposes. However, development of long-term funding requires collaborative planning among stakeholders. Stommes (2001) describes how collaboration is becoming an increasingly common organizational practice as resources shrink and as organizations face complex, crosscutting issues. In the transportation arena, Innes and Booher (1999)
describe how consensus building and collaborative planning are increasingly used to address fragmented decision-making processes facing transportation stakeholders funded by multiple programs.

To streamline fragmented decision making, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), the principal legislation authorizing surface transportation programs, required states to develop transportation plans that involved participation among a wide range of stakeholders, setting the stage for collaborative planning of transportation services (DOT, 1999; United States Code, 1998). However, Blumenberg (2002) notes that divergent organizational goals, methods, and approaches of the participating agencies [often] heavily influence these collaborative efforts. As a consequence, stakeholders may have difficulty moving beyond the narrow interests of their individual institutions to identify and plan for the transportation needs of welfare participants. (p. 152)

Although many human service transportation providers had been collaborating before the passage of TEA-21, the legislation formalized this practice as a condition for JARC funding.

### JARC Program Description

Congress authorized a total of $750 million from the mass transit account of the Highway Trust Fund and from the general fund for fiscal years 1999 to 2003 to establish JARC. TEA-21 set out a formula allocating specific funding according to population, with nonurbanized, rural areas receiving 20%. The maximum individual grant for nonurbanized rural areas was set at $150,000. In fiscal year 1999, 47 projects were funded in rural areas (population fewer than 50,000), 51 in small urban areas (population 50,000-200,000), and 91 in metropolitan areas (population greater than 200,000).

Although the program aids both urban and rural areas, the legislation highlighted special needs in rural areas, indicating that compared to urban access, rural access to employment is even more restricted by lack of transportation. Providing access to jobs, training, and child care, transportation is consistently cited as among the most important issues for meeting the goals of welfare reform (Dewees, 1998). Yet rural areas present particular challenges for meeting individuals’ transportation needs, especially for people without vehicles. Longer distances between urbanized areas and low population densities create a spatial divide that often cannot be bridged without a private vehicle—or without public transit. Although 60% of rural counties have access to public transit, roughly two thirds of these publicly funded systems are single county or city or town in scope, limiting the range of employment destinations available to the individual (Community Transportation Association of America, 2001a, 2001b). Because not many jobs are usually located in sparsely populated rural areas, such locations are even less likely to have public transportation, leaving residents there with little choice but to travel long distances to work (Dewees, 1998; Kaplan, 1998).

The JARC grant program encompasses two different components. The first element, job access, encourages development of an array of new or expanded transportation services, including shuttles, connector services, and new bus routes, to increase access to jobs, whereas the second element, reverse commute, focuses on providing transportation to suburban employment centers from urban, suburban, and rural locations. JARC identified eligible recipients as TANF recipients and individuals with incomes at or below 150% of the poverty line as defined by the Community Services Block Grant program.

JARC introduces new factors into transit funding that generate opportunities and challenges to rural transit. First, it targets assistance to low-income individuals. But unlike other human service programs, JARC is operated by DOT and provides funding to transit systems, not individuals. Hence, assistance for such things as vehicle repair, insurance, and taxes are not covered.
Second, JARC funding parameters differ from other federal transit programs. The program requires a 50% funding match from the participating organization; that is, to receive funding, each organization must come up with 50% of the total project cost. However, JARC allows for the use of certain federal funds, primarily TANF monies from HHS and Welfare to Work (WtW) funds from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), as eligible matching fund sources.

Third, JARC requires coordination of transportation services by participating organizations as a condition of funding (Federal Register, 1998). Coordination is required during all stages, including planning, implementation, and over the long term. Although many rural transit organizations already coordinate with other local organizations, JARC explicitly emphasizes the leveraging of transportation funds for TANF recipients and other low-income residents.

Fourth, although JARC funded transit systems, it was not limited to only transit agencies. Rather, any local government agency, authority, nonprofit organization, state entity, regional transit authority, or tribal organization that can provide transit is eligible for funding. JARC, however, does require the involvement of any existing transit systems in the area to be served. By broadening the applicant eligibility pool, the program facilitates taking advantage of existing local institutional capacity and leveraging resources from multiple sources.

**JARC and Welfare Reform**

JARC was designed to complement ongoing programs that implemented federal welfare reform. In particular, two major programs are of note: (a) TANF, administered by HHS, and (b) WtW, administered by DOL (Nightingale, 2001). A third program, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), does not directly address welfare reform but provides educational and training support for welfare recipients, among other eligible clients. The 1999 JARC program unfolded as these three new federal programs were implemented simultaneously at the federal, state, regional, and local levels.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), also referred to as the 1996 Welfare Reform Law, transformed the federal welfare system. Whereas PRWORA reforms affected programs in several departments, TANF is key to implementing JARC objectives. TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children, establishing new program requirements. Key TANF elements include lifetime benefit limits, work requirements for welfare recipients, greater flexibility for states to run the program, and strengthened child support enforcement mechanisms. TANF gives broad flexibility to states, tribes, and communities to provide transportation to individuals moving off welfare and into the workforce. TANF funds can be used for a range of transportation services such as work trips, workforce training, and child care (HHS, 2000).

In 1997, Congress passed the Balanced Budget Act, which provided $3 billion for WtW grants (split between fiscal years 1998 and 1999). The funding was targeted to high-poverty communities where the employment objectives of TANF might be difficult to attain and where the communities would bear increased costs when long-term welfare recipients had reached lifetime limits on welfare. WtW grants, administered by DOL, are narrowly focused on providing employment assistance to hard-to-employ TANF recipients and noncustodial parents. Grants are provided to states, local communities, and tribes and can be used for job-readiness activities, including transportation assistance (Nightingale, 2001).

WIA is a third program that affected JARC implementation. Congress enacted WIA to replace the fragmented federally funded employment and training system (GAO, 2001; 2002b). WIA requires that 17 programs administered by four federal agencies (DOL, the Department of Education, HHS, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development) make their services available through “one-stop” centers to support the operations of these centers. WIA also requires its programs to develop partnerships to deliver its training services, including transportation. Six out of the eight case studies involved WIA programs in the JARC planning and implementation process.
Study Objectives and Selected Sites

The overall objective of this study was to gather information on how selected rural organizations implemented the JARC program in fiscal year 1999, the first year of the program. Relying on these findings, this article highlights some of the challenges and opportunities to implementing rural transit.

Eight projects were nonrandomly selected to represent geographic diversity, organizational diversity (of the implementing agency), and degree of rurality (of participating communities). Program data were gathered from FTA, the DOT agency that administers JARC; individual implementing agencies for each of the eight case studies; the Census Bureau; and the Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis. Information also was gathered from the Web sites of several of the implementing agencies. These sites marketed JARC, used the site to promote their partners, provided schedules, and signed up riders for the service. During late summer 2001 until early 2002, the first author conducted minimum 1-hour interviews with the JARC program official of the grantee organization that addressed key partnership issues. In addition, further interviews of similar length, highlighting client service issues, were conducted with two partners identified by the JARC program official. These interviews covered broad issue areas and allowed the organizational representative flexibility to address concerns applicable to local implementation.

Study sites are spread across the nation and include communities in California, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas. The study counties were all nonmetropolitan, with 12 out of 40 counties being completely rural or having an urban population fewer than 2,500. Ergo, they present a particular challenge to providing transit service, given that greater distances and lower population densities made it difficult to develop economically viable transit services.

Study Findings

PROGRAM PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

TEA-21 required that JARC project planning be part of a coordinated transportation planning process, not an isolated event that included the project alone. Planning was to be comprehensive and inclusive and connected to a statewide transportation plan covering all types of surface transportation, including transit, rail, and intercity bus (Federal Register, 1998). This planning process characterized the study areas, with each project included in its statewide transportation plan as required by FTA.

The study revealed broad involvement by diverse rural organizations in the planning process (see Table 1). Multiple units of government often participated in planning, especially in those locations involving a council of governments, a regional organization, or a planning commission, because these governmental organizations were formed to represent a region or a cluster of counties. Different departments within each government agency also participated. In some locations, state government agencies were involved, primarily human service agencies and/or labor agencies. Colleges, a regional tourism association, and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) were also involved in planning JARC projects.

Tribal representation characterized Spirit Lake (North Dakota), where the tribal council is the primary agent for all programs and services operated by the tribe. This planning process also included a government-to-government association with both state and county human services agencies and the state labor agency.

Based on our interviews, the planning process appeared to work well in most cases. In particular, long-established local contacts commonly found in rural areas often acted to expedite the planning process. Furthermore, the process frequently strengthened relationships with organi-
zations sharing a common client base or a common mission, such as job training, transportation, or helping low-income residents or TANF recipients to attain self-sufficiency. Several organizations began to explore building new partnerships to serve customers in new ways as they learned more about common missions and complementary resources.

Although most planning participants provided positive feedback on the process, several commented that changes could improve future planning efforts. These changes involve the time constraints imposed by the program, the length of the planning process, difficulties associated with expanding the planning group, and the need to include employers and organizations that have experience in working with low-income residents.

The time required to complete the JARC application was mentioned most frequently as a problem in part attributable to the difficulties associated with establishing a new program. Although FTA carried out an extensive national and regional outreach effort to publicize the program, the application period was short. The original JARC posting appeared in the Federal

Table 1: Participants in the Job Access and Reverse Commute Planning Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grantee</th>
<th>Study County</th>
<th>Participating Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Del Norte County Department of Health and Social Services</td>
<td>Del Norte, CA</td>
<td>City, city/county transit agency, college, community action agency, county, transit contractor, transportation consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RIDES Mass Transit District</td>
<td>Edwards/Gallatin/Hamilton/Hardin/Pope/Saline/Wabash/Wayne/White, IL</td>
<td>College, county and regional human services agencies, employer representatives, regional transit authority, state transportation department, welfare-to-work agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Iowa Transit System</td>
<td>Audubon/Carroll/Crawford/Greene/Guthrie/Sac, IA</td>
<td>Council of governments, Job Corps, regional transit system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York County Community Action Corporation</td>
<td>Oxford/York, ME</td>
<td>Chamber of commerce, community action agency, county and regional human services agencies, employers, nonprofit child care agency, regional planning commission, regional tourism association, state labor agency, TANF recipients, technical college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit Lake Tribe</td>
<td>Benson/Eddy, ND</td>
<td>Employment and training program, housing authority, state and county human services agencies, state labor agency, tribal child support programs, tribal college and schools, tribal employers, tribal nation, tribal council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area Transit Authority of North Central Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Cameron/Clearfield/Elk/Jefferson/McKean/Potter, PA</td>
<td>County human services agencies, county governments, planning commission, private industry councils, regional transit system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency</td>
<td>Bledsoe/Bradley/Grundy/McMinn/Megs/Polk/Rhea/Sequatchie, TN</td>
<td>Child care broker, metropolitan planning organization, private industry councils, state and county human services agencies, state labor agency, transit authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazos Valley Council of Governments</td>
<td>Burleson/Grimes/Leon/Madison/Robertson/Washington, TX</td>
<td>Council of governments, county human services agencies, metropolitan planning organization, state workforce centers, transit authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Tabulated by the first author using material from interviews.
NOTE: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.
a. Listed by levels of government and organization types.
b. Private industry councils were replaced by workforce investment boards under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998.
c. Metropolitan planning organizations carry out transportation planning for metropolitan areas.
Register on November 6, 1998, with applications required to arrive at FTA regional offices by December 31, 1998.

The planning process also was time-consuming, with the application requiring documentation of transit need and evidence of partnerships and financial contributions. Those grantees able to use the expertise of a regional planning commission, a transit operator accustomed to FTA requirements, or a transportation planning consultant had fewer difficulties in this regard.

PARTNERSHIPS

A key component of JARC emphasizes partnerships among agencies sharing responsibilities for moving TANF recipients out of welfare and into employment. Partners included not only organizations funding JARC but also those organizations involved in supportive or complementary roles. These latter organizations provided outreach, referred clients to the grantee, donated meeting space, facilitated information exchange, or supplied other services that contributed to implementation of the project.

The selected sites had developed partnerships, some new and some long standing. In rural areas, the pool of potential partners was relatively small, and many of the partners, facing resource limitations, had cooperated in a variety of joint activities before implementing JARC. However, as one grantee pointed out, although subgroups of the partners had often previously worked together on common issues, JARC frequently provided the catalyst for partnerships to implement a joint program. New partnerships, involving a broad range of community and regional organizations, formed as a result of JARC. In some locations, JARC served as a springboard for further cooperation on issues unrelated to the program.

Grantees and their partners not only collaborated in preparing their applications, but they also maintained their partnerships throughout the implementation process. Successful implementation of JARC was dependent on maintaining organizational partnerships to sustain the project once the application had been funded. The grantees often displayed a considerable degree of energy, creativity, and level of commitment in their efforts to maintain a working partnership throughout the project.

Although partnerships demonstrated a range of positive organizational benefits, several opportunities for partnership were lost, reducing the potential benefits of the program for low-income residents and TANF recipients. These lost opportunities were attributed to time constraints, unexpected events, excessive red tape, missing partners, and limited perspectives about the role of rural transit.

Partnerships take time to develop and maintain. Time committed to JARC was time not spent on other organizational priorities. None of the partners said the time commitment for the program was excessive, but they did indicate that both development and maintenance of the partnership required conscious time allocation to the project to produce service. Communication gaps were an issue for some participants working together for the first time. They were unsure about the adequacy of information shared by JARC organizations, indicating that they felt that more sharing of program details would have provided greater benefits for their clients.

Partnerships can also be precarious, subject to change when funding cutbacks, reorganizations, or personnel transitions occur. Any agency could pull out at any time, disrupting relationships within the partnership. Personnel changes within the eight projects took place regularly, creating gaps in institutional knowledge and requiring new employees to acquire project information and quickly develop relationships with existing partners to maintain a smoothly operating service.

Several partners raised the issue of red tape. Overseeing the project through the approval phase with the involvement of multiple agencies was time-consuming and cumbersome. Because partners could include local and regional organizations, the approval phase could be either quick or lengthy, depending on how many subunit reviews and approvals were required. The local match requirement, which is 50% for JARC, was also mentioned as an issue when several partners were required to provide funding.
A focus on individual client needs may have interfered with developing a partnership that could serve the broader public, which, in turn, could generate broader community support and attract more riders. Also, several partners mentioned that reliance on existing partnerships may have narrowed the focus to traditional agencies.

Partnership opportunities also may have been limited by organizations not involved in the projects. Grantees and their partners generally indicated that the organizations affected by the program were “at the table” when the application was developed and while implementation took place. There were, however, some exceptions. For example, some participants mentioned the potential benefits that greater employer representation could have brought by more quickly identifying employment locations and worker shortages in the program planning process. Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) and local chambers of commerce were also recommended as organizations that should have been involved at the beginning of the project, as their input might have resulted in more realistic transit service routes. When a JARC project included or was adjacent to tribal nation lands or a rancheria (as in California), partners indicated that tribal leaders should have been involved in the original planning process. Inclusion of the broader geographic area, including tribal nation lands and adjacent localities within the region, would have allowed for more effective route design during the planning stage.

Although human service agencies working with low-income residents and/or TANF recipients were partners in all eight projects, some felt that broader involvement of organizations with direct experience in working with rural residents living in long-term poverty should have been included in the planning process. Some stated that better knowledge of the needs and preferences of people living in poverty, especially of long-term welfare-dependent families, would have helped develop transit services more sensitive to their employment, training, and support needs.

**FUNDING**

JARC had different local-match-funding requirements than other DOT transit programs. The local match, which was 50%, could be met through the use of federal funds, a practice generally not allowed for other programs that require state or local matches. JARC complemented TANF and WtW funding by encouraging TANF recipients and low-income residents to obtain long-term employment and to make use of employment support services.

As shown in Table 2, the projects demonstrated a considerable degree of funding diversity. Funding for the eight projects can be summarized as utilizing local, regional, state, mixed jurisdictional, and/or tribal nation resources. But other funding sources were also used, including local businesses, a regional planning commission, county commission offices, a county United Way, and a housing authority.

**SERVICES PROVIDED**

A review of grantee reports and interviews leads to the following observations about rural JARC services in the eight case studies (see Table 3): (a) Grantees showed considerable flexibility in adapting service to changing client needs and funding requirements, (b) services were client oriented, (c) service delivery mechanisms varied across the projects, and (d) JARC service led to impacts beyond the program.

Grantees demonstrated flexibility on many fronts. For example, in Maine the grantee provided JARC service by expanding already established rural door-to-door pick-up service and creating new collection points in urban areas. Transit service was also coordinated with other service providers in the local area. In Illinois, the grantee experimented with routes, established new routes when new employment opportunities became available, and canceled routes when ridership was low.

JARC service in the eight study areas tended to be client oriented, providing a personalized service often adapted to individual riders. This client orientation demonstrated itself in a variety
of ways. For example, the Maine grantee designed its service to ensure that individuals moving from welfare would gain access to necessary support services as they entered the workforce. In North Dakota, the grantee had originally planned to route its service using bus shelters as stops, but upon finding that the severe cold in the winter prevented people from using shelters, they began door-to-door pick-ups, thereby boosting ridership.

Although grantees were flexible in adapting service to changing rider needs, several of them expressed frustration at the difficulty of reaching remote rural locations and making jobs accessible to low-income residents and TANF recipients. In particular, grantees and partners in California, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee talked about how distance and geographic barriers created a dilemma for transit—long commutes resulted, leaving many riders frustrated at the length of time required to reach a job.

A considerable degree of diversity in delivery practices existed among grantees. Several grantees provided JARC transit service directly. Illinois, Maine, North Dakota, and Tennessee being cases in point. In contrast, in Iowa and Pennsylvania a regional planning organization applied for the program grant, with its subsidiary transit agency delivering transit service. And in California, a county human service agency contracted with a private, nonprofit transit company to provide service.

The impact of JARC went beyond the delivery of a specific transit service. Employment levels increased during the project study period, a primary objective of the program. For example, in North Dakota 75 individuals used the service to commute to new jobs at a local telemarketing firm. When JARC service terminated, a number of these individuals—people who had no previous access to employment—were able to purchase a car and continue working. In Illinois, approximately 450 individuals used JARC service for transportation to employment, child care,

### Table 2: Funding Partners for Study Counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grantee</th>
<th>Funding Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Del Norte County Department of Health and Social Services</td>
<td>Rural Human Services (WtW), California Department of Social Services (TANF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RIDES Mass Transit District</td>
<td>Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS; Office of Rehabilitation Services, local DHS offices [TANF]), Illinois Department of Labor (WtW), other sources, Southeastern Illinois College (JTPA, Project CHOICE, WtW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Iowa Transit System</td>
<td>Denison Job Corps (U.S. Department of Labor funding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York County Community Action Corporation</td>
<td>Local businesses, Maine Department of Human Services (TANF funding), Maine Department of Labor (WtW funding), Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (social services block grant), United Way of York County, York County Commissioners, York County Shelters, Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit Lake Tribe</td>
<td>Fort Totten Housing Authority (TANF), North Dakota Department of Human Services (Child Care Development Fund, Native American Works Program), North Dakota Department of Labor (JTPA, WtW), U.S. Department of Interior/Bureau of Indian Affairs (adult vocational training financial assistance, higher education and employment assistance, tribal work experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area Transit Authority of North Central Pennsylvania</td>
<td>County assistance offices (Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean, Potter counties), Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (WtW), Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (TANF), workforce investment boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency</td>
<td>Tennessee Department of Human Services (TANF), Tennessee Department of Labor &amp; Workforce Development (WtW), Tennessee Department of Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazos Valley Council of Governments</td>
<td>Brazos Transit District (WtW), Bryan/College Station Metropolitan Planning Organization (WtW), Texas Department of Labor (WtW)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tabulated by the first author using material from interviews.
job search, and training opportunities. By the end of the study period, nearly 60% were still employed, resulting in a net positive benefit to the community.

SUSTAINABILITY

Each grantee and partner expressed concerns about the long-term sustainability of JARC if federal funding were to be discontinued. To deal with this uncertainty, alternative funding sources were frequently sought by grantees. Employers were sometimes seen as potential contributors, given their vested interest in having a ready source of labor. Generally, however, employer funding was not emphasized by the program, which focused instead on matching federal dollars with state and local funds from human service and workforce training programs. A second source of funding was state money. Foundations and local banks were also potential contributors. And general public ridership fees were identified as another potential funding source, because routes could be marketed to local residents not already taking part in JARC-provided services. Overall, however, many grantees and their partners emphasized the difficulties of sustaining rural transit in general, not just the JARC program.

Opportunities and Challenges

The JARC program presented rural areas with a broad range of opportunities and challenges. For those communities interested in setting up transit service, an examination of these experiences can therefore provide some useful lessons.

OPPORTUNITIES

Based on interviews with grantees, their partners, state transportation officials, and FTA, a number of opportunities for the JARC program—and rural transit service in general—can be identified (see Table 4). These include existing familiarity and collaboration with partnering organizations, enhanced community understanding of the importance of public transit in rural America, and the leveraging potential offered by JARC funding.
Existing relationships. Many rural areas have a relatively small cadre of organizations providing public service functions. Virtually all of the grantees and their partners indicated that they had already worked together on previous projects and knew who needed to come to the table to plan and implement the JARC program. Two variations on this theme can be identified. First, organizations were familiar not only with the potential partners but personally knew their partners’ staff. Second, other cases illustrated instances where new relationships were forged as a result of JARC—allowing the program to serve as a catalyst for organizations to address transportation.

Positive public relations. JARC also provided positive public relations for participating agencies. In Maine, the local chamber of commerce and a regional tourism association received positive publicity through their participation in JARC, demonstrating a commitment to community development and improvement of job opportunities for local residents. RIDES, the grantee in Illinois, gave participating organizations the opportunity to promote their roles in adding jobs, increasing regional payrolls, and bringing dollars into their local economies. Participation in JARC by nontransit agencies provided them greater public visibility, earning them credit for building the community economic base. Overall, the small number of organizations and their connections to the local economy gave rural transit operators the opportunity to link their missions with those of local organizations to build public support and gain funding.

Enhanced community acceptance of public transit. Several grantees and their partners stated that participation in the program had enhanced community understanding of the importance of public transit for local quality-of-life issues. For example, the California study area expanded its program ridership to include the general public, thereby providing tourists with easy access to local recreational attractions. Partners there indicated that the local Native American community could benefit from an expanded community transportation system. Iowa, Illinois, and Pennsylvania indicated the potential benefits of expanding JARC service to serve the general public.

Funding collaboration. JARC advocates an overall reliance on multiple funding partners for rural transit. These include federal, state, local, and human service program funds, combined with fare box revenues (Community Transportation Association of America, 2001b). Leading sources of federal human service program funding for rural transit include Medicaid, Older Americans Act, TANF, and Head Start, which account for 15% of overall rural transit operating budgets, whereas Section 5311 funds provide 15%. Funding from state and local governments is another major funding source for operating assistance, accounting for 44% of operating funds. This funding involves a mixture of dedicated state and local taxes, state general revenue funds, and general expenses of city and county governments. Fare box revenue amounts to 18%. Yet, as the JARC program demonstrated, a range of local, nongovernmental sources, including chambers of commerce, regional tourism associations, and area employers, provided funding as well.

CHALLENGES

Implementation of JARC service in the study areas faced many challenges, some caused by the nature of rural transit itself, some resulting from the difficulties associated with a new program start-up, and yet others brought about by changes in a range of federal, state, and local programs (see Table 4).3

Although the authors do not recommend specific program changes on the basis of a study examining the first year of program implementation, a close examination of the challenges described below sets some parameters for potential program modification.

Simultaneous program changes in cooperating organizations. Simultaneous changes in federal, state, regional, and local programs took place as part of the national legislative effort to “end welfare as we know it.” These changes, including those implemented in TANF and WIA, led to JARC program slowdowns in several study areas (DOT, 2000). One grantee articulated the overall frustration created by these simultaneous program reorganizations: The regulations
all changed so quickly that there was no time during the fiscal year 1999 grant period when staff could “catch up” with the latest requirements.

Several observations about these simultaneous, multiple program changes can be made. First, although JARC focused on transporting both TANF recipients and low-income residents to work and other support services, TANF involvement in JARC varied among study areas. Because JARC was established 2 years after welfare reform, some human service agencies had time to institute a variety of personal transportation options for individuals lacking a vehicle (e.g., providing money for vehicle purchase, lease, or insurance payments). Second, involvement of workforce training programs also varied among study areas. Although workforce training organizations were partners in most study areas, their visibility and involvement may have been reduced because of WIA reorganization and the focus on moving TANF recipients directly into jobs.

Organizational reporting differences. Rural transit already operates within a web of organizations at the state, regional, and local levels, with each level providing another layer of requirements and a set of overlapping clients. Rapidly changing regulations and reporting requirements cut across several organizational levels at the local, regional, state, and national levels and created program implementation delays in some locations. Nontransit grantees sometimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Existing grantee familiarity with partners created opportunities to establish the program and allowed it to be implemented quickly.</td>
<td>• The program application process provided a narrow window of opportunity for implementation, which limited data collection and partnership building.</td>
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<td>• JARC offered grantees opportunities to leverage resources among rural organizations sharing similar missions and serving overlapping clientele.</td>
<td>• Funding disruptions at the national, state, and local levels hindered development of a transit service deemed reliable by local organizations, employers, and riders and led to concerns about long-term program sustainability.</td>
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<td>• JARC increased community understanding of the importance of transportation in rural communities.</td>
<td>• Simultaneous changes in federal, state, regional, and local programs in welfare, workforce training, and transit led to program implementation slowdowns, frequent staff turnover, and confusion in reporting procedures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The program application process provided a narrow window of opportunity for implementation, which limited data collection and partnership building.</td>
<td>• Confusing regulations and reporting requirements caused delays for some grantees. Nontransit organizations had difficulties with transit requirements. Partners had different reporting requirements, creating confusion about what items should be reported, to whom, how frequently, and in what format. Lack of trained grantee/partner staff contributed to reporting difficulties.</td>
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<td>• Funding disruptions at the national, state, and local levels hindered development of a transit service deemed reliable by local organizations, employers, and riders and led to concerns about long-term program sustainability.</td>
<td>• Electronic reporting systems were not always compatible with grantee staff training or ready access to adequate telecommunications capacities.</td>
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<td>• Some employers were reluctant to participate in the program.</td>
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<td>• Privacy concerns prevented some human service agencies from providing lists of TANF recipients to transit providers.</td>
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<td>• Personnel changes occurred at the federal, regional, and local levels slowed program implementation as institutional memory and standard operating procedures were lost.</td>
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<td>• Lack of client familiarity with transit procedures and job practices created confusion and conflict in some locations.</td>
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<td>• General challenges to providing rural transit—long distances, light population densities, and high per-rider costs—created barriers to program implementation.</td>
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SOURCE: Tabulated by the first author using material from interviews. 
NOTE: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.
expressed confusion about standard FTA application and reporting requirements. Furthermore, each of the funding partners had different reporting requirements, adding to the confusion about what information needed to be reported, to whom, how frequently, and in what format. And in nontransit agencies, the required reporting of program results added another layer of duties for organizations with limited staff resources.

To address the reporting dilemma, JARC partners urged that uniform reporting requirements be set up across all agencies. Frequently, confusion was created by differences among the various federal agencies (including DOL, DOT, and HHS) and was complicated by their counterparts at the state, regional, and local levels. Each governmental unit frequently required a different set of data, used different reporting forms, and had different reporting cycles.

Electronic system requirements. Another factor complicating program reporting was the use of electronic reporting systems that were not always compatible with local capabilities. In particular, participants indicated that electronic reporting systems should be adaptable to rural users and rural telecommunication capacities. Although electronic reporting systems appear to be approaching the norm in government, several problems associated with their use still exist in rural areas. Staff training may be an issue, given low staffing levels in many rural organizations. Time taken off for training is time taken away from other responsibilities, and staff turnover means further training.

Staffing issues. Although the size of a transit system affects staff numbers, rural systems as a whole use full-time staff supplemented by part-time workers and volunteers to provide service. An average public transit system has 13 full-time employees and 10 part-time staff. Nonprofit systems have an average of 11 full-time staff and 7 part-time staff. Ten percent of public providers use volunteers, whereas 30% of nonprofit providers use volunteers (Community Transportation Association of America, 2001b). These data point out the limited rural transit staff available to meet reporting requirements and the importance of a user-friendly reporting system. Rural agencies also may not be “wired” for ready electronic access, illustrating the need for a reliable and easy-to-use electronic format. Although the experience of the 1999 JARC grantees may have been colored by a tighter implementation time frame to meet planning and implementation deadlines, rural transit operators routinely meet multiple, complex program and client requirements from their funding partners. Because many JARC providers indicated that they had previously worked with some of their partners, they were already familiar with program requirements and implemented service well within the first year of JARC funding—a relatively fast turnaround that illustrates how rural transit systems frequently are faced with juggling multiple reporting, funding, and administrative requirements to maintain service.

Missing JARC partners. Missing partners was also an issue in several JARC projects, possibly leading to situations where project deadlines were not met and employment opportunities for potential clients were lost. Affected partners included employers, poverty agencies, and “hands-on” transit managers.

In some locations, employers appeared reluctant to take part in the program. Grantees and their partners indicated several reasons for this lack of involvement. Because employers or their representative organizations were not included in the initial planning process in several locations, some may have felt disenfranchised from the program. Some grantees and partners also indicated that employers were unwilling to pay for transportation services or complete required paperwork to bring employees to work. Although employers were represented in some locations, in other areas partners indicated that employer involvement would have made transit planning efforts more realistic by allowing for the identification of actual job or employment locations and encouraging employers to hire JARC riders. In locations characterized by low unemployment rates, employers were more likely to cooperate by hiring workers located in surrounding areas with high unemployment. Virtually all partners indicated that employer representation in the planning and implementation process should be broadened.

Poverty agencies necessary partners. Several partners indicated that outreach to and inclusion of organizations working directly with people living in poverty should be emphasized in future projects. These organizations may also include nonprofits, faith-based organizations, youth training organizations, and other community-based entities working directly with com-
communities experiencing poverty. Involvement of these organizations may help to address multiple employment barriers facing the hard-to-place TANF client and low-income resident. Ridership could be increased as clients of these community-based organizations use transit to access work and support services.

Case manager involvement necessary in planning. JARC partners indicated that some routes did not generate expected ridership because case managers were not involved in the planning process. These managers could have provided a “reality test” of how proposed service would—or could—function, as opposed to “management types” removed from the day-to-day processes. Inclusion of these managers in the planning and implementation process would have facilitated development of effective routes more quickly, preventing time lost operating routes with little to no ridership and the subsequent development of new routes to capture a more cost-effective client base.

Privacy issues. Privacy concerns in a few instances also may have prevented dissemination of addresses of TANF recipients to program grantees, limiting the use of the program. In some sparsely populated locations, utilization of a public transit vehicle communicates poverty status to neighbors and work colleagues, a factor limiting ridership where individuals do not want to advertise their dependence on a welfare program. Some grantees dealt with this through the use of Geographic Information Systems (GISs) and other such techniques to identify the location of low-income residents, employment locations, training sites, and day care facilities. In other locations, use of the same ticket for all passengers allowed welfare and other low-income residents to blend in with the general public so that no single rider could be identified as receiving human service assistance.

Local resistance to service for TANF recipients. In some locations, community resistance to door-to-door transportation of TANF recipients and low-income individuals was noted, with some charging that such a service represented a “glorified taxi service.” In Maine, although door-to-door service occurred in sparsely populated rural areas, collection points were designated in small urban areas, thereby combining individualized service with bus stops in more urban sites. In California, enhanced signage advertised the availability of transit service to the entire community, a strategy that reduced public resistance to individualized service.

Staff turnover. Personnel changes slowed implementation in some locations. These changes took place at the national, regional, and local levels. In several locations, grantees cited frequent staff turnover in their own and partners’ offices, resulting in a loss of “institutional memory.” Others cited situations where program planning was performed by one organization and operations were delegated to another subsidiary organization. This required a second, time-consuming round of partnership building at the operations level.

Clients unfamiliar with transit practices. Client issues also created confusion and conflict in some locations, with clients occasionally displaying behaviors that made transit service difficult to provide. Transient passenger bases, no-shows, cancellations, and rude behavior all contributed to disruptions in transit service. Because public transit was sometimes seen as a stigma, used only by those too poor to afford a vehicle, transit routes designed and operated to serve low-income rural areas occasionally generated little ridership, as potential riders feared that using the service would imply that they were poor.

Partnership and funding sustainability concerns. Sustainability was another concern voiced by many JARC participants. Sustainability can have at least two aspects: partnership continuity and funding availability. Partners occasionally may no longer be able to maintain a supportive relationship with the local transit agency, diminishing the resources available to the transit organization. Or sometimes, partners cannot provide funding but rather provide an array of in-kind services, including meeting space, advertising, client referrals, right-of-way for bus stops and shelters, and joint staffing for common administrative tasks. Loss of any of these services can increase the cost of providing transit, reducing rural transit coverage. Funding availability is almost always a concern for rural transit. Because rural systems often patch funding together from a variety of sources, they are aware of the serious impact that can result from the loss of a single funding partner. Federal, state, and local government funding, along with local organizational support, typically sustain rural transit systems. In most cases, each funding source
requires an annual application that reports on past activities to justify another year of revenue—a time-consuming task that requires grantsmanship expertise and relies on regular reporting and continual maintenance of partner relationships.

Conclusions

Congress created the JARC program in 1998 to address the spatial mismatch existing between mostly suburban employment centers and welfare recipients and low-income residents living in center cities and rural areas. JARC supplemented existing transit by funding new transit services and complementing individualized transportation services provided by human service agencies implementing welfare reform.

This article highlights how the rural JARC experience reflects the opportunities and challenges facing implementation of rural transit service. Organizations in the eight rural study locations developed complex partnerships to deliver JARC service in rural areas. Multiple organizational levels—state, regional, local, and nongovernmental—assisted in coordinating program activities, with some organizations providing funding, others contributing planning expertise or outreach support, and still others donating in-kind services or facilities to ensure program delivery.

New services were provided, including transportation to second- and third-shift jobs, weekend employment, training, child care, and job-readiness activities. Each project tailored the JARC program to the specific needs of its community. Still others included public ridership on their routes, integrating program riders into a service available to the general public.

JARC was designed to leverage funding from other sources. Although the most common funding sources were TANF and WtW, projects also used state and local money to provide the match for JARC and in some instances drew on local private funding to supplement the transit budget. Yet, all eight projects expressed concerns about the sustainability of the program if FTA funding was discontinued in the future, reflecting the precarious nature of resource availability for rural transit service in general.

Reporting systems were also problematic, because each participating agency reported different information to separate funding sources. Each agency was thus required to file multiple reports and gather different information on the same set of clients using separate reporting cycles. A JARC electronic reporting system was available for participants, but rural locations often lacked the electronic capabilities and had time constraints, limited access to training, and inadequate personnel to utilize the system.

JARC implementation was affected by the simultaneous implementation of several newly revised federal programs. WtW, WIA, and TANF were sources of matching funds—and newly enacted programs that established programmatic changes at the federal, state, regional, and local levels. Although the time frame for JARC implementation was compressed, the pressures to keep up with the changing program regulations of funding partners is a constant requirement for rural transit operators.

Like most rural transit systems, JARC also faced the challenges and opportunities unique to providing passenger service in rural areas. Long distances and low population densities often created barriers to serving welfare recipients, low-income rural residents, and the general public. Despite these and other obstacles, the rural areas discussed in this article were generally able to successfully implement JARC, a new transit program designed to address job access barriers and expand employment opportunities, training, and other services to rural residents without cars.

Notes

1. Nearly 1,200 public transportation systems exist in rural communities, funded by U.S. Department of Transportation’s Formula Grant Program for Areas Other than Urbanized Areas, known as Section 5311. Approximately 3,500
other systems, primarily funded through the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities Program (Section 5310), as well as human service agencies, provide transportation to special client populations.

2. During the study period, the Texas grantee was being reorganized, and JARC service was not implemented. However, important parts of the program were successfully completed, including planning, partnering, and securing funding. Hence, Texas was included in the study.

3. Many of these challenges can present opportunities if the program is adapted to meet the varying needs of rural areas. Several of the identified challenges may have been addressed in subsequent years.

References


