

## The Drive to Work: Transportation Issues and Welfare Reform in Rural Areas

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The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, passed in 1996, replaced *welfare as we know it* with a program that includes work requirements and time limits for assistance. A major goal of this new program is to move recipients from welfare to work. While all of rural America will be dramatically affected by welfare reform, rural areas in the South may face some of the greatest challenges. Welfare dependency, unemployment and underemployment are high in this region,<sup>1</sup> and the number of rural welfare recipients in many places outnumbers the available jobs.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in a *spatial mismatch*—the jobs that are available are not located in the areas with the greatest need for employment.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, and others, the provision of transportation will play a crucial role in welfare reform in the South. Transportation provides the *to in welfare-to-work*.

### Transportation and Welfare Reform in Rural America

According to a study by the Community Transportation Association of America, the rural poor have less access to public transportation than the urban poor, and must travel greater dis-

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tances to commute to work, obtain essential services, and make needed purchases.<sup>4</sup> Nationally, close to 40 percent of all rural residents live in areas with no form of public transportation.<sup>5</sup> Another 28 percent of rural residents live in areas with very low levels of service provision.<sup>6</sup> Nationally, counties with smaller urban populations and greater distances to metropolitan areas are less likely to be served by a federally assisted public transportation program.<sup>7</sup> Data from the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey<sup>7</sup> suggest that nearly 80 percent of rural (non-metropolitan) counties have no public bus service. This is compared to less than two percent for urban areas.

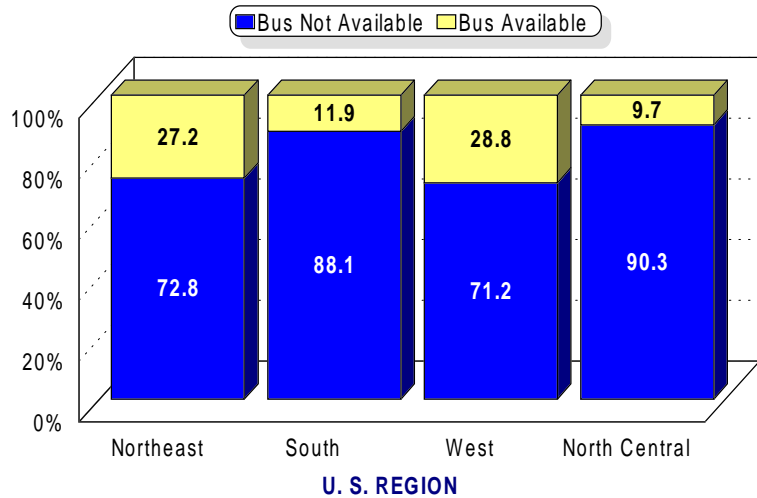
<sup>a</sup> Federally funded transportation programs are programs that receive funding under Section 5311 of the Federal Transit Act. In 1978, Congress created a program of transit assistance (referred to as "Section 18") to areas other than urbanized areas. This program has been used to fund a wide range of rural public transportation programs, including fixed route, demand response, and subscription programs. In 1994, Section 18 programs were renamed Section 5311.

Figure 1 outlines bus access to rural areas across various regions of the United States. In general, the bulk of rural areas in all four regions have no bus service available to them. However, the problem is particularly acute in the South and North Central regions where approximately one in 10 rural residents have no access to bus service. Within the South, availability is clearly linked to place of residence (see Figure 2). Nearly 98 percent of urban Southerners have some form of bus transportation available to them. This figure slips to 80 percent among suburban residents and drops dramatically among rural Southerners (11.9%).

Given that remote rural areas are least likely to have some form of public transportation service, residents of these areas are most likely to have to travel great distances to work. Nationally, nearly three of every four rural (non-metropolitan) counties have average out-commuting rates from their towns of over 35 percent.<sup>8</sup>

The provision of transportation options to low income citizens is one of the “big three” issues most frequently mentioned by service agencies when considering welfare-to-work programs. Child care, job readiness, and transportation are seen as three major topics which will affect the success of welfare reform. In May 1995, the General Accounting Office issued a study of employment outcomes for participants in the 1995 Job Oppor-

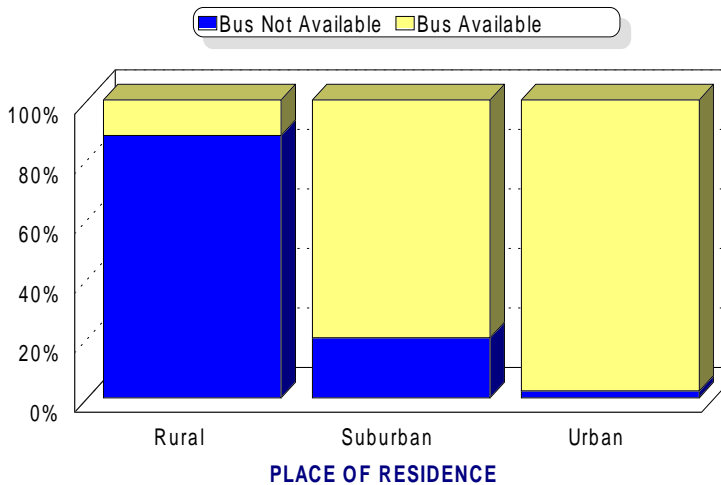
Figure 1. Bus Service Availability in Rural Areas, by Region



Source: Federal Highway Administration, 1995

tunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. In this national survey, county welfare administrators were asked to identify the most common reasons job-ready participants did not get jobs. One of the top barriers identified, and the second most frequently cited reason for individuals not being employed, was the lack of transportation to jobs.<sup>9</sup> There is a low rate of car ownership among welfare recipients, with one study indicating that 96 percent of public assistance recipients have no personal automobile.<sup>10</sup> Public transportation does not always provide mobility to available jobs, as many entry-level jobs are not on bus routes or are offered at off-peak times. In rural areas, bus service is generally not available.

Figure 2. Bus Availability by Place of Residence in the South



Source: Federal Highway Administration, 1995

The provision of transportation options to low income citizens will be critical for the success of welfare reform in rural areas. Rural areas face many unique challenges in meeting the work requirements under the new welfare legislation. Unlike urban areas, there are often fewer jobs available in rural areas, and there may be greater distance between job sites. Many individuals have to drive “into town” or to the closest population center to find employment. Low population size and low population density can make it difficult to locally provide the services such as job training, child care, and skills classes that are essential to making the transition from welfare to work. Transportation to these services will also be critical for successfully transitioning individuals off public assistance.

### Challenges Associated with Transportation Programs in Rural America

As states experiment with ways to provide mobility to low income individuals, the two most common approaches are public transportation programs and private vehicle ownership programs. There are many challenges associated with both strategies. Because of the low population density and poor road conditions in rural areas, rural public transportation systems can be costly. Furthermore, the provision of public transportation to welfare recipients may require the expansion of current transportation routes and the addition of non-peak and night service hours to meet the scheduling demands of many entry-level jobs. This can further increase the cost of transportation service provision.

Because of the cost of rural public transportation programs, many states have initiated private vehicle ownership programs. While private vehicle ownership is slightly higher in rural areas than in urban areas, nearly one out of every 14 rural households does not own a vehicle.<sup>11</sup> Nearly 57 percent of the rural poor do not own a car.<sup>5</sup> In the past, family and community networks have played an important role in facilitating travel for some low-income rural residents. As larger numbers of individuals transition off welfare, however, the provision of new transportation options to disadvantaged rural citizens will be critical.<sup>b</sup>

There are also many challenges associated with private vehicle ownership programs. The relatively large cost associated with such ownership creates a barrier for many current welfare recipients. In addition, individuals who do not have a license or have had their license suspended cannot use this form of transportation. In some cases, welfare recipients need to develop the life skills necessary to purchase and care for a car, such as money management and automobile maintenance skills.

A third strategy in many states is to move welfare recipients to available jobs. Some states are encouraging rural residents to move to urban areas or job centers to overcome distance barriers to work. In Kentucky, individuals can receive up to \$900 for moving expenses if they have verified offers of employment at their new town of residence. While this policy will be helpful for some individuals, it can also have negative repercussions for many rural communities. Such relocation may result in increasing depopulation of rural areas, further lowering the tax and population base. It may also work against promoting self-sufficiency as individuals are forced to leave behind the social, community, and family networks that are often essential for making ends meet in a low-wage economy. Finally, this policy may result in housing problems in urban areas as the influx of new workers strains existing capacity.

<sup>b</sup> Several surveys of welfare recipients indicates that a large number of welfare recipients carpool or rely on friends for rides to work.<sup>12</sup>

For many reasons, transportation is essential to the success of welfare reform in rural areas. New workers will need to travel to training classes, child care centers, and jobs. Despite the challenges in rural areas, there are many examples of successful practices that have used innovative planning and partnerships to implement programs that provide low-income residents with transportation options. Some of these are highlighted in the following section.

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### Successful Transportation Strategies

There are a variety of strategies that have been used by rural organizations, governments, and social service agencies to provide transportation for rural residents making the transition from welfare to work. These include the following:

***Creative use of existing resources.*** In Arkansas, Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee, school buses are being used to transport adults to training classes and jobs. In Tennessee and Arkansas, Senior Citizens vans are being used in off-hours to serve residents needing employment transportation. Other counties have used Medicare vans or vehicles for service programs. By pooling the resources from different social service agencies, these programs avoid replicating service routes and provide a more efficient and cost-effective use of available public transportation vehicles. This type of innovative use of existing transportation services can provide savings on overhead costs such as insurance and maintenance of vehicles. This may require policy changes in some states if legislation hinders this type of collaboration.

***Public-Private partnerships.*** In Tennessee, welfare recipients are receiving subsidies to use taxis to get to work. In North Carolina, agencies are experimenting with employer incentives and encouraging employers to subsidize their employees' public transportation and/or vanpooling expenses by drawing on the Internal Revenue Service's Transit Commuter Benefit. *Charity Cars* in Florida has been working with the automobile industry and others locally and nationally to gain access to charity cars and donated services. Georgia's *Peach on Wheels* program works with used car dealers to enable Temporary Assistance for Needy

Families (TANF) recipients to purchase cars with no-interest or low-interest loans. The private sector is an important partner in welfare reform, and has a great deal to gain from collaboration with service agencies facilitating family independence. Collaboration can be mutually beneficial by providing resources to needy individuals and providing a quality workforce for private sector interests.

### ***Multi-agency communication, collaboration, and coordination.***

Programs in Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, South Carolina, and other areas have worked to draw on a broad coalition of actors to provide an integrated, coordinated approach to providing transportation for low-income citizens. This collaboration and coordination among agencies takes advantage of existing resources and expertise and may allow for the pooling of resources required for the critical mass needed for a successful program. The communication among agencies and new partners, in the case of North Carolina, has allowed agencies to identify overlaps in services that may be eliminated through coordination. This communication can also facilitate the identification of opportunities for collaboration and integrated planning to make the best use of available resources.

***Strategic Planning.*** Many states, including South Carolina, Kentucky, Arkansas, and North Carolina, have initiated strategic planning sessions with key partners in the state. In South Carolina, this process involves assessing and analyzing the welfare transportation needs at the state, regional, and county levels, identifying short and long term needs, and developing a broad program to address these needs. In many states, this process draws on the multi-agency communication and collaboration that is essential for developing a comprehensive, efficient program. This process can also draw on information sharing between the public and private sectors, as in the case of North Carolina. Many states have been using innovative planning tools such as GIS and ongoing, real time databases of client use patterns to help anticipate transportation needs.

***Integrated programs.*** Because of the complex set of challenges faced by welfare recipients as they make the transition from welfare to work, many of the most successful programs may provide a combination of skills enhancement and transportation services. *Charity Cars*, in Florida, requires that individuals take short classes in car maintenance before they are granted a charity car. The *Drive to Work*, in southern Ohio, provides instruction for new car owners on a range of skills from shopping for a car, to money management, and car maintenance. These combined skills training will increase the ability of these programs to have a lasting effect on the lives of the individuals being served, and to provide the skills needed for individuals to become independent and self-sufficient.

## Successful State Programs in the South

Under the new welfare legislation, states may use funds from their TANF programs to provide transportation assistance to people on or moving off of public assistance. Many agencies and organizations have experimented with innovative programs that promote both public transportation and private vehicle ownership. The following is a list of programs, with an emphasis on rural areas, that serve Southern states.

***Alabama: Covington Area Transit System (C.A.T.S.).*** In 1992, the Covington County Department of Human Resources began work with local officials to bring a public transportation system to a community that had been without any form of public transportation for more than two years. Covington County, a largely rural county in southern Alabama, found it difficult to get clients to access the services of their local JOBS program. The *Covington Area Transit System (C.A.T.S.)* was developed, drawing on a partnership with the Covington County Department of Human Resources and the Covington County Commission. This public transit program, with 17 passenger vans and one wheelchair lift-equipped vehicle, is designed to meet clients' needs by offering flexible service. Allowing people to call for rides 24 hours ahead of time, the routes are flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of its riders.

In other areas of Alabama, there are ongoing experiments using state and county vehicles, including school buses during non-peak hours, to provide transportation to individuals needing rides to jobs or services. A Regional Consortium has been formed for part of the state in order to study transportation issues. Private vehicle ownership programs are also being pursued, and the state is working with various auto dealers to donate salvaged cars or arrange low- or no-interest purchase programs. For more information about any of these programs, contact Bill Lukerson, Alabama Department of Transportation, (334-242-6083).

***Arkansas: The Central Arkansas Development Council.*** This Council has been working with the South Central Arkansas Transit System to provide transportation options to the largely impoverished, rural region of the state known as Lower Arkansas. This organization has been successful in providing service to 10 counties using a combination of fixed schedules and demand-response systems. By encouraging local social service organizations to apply for foundation funding, as well as securing funds to pay for rides for elderly non-Medicaid customers who need a trip to medical care, this agency has employed a mixed strategy of coordinating local resources and drawing upon available funding. Keeping an extensive data collection system in place to evaluate service demand and market gaps, this agency has depended heavily on coordinated planning of services to maximize resources and efficiency.

In Southeastern Arkansas, the Southeastern Arkansas Transportation Systems are using their senior center vans during off-peak times to serve residents needing employment transportation, and school buses are used during non-peak hours for trips to child care facilities and medical appointments. For more information about any of these programs, contact Jim Gilbert, Arkansas Department of Transportation, (501-569-2471).

**Florida: Charity Cars.** *Charity Cars* is a non-profit 501(c)3 corporation which provides a vehicle, tag, insurance, down payments, service, and towing free of charge to individuals moving from welfare to work. With funding from both the public and private sectors, *Charity Cars* takes donated automobiles and distributes them to disadvantaged individuals to assist them in their transportation needs. The program provides classes in basic skills such as car repair and financial management. Vehicles are registered in the name of the individual recipients, however, *Charity Cars* retains a lien on each vehicle for a period of three years so that the vehicle cannot be re-sold. Recipients must be employed within days of receipt of the vehicle and must remain employed through the lien period. Contractual obligations require the recipients to maintain car insurance and to participate in follow-up case studies.

This program draws on a unique public-private partnership with the automobile industry and receives donations from local businesses and citizens in the form of cars, repair services, and parts. *Charity Cars* has enjoyed significant national media attention and in response, *Charity Cars* has designed a model for replication. Serving both urban and rural areas in central Florida, this program has provided many individuals with the transportation support they need to gain meaningful employment. For more information about this program, contact Brian Mensies, *Charity Cars* President, (407-324-5050).

**Kentucky: Empower Kentucky.** In 1997, 22 of Kentucky's 120 counties were without public transportation. That same year, Governor Paul Patton signed a \$5 million transit allocation for public transportation in the state, a portion of which will flow through Kentucky's new welfare initiative. This program, called

*Empower Kentucky*, is designed to guarantee transportation for all TANF recipients throughout all areas of the state. Its plan entails a statewide transportation network composed of 16 regions. Each of the 16 regions will contract with a provider who will be responsible for offering transportation in that area. The selected transportation provider will be paid a fixed rate of \$3/day for each welfare recipient that resides within the designated service area. While the costs of providing transportation services are higher in rural areas, it is assumed that the flat \$3 fee

will be sufficient since all welfare recipients will not use this service, even though the provider is being compensated at a rate that includes all welfare participants in the service area. Lower labor costs in these areas may also help to ensure that the system is profitable. Overall, coordinated strategic regional planning is being used to try to provide public transportation options for residents of all counties in the state.

There is also some experimentation with promoting private vehicle ownership in Kentucky. The Big Sandy Area Development District is working with

state agencies and charities to secure auctioned or donated cars for job-ready welfare recipients. For more information about any of these programs, contact Vickie Bourne, Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, (502-564-7433).

**North Carolina: Work First.** The State of North Carolina has been implementing a variety of programs to help welfare recipients get transportation to work. The state's main program, *Work First*, brings together the North Carolina Department of Transportation-Public Transportation Division, the North Carolina Division of Social Services, and the State Board of Education's Department of Public Instruction. These agencies have been promoting communication between Social Service agencies, the Department of Transportation, private employers, and local community colleges in individual counties in order to share information, identify issues, and suggest solutions. One of the joint programs that has been initiated is encouraging employers to subsidize their employees' public transportation and/or vanpooling expenses by drawing on the Internal Revenue Service's Transit Commuter Benefit. This program provides employers with a tax break, employees with subsidized public transportation, and local transportation providers with additional riders.

**Rural Transportation Challenges**

**Challenges to public transportation in rural areas**

- distance to jobs
- distance between households
- irregular work hours
- cost of service provision

**Challenges to private vehicle ownership**

- costs for vehicle and insurance
- maintenance
- no license

The Department of Transportation has initiated contracts with rural transportation providers in 40 systems, and is subsidizing service in several counties. The Department of Transportation is also supplying vans to county transit systems in an effort to promote rural vanpooling, and in some cases, has coordinated the use of local school buses for job transportation. The North Carolina Department of Transportation is planning to use state money to subsidize workers' transportation needs after the TANF funding limits are reached, in order to provide a "safety net" for low-income workers. Private vehicle ownership programs are also being used to provide cars to needy individuals. For more information about any of these programs, contact Kathy McGehee, North Carolina Division of Social Services, (919-733-2873).

**Tennessee: First Wheels Program.** Tennessee's *First Wheels* program draws on a unique partnership between Department of Human Services workers, community leaders, businesses, transportation providers, and clergy. In Warren County, Tennessee, funding for the project has been raised through the efforts of the Families First Council, an organization established in each community under the Tennessee welfare reform plan. In the case of Warren County, the local Episcopal church has played an important role in fund-raising. This program allows individuals to move toward car ownership by helping them build a credit history and learn skills such as money management. Department of Human Services clients are able to purchase a vehicle through a revolving loan process. Participants sign contracts agreeing to pay back the cost of the vehicles at a low monthly rate, without paying interest. The money then goes back into the revolving fund to help other participants afford cars. In another program serving one of the state's eastern, Appalachian counties, driver's education courses were initiated after it was discovered that many individuals did not have a driver's license. Attendance in the program has been high and participants mention not only the benefits of getting a legal driver's license, but also improved self-esteem.

Through the Families First Council, agencies have also been exploring options for the provision of public transportation. The East Tennessee Private Industry Council encouraged the local school board in some east Tennessee communities to use school buses to transport parents who are engaged in training and educational programs. The school board receives a per capita fee for each rider, and there are several stipulations put in place for safety measures. A surprising outcome of this project is that both children and bus drivers report positive effects of having other adults on board the school bus. Also, in east Tennessee, the East Tennessee Private Industry Council has had success encouraging local taxi companies to transport people for a flat fee. In some cases, this is more cost efficient than other public systems. The Council is also toying with the idea of helping

recipients pool their money to lease a used car. For more information about any of these programs, contact Sherri Carroll, Tennessee Department of Human Services, (615-313-5758).

### Conclusion

Welfare reform has provided both challenges and opportunities in rural America. Some of the challenges presented by welfare reform have stimulated new and innovative practices for providing transportation to citizens making the transition from welfare to work. Some transportation issues have been addressed on an individual level through vouchers, donations, and programs to promote individual car ownership. Some of the public transportation issues in rural areas have been addressed through a better coordination of resources, increasing collaboration among agencies, public/private partnerships, and strategic planning.

Transportation programs may create the need for some basic policy changes that remove barriers to interagency coordination and the sharing of resources.<sup>13</sup> Kaplan (1996) suggests that states may need to experiment with providing transportation subsidies in welfare reform initiatives, creating more flexible insurance regulations, and exempting the value of cars in determining eligibility for benefits. Innovative strategies must be utilized which draw on information from a broad range of partners, including state agencies responsible for education, insurance, economic development, and transportation, as well as private businesses, public transit authorities, and employers.<sup>14</sup>

Many states have been successful in rising to the challenge of providing transportation to their communities' neediest residents. With innovative planning, design, and partnerships, rural transportation strategies are providing many former rural welfare recipients with the transportation options they need to make the transition from welfare to work. Given the significance of transportation for the success of welfare reform in rural areas, the success of these rural transportation programs are critical for the future well being of rural communities and citizens.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cook, Peggy J. and Elizabeth M. Dagata. "Welfare Reform Legislation Poses Opportunities and Challenges for Rural America." *Rural Conditions and Trends* Volume 8(1). 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Howell, Frank. "Challenges to Welfare Reform in the South." *Southern Perspectives*. Southern Rural Development Center. (December). 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Nord, Mark and Bo Beaulieu. "Spatial Mismatch: The Challenge of Welfare-to-Work in the Rural South." *Southern Perspectives*. Southern Rural Development Center. (December). 1997.

<sup>4</sup> General Accounting Office. "Welfare Reform: Transportation's Role in Moving from Welfare to Work." Report to the Chairman, Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives. (May). 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Rucker, George. "Status Report on Public Transportation in Rural America, 1994." Rural Transit Assistance Program, Federal Transit Administration. Available on the web at <http://www.fta.dot.gov/library/program/rurlstat/rurlstat.html>  
*Continued on bottom of next page.*

## More Information on Key Transportation Issues

The following is a list of resources that provide an in-depth discussion of some of the key transportation issues in rural welfare reform. Many of these resources also provide listings of other key information and funding resources.

- **Assessment of the Economic Impacts of Rural Public Transportation**

This report (Project H-11), authored by Jon E. Burkhardt with James L. Hedrick and Adam T. McGavock, provides an overview of several case studies as well as tips for planners to influence the type and level of economic impacts from their rural transportation systems. Available from The Transportation Research Board, 202-334-3240

- **Community Transportation Association of America Web page:** <http://www.ctaa.org>

This web page has a wealth of information about community transportation issues, including example projects, information on funding for planning grants and demonstration projects, and low interest loan funds for small and rural community transportation providers. The publication titled *Community Transportation* is also accessible from this page.

- **Rural Transit in the Age of ISTEA**

This information brief, available on the web at <http://www.ctaa.org/ntrc/rtap/pubs/ib/istea-ib.shtml>, covers some of the provisions in the Intermodal Service Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) that are beneficial to rural transportation providers. This also includes a discussion of funding for service provision and planning.

- **Transportation and Welfare Reform**

This report by April Kaplan is available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.welfareinfo.org/transita.htm>. This report provides an overview of the key issues related to transportation and welfare reform, and provides an extensive list of resources.

- **Welfare Information Network Web Page:** <http://www.welfareinfo.org/>

Click on the button titled “transportation.” There are a variety of resources here, including a listing of some successful projects and funding resources.

- **Welfare Reform: Transportation’s Role in Moving from Welfare to Work**

This report by the General Accounting Office outlines several important issues related to transportation and welfare to work in both rural and urban areas. Available on the web at <http://www.fta.dot.gov/library/program/rurlstat/rurlstat.html>

### Endnotes continued

<sup>6</sup> Community Transportation Association of America. “Mobility: Key to Welfare Reform.” *Community Transportation*, Community Transportation Association of America. 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Federal Highway Administration. *Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey, Federal Highway Administration*, United States Department of Transportation. 1995. Available on the web at: <http://www.cta.ornl.gov/npts/1995/doc/index.html-ssi>

<sup>8</sup> Aldrich, Lorna, Calvin Beale, and Kathleen Kassel. “Commuting and the Economic Functions of Small Towns and Places.” *Rural Development Perspectives*. Volume 12(3). Pg. 26-31. 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, Mark. “Job Access Programs are More than Just Turning Keys in the Ignition.” *Community Transportation*, Community Transportation Association of America. (August). 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, Jennine. “Welfare Reform in Rural Areas: A Special Community Transportation Report.” Community Transportation Association of America. (September/October). 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Burkhardt, Jon E., with James L. Hedrick and Adam T. McGavock. “Assessment of the Economic Impacts of Rural Public Transportation.” *Final Report, Project H-11*, prepared for the Transit Cooperative Research Program, Transportation Research Board, and National Research Council. Bethesda, MD: Ecosometrics, Incorporated. 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Policy Research and Evaluation. “From Welfare to Work: Welfare Reform in Kentucky.” Urban Studies Institute, University of Louisville. (January). 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, April. “Transportation and Welfare Reform.” *Welfare Information Network*. 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Community Transportation Association of America. “Transportation and Welfare Reform: States on the Move.” *Community Solutions*, Community Transportation Association of America. (Winter). 1995.

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