

LIAISON REPORT

AGENCY: HIRTA

LIAISON: Jenny Schill

1. Need for Program. Describe who the target population is and whether their numbers are increasing or decreasing. Indicate the source of this information. Also, indicate how the program/service is different and how it is similar to others and what would happen if the program/service ceased to exist. List the priorities established by ASSET Funders, which the programming addresses.

The Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency, HIRTA, provides door to door transit services in the counties of Boone, Dallas, Jasper, Madison, Marion, Story and Warren. HIRTA is Federally funded so their services are open to the general public. Their largest population they serve is the elderly and disabled. Numbers are increasing due to additional services from Ames to Des Moines and Ames to Boone (DMACC). Weekly trips to Iowa City. HIRTA doesn't have any direct competitors as they are the only door to door service in the area. So, if this program ceased to exist a large part of our population would be without dependable transportation.

HIRTA provides the funder's requirement for transportation programs for the elderly and families. They do this through their regular HIRTA transportation scheduling, their HIRTA Now program, working with the Boys and Girls Club to get kids to off-site programs and working with the United Way to help get kids to the Summer Lunch Program in local communities.

2. Program Strengths. Pick two to four factors that contribute most importantly to the program/service outcomes. Do not list everything that is satisfactory. We will assume that things not mentioned are okay. For each strength describe some supporting evidence.

- HIRTA has been given funding to hire a Mobility Coordinator. This position will help educate riders and agencies on what services their clients may qualify for as well as give HIRTA the ability to receive the proper funding/reimbursement for those rides
- HIRTA has set-up a non-profit organization, and been approved, and set up a compassion fund that people can donate to. They will now also be able to apply for grants that they previously wouldn't qualify for.
- The HIRTA Board is very supportive, hands-on, and Supervisors from each county are seated on the Board. Julia Castillo, the Executive Director, communicated that she is able to communicate openly with her board and they take action.
- After having to make some big budget cuts last year HIRTA's revenue is in the black. They also continue looking for innovative avenues to find more funding and services they could provide.

3. Program Weaknesses. Select factors that detract most from the program/service achieving its outcomes. Present details as described above. Recommendations for reducing these weaknesses should follow the discussion of each weakness.

- There is a perceived barrier for some clients, due to lack of knowledge of how the service works, that they are denied services for no reason. These denials are usually due to timing. Someone may request a ride to McFarland from Nevada at 10:00, but due to others also traveling from Nevada they would need to leave at 9:45. So, in the system the request is denied. More awareness of how this program works, would address this issue.
- Communication to riders on how to bill for rides. Word has spread in Story county that 3B rides are “free” when in reality they are donation based rides. HIRTA is missing out on a lot of fees due to the problem of people not realizing what services they qualify for.
- Continued outreach, Story county is so diversified and some of the rural communities aren’t being reached. Currently males aren’t being reached well. HIRTA also believes that there are some minority populations that might be being missed as well. HIRTA’s new Van Pool program will help reach some of these groups, as well as their continued social media campaign.
- Story County is the only place that has a dispatcher not in the central office. This makes it hard for administrative staff to respond in a timely manner to issues that come up. This would be solved by moving this dispatcher to the main HIRTA office in Des Moines.

4. Financial Outlook. Current funding concerns should be described. In addition, the assessment of the program's plan to cope with shrinking resources should be given.

HIRTA is financially sound. This year their revenue is up and in the black after last year’s budget cuts. Their new strategic plan states they would like to become less dependent on federal and state funding because they never know what will be approved for the next year. They have been approved to set up a non-profit so they can apply for federal grants as well as take donations to a Compassion Fund. With the new funding to create a Mobility Coordinator position, they believe this will help educate customers what they qualify for and in turn HIRTA will be able to collect more funds from these rides. HIRTA is also hoping to meet with the CyRide Director to work out how HIRTA could get some of the 5310 funding that CyRide isn’t using each year. Julia also commented that the dynamic of the populations they serve is changing. Currently they only receive funding for rural areas. Communities that used to be considered rural communities, such as Norwalk, Ames and Waukee, are now urban. So they are looking at ways to start getting some of the urban funding for those areas that they serve.

5. Internal Management Practices. Summarize your assessment of the management of the agency, and the role of the Board. If there are deficiencies, details should be provided. Conclude with recommendations when appropriate.

HIRTA has 3 administrative staff in their office and 8 employees in their call center. Their Board of Directors is a policy setting board. They are active, and they hear a lot that the board enjoys serving. Julia does a good job of getting the board involved in projects and keeping them up to date on what's going on. Most board members request to be

appointed to their board because they have an interest in this area. The Board is good about making staff aware if they have been contacted about an issue.

6. Agency Suggestions/Comments. Make note of any suggestions, comments or questions agencies may have with regard to the ASSET process, budget forms and or anything else that relates to the process.

Julia expressed that she struggles every year with the financial spreadsheets. It's a challenge to get them done each year. So much information has to be entered each year and she wondered why information can't flow from one sheet into another, that is requesting the same information. She also stated that she could benefit from a workshop day, not the short refresher done each year, on all forms and how to properly fill them out. Smaller agencies struggle with staff time to fill it all out. In 2018 she hired a new financial person and he was unable to figure out the ASSET process. Julia in turn had to take this on herself and in a small organization staff time is already stretched thin. Julia did comment that the Score Card is much easier to use and enter data into.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT: It is my overall assessment that HIRTA has overcome some setbacks over the last few years, but continues to fulfill one of ASSET's priorities of providing transportation to programs for the elderly and families. With their recent budget cuts they were forced to look for new ways to access funding. I also believe that the new Mobility Coordinator will help educate HIRTA's customers and in turn bring in more revenue from those rides. They continue to look at ways to improve their services for their clients, working with other entities to form partnerships and reaching populations not currently reached.