

2020 LIAISON REPORT

HIRTA Liaison – Stephanie Spence

Need for Program

HIRTA Director

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. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, numbers had been increasing due to additional services from Ames to Des Moines and Ames to Boone (DMACC) and weekly trips to Iowa City. Numbers have decreased due to COVID-19. HIRTA doesn't have any direct competitors as they are the only door to door service in the area. If this program ceased to exist, a large part of Story County's 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.

Program Strengths

HIRTA hired a Mobility Coordinator. This coordinator helps 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. The mobility coordinator has many projects they are working on, including a "Do You Have Transportation Initiative", partnering with local medical facilities and other agencies whom have clients who utilize HIRTA, this initiative will cue agencies to confirm a client's transportation plan at the time of the appointment, opposed to a client waiting for or rushing to find transportation at the last minute. This coordinator is also working on creating a video called "HIRTA – The Life of a Trip". This video would be accessible online and show a HIRTA trip from start to finish. This includes scheduling a trip online and every step through being dropped off after the completion of one's appointment. The hope is that this video will make both passengers and their caregivers more comfortable with the HIRTA process.

HIRTA recently revamped their website, making it more user friendly, more interactive and English/Spanish bilingual. HIRTA has also been utilizing staff to make Assurance Calls to patrons who are no longer riding due to COVID-19, this reassures patrons that HIRTA still cares for them and can provide referrals to Aging Resources if a concern is identified.

HIRTA set-up a non-profit organization called the Heart of Transit. Heart of Transit was established as a non-profit entity to enhance rural transportation services within central Iowa, especially to those with special needs who depend on public transit as their life-line to their community. Heart of Transit will grant seek for funding, and use those funds to

help central Iowa transportation providers create new programs, fund unique transportation services and implement on-going transportation options in central Iowa

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.

Executive Director, Julia Castillo states she has been proud of the way the team has handled challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. She states her team works well together, communicates effectively and prioritizes maintaining safe and reliable public transportation that is accessible to all Story County resident.

Program Challenges

The primary challenge this year has been related to the COVID-19 pandemic. HIRTA is designated a vital service from the Governor of Iowa and never shut down. Although HIRTA never shut down, rides have decreased significantly due to passengers finding alternate ways to meet their needs, including tele-health and grocery delivery. HIRTA has taken steps to ensure both rider and driver safety during the pandemic, including requiring masks while riding, creating extra barriers between the driver and the rider and enhanced cleaning practices.

HIRTA used to have a no show rate of 5%, it is now between 13%-20% due to changes in riding due to COVID-19. HIRTA staff is seeing high cancellations and now shows for both healthcare appointments and employment rides.

HIRTA continues to face uncertainty about what public transit will look like post-COVID-19. Short and long term transit projections are difficult at this time, as the need to public transit flocculates greatly depending on the COVID-19 virus.

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. HIRTA is combating this by having their Mobility Coordinator create accessible programming showing step-by-step how to schedule and complete trips.

Financial Outlook

HIRTA is financially sound. They received CARES Act funding in the spring, which helped with payroll. Director Julia Castillo states she is reassured that the Iowa DOT recognizes the importance of transit systems, particularly in rural Iowa. HIRTA federal and state funding is based on number of riders and number of miles put on each vehicle. This has decreased dramatically, though HIRTA administration team is positive about the prospects of riders returning post COVID-19. 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 recognizes that as Ames is becoming less rural, she cannot rely on federal funds and is working on approaching the City of Ames to determine ways to increase funding for HIRTA use in more urban areas.

Internal Management Practices

HIRTA has 4 administrative staff in their office and 4 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.

Agency Suggestions/Comments

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.

Julia and Brooke suggested a yearly workshop run by ASSET explaining the ASSET process to new and returning agencies. Julia notes increased difficulty with appropriately completing paperwork due to the pandemic, noting the pandemic did not create these difficulties, but it amplified the problems. Brooke suggested utilizing the program Score Card, which can transfer data from one year to the next, creating a more streamlined process of applying for ASSET funds.

General Assessment

It is my overall assessment that HIRTA has overcome many struggles faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The HIRTA team is constantly looking for new and innovative ways to reach vulnerable populations in Story County. The addition of the Mobility Coordinator has allowed HIRTA to provide access to patrons who had been unable to utilize HIRTA in the past. HIRTA continues to fulfill one of ASSET's priorities of providing transportation to programs for the elderly and families. HIRTA's Julia and Brooke were open with this ASSET volunteer and willing to explore ways they are continuing to reach their mission to "Provide customer-focused community transportation with a commitment to excellence in safety and service promoting independent lifestyles for central Iowa residents". HIRTA continues to look at ways to improve their services for their clients, particularly during unprecedented times of a global pandemic, working with other entities to form partnerships and reaching populations not currently reached.