EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is about understanding and improving the transportation services that are available to those people who, because of age, disability, poverty, or other reasons, cannot routinely use automobiles to transport themselves. Our concern in particular is with the services commonly known as “community-based transportation.” Our objective in this research was to take as broad a view as possible of the subject, not focusing on any particular problem or favoring any point of view. The litany of problems and barriers that are cited with regard to these systems can be overwhelming, and not just on first sight. Our goal was to move beyond individual complaints, observations, and anecdotes to develop a more general understanding of what is wrong with the system and what would make it work better.

We observed early that many of the commonly cited problems have been around for a long time, despite the apparent desire of everyone involved to solve them, and despite the existence of examples of how to solve them. We concluded from this that there must be significant barriers preventing solutions from being implemented; barriers that are not being systematically addressed or perhaps even acknowledged. Thus our ultimate objective was to develop a conceptual structure for identifying and addressing these barriers, rather than simply describing what has been done elsewhere, or promoting a particular approach.

Our first general finding was the observation that the word “coordination” is used in case studies to refer to at least two distinct types of activities. Operational coordination is the most intuitive (but the least common), that is, agencies working together on the operation of their vehicles. Administrative coordination is less intuitive but more common; this typically involves agencies centralizing certain administrative functions. In working more with this idea, we noticed further that the words “coordination,” and to a lesser extent “brokerage,” were being generically used to refer to a multitude of different activities, many of which actually had little or nothing to do with the word being used to describe them.

The use of just a couple of words to describe all activities has the undesirable effect of obscuring the variety of the improvements being undertaken; the words
themselves have natural interpretations that can lead lawmakers and others who don’t follow the field closely to draw incorrect conclusions about what needs to be done.

But perhaps an even more serious problem is that overuse of these words tends to focus too much attention on the end state, that is, the system as it is finally implemented; while failing to adequately recognize the variety of issues that have to be grappled with during the development process. The plethora of circumstances and outcomes of the various improvements in place around the country can make the system development process appear infinitely complex; however, in our study we eventually concluded that there are just five basic classes of questions that have to be successfully addressed in any improvement effort:

- What is the specific improvement that is desired, or problem that needs to be solved? The point here is the end result, not the methods used to achieve it.
- How will the objective be achieved, i.e., how will the system be changed? Or put another way, what program will be implemented?
- Who needs to be involved to implement the change, and to keep it going in the future? How will their involvement be encouraged?
- How much money will be needed, up front and for sustaining the system? Where will it come from?
- How will the new system be implemented and managed in the future? That is, who will be in charge, and with what authority; and what type of administrative structure will be used?

While this framework may be of limited value to practitioners until it is further developed and refined, we do feel that it is a vitally needed first step in bringing some sense of order and organization to this extremely complex and often confusing subject. A major problem for us was that we encountered literally dozens of different complaints and ideas for improving the system, and had no way of understanding how they were related, or how to reduce them to a shorter list that we could actually work with. Thus this framework should also be of value to future researchers.

We are reluctant to make specific recommendations about how to make specialized transit systems better. The main reason is that the more we study this subject, the more we are struck by the almost complete absence of objective evidence of the magnitude, or even the existence, of many of the commonly cited problems. Any
significant improvements to the system will probably require the active cooperation of both funders and providers. Unless both sides can agree on what the most important problems are, and whose responsibility it is to address them, it is hard to imagine how any meaningful progress can be made. And it will be hard to develop such consensus in the absence of evidence that is both more clearly measured and more objective than anything we have observed to date.

We have also noted that there is often little evidence that the “improvements” put into place have actually made anything better; and in the cases where evidence is cited, it is often too vague to be useful, or is even irrelevant. In many cases the mere fact that the program is operating is considered in itself to constitute success, which given the difficulty of negotiating these things, is understandable. However, programs are, or should be, instituted in order to achieve some objective; and direct, unambiguous measurement of the extent to which the objectives have been met is hard to come by.

That being said, we can offer a few observations based on what we have learned. The first of these is that the traditional notion of coordination, of different agencies sharing resources and coordinating their vehicle operations, seems rare in practice, and it is not even clear that it is desirable. The potential for significant benefit seems to exist more in principle than in actual documented evidence. Certainly it seems obvious that a van carrying ten people will cost less per person than ten vans carrying one person each, but in practice the opportunity for this appears to be infrequent (aside from prearranged groups that are already done this way), and the costs of arranging it substantial.

Perhaps a more realistic option within the realm of more efficient vehicle use would be to inventory all the vehicles that are currently underutilized, and develop a plan for inducing the owners to make them available for serving trips and people that are currently underserved. Again, it is not clear that there is really an opportunity here; there are many questions that would need to be answered. For example, are there actually idle vans out there, and could they really be made available for other purposes? Do the times when the vehicles are unused correspond to the times when other users need them? Who are the underserved populations who would use them? How can the two be connected without prohibitive “brokering” costs?
An even more realistic option for system improvement would involve ignoring vehicles for the moment and focusing on a centralized effort to reduce the various administrative costs that agencies incur while operating transportation systems. A couple of examples would be a listserv and website for providers to share and acquire information, and better data management software to simplify recordkeeping and reporting to funders.

One major research objective might be to develop a better understanding of how much community transportation costs and why. This is really a long range objective; it can’t be done without better data. A shorter term goal might be to work toward defining some more standardized ways of describing the various functions that these systems undertake, and standardized ways of describing how much they cost.

In terms of describing what systems do, this could include what types of clients they serve, what types of trips, the extent of group vs. individual trips, how long the trips are, what time of day, special conditions, and so on. The cost per trip in general will depend on all these things. Without knowing this, it is impossible to compare systems, or evaluate if a given system is efficient, or how far off it is and why. The next necessary step would be a standardized way of describing how much systems cost to operate, for example accounting for volunteer labor. This would make it easier to tell if a cheaper system is really more efficient or is just paying less for its inputs.

A final, more theoretical, idea is determining if the financial and other incentives under which providers work are somehow at fault. People naturally want to cooperate and make things better; they seem to do so naturally in almost every other walk of life. If they are not doing it here, perhaps we should look harder at what the reasons are. For example, if providers are skeptical about coordinating their vehicles with other organizations, this may reflect an intuitive understanding of the hidden costs of doing this, more than a desire to “protect turf.” Unfortunately, only the successful systems tend to be documented; there would be much to be learned from a series of case studies of system improvement efforts that didn’t work out.