

# LET'S RIDE THE BUS:

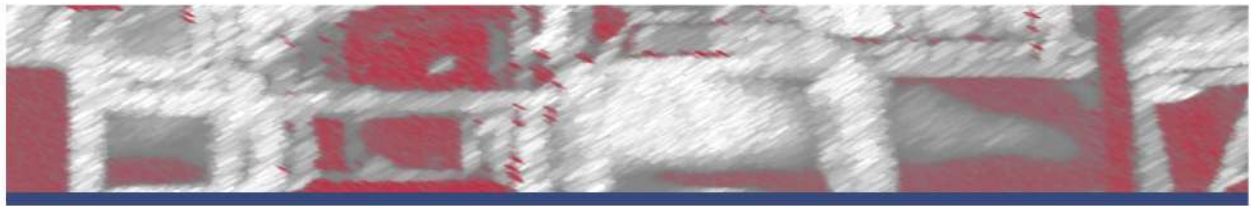
REVERSE-COMMUTE CHALLENGES FACING  
LOW-INCOME INNER-CITY RESIDENTS OF  
ONONDAGA COUNTY

**2009 Report**

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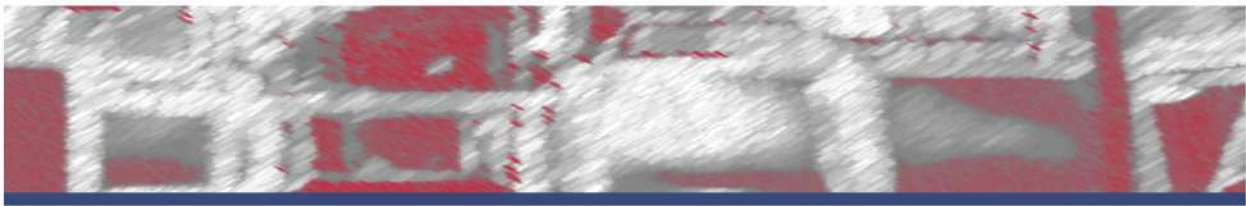
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## Executive Summary

**T**his is the second and final phase of our investigation into the reverse commute challenges facing low-income inner-city residents in Onondaga County. With lower-wage jobs proliferating outside the city core, our findings confirm that transportation remains one of the greatest obstacles to landing and keeping entry-level work.

The current transit system does not meet the needs of low-income workers living in the city or employers based in outlying neighborhoods or the suburbs. Although a majority of manufacturing employers contacted for this study said transportation shortfalls do not affect their ability to hire and retain workers, other stakeholders—jobseekers, job developers, service providers, county planners, and transit professionals—insist the problem is real: Jobseekers with few skills and limited access to transportation struggle to find employment while employers in other key sectors, notably hospitality and health services, contend with the consequences in the form of high turnover, tardiness, absences, and vacancies, as noted in our 2008 report, “*Catch That Bus...*”

Inadequacies in the local transit system will affect the county’s longer-term economic vitality. Current concerns about air pollution, environmental conservation, energy costs, and strained municipal budgets add to the urgency of addressing the interrelated issues of employment, transportation, economic development, and sprawl. Collaboration among key stakeholders—the County, Centro, employers, private transit operators, service providers, and town boards—is necessary to advance the parties’ mutual interests.

Progress on this front may be impeded by several factors:

- **Employer Attitudes**

Local employers seem resistant to tackling the transportation challenge. Their reluctance may reflect concerns about the cost of providing, or subsidizing, transportation and a presumption that transportation is the workers’ problem.

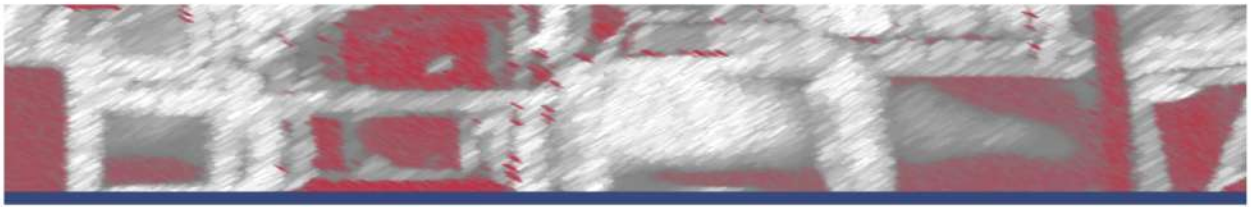
- **Lack of Coordination**

Centro shares the roads with other transit providers, including private operators, human service agencies, and health care providers, all of whom command fleets of school buses, vans, taxis, and sedans. The ability and willingness of these various players to coordinate efforts in pursuit of greater financial and operating efficiencies is impaired by turf, financial, and legal considerations.

- **Resistance to Smart Planning**

Although local planning professionals advocate land use policies that promote high-density economic and residential development—with the attendant positive impact on transit services—municipalities have other priorities. A determined effort to grow the local tax base has trumped concerns about economic and environmental sustainability.

Two northeastern cities, similar to Syracuse in several ways, have successfully attacked their reverse commute challenge. In Hartford, CT, ongoing collaboration among transportation providers, social service organizations, and local employers sustains a popular shuttle service to outlying worksites. Flexibility, outreach to employers, and stable funding keep the system going. The transit authority in Albany, NY runs an unlimited-rides program and shuttle services that bring transportation to 80% of the area’s employment locations. The interrelated services



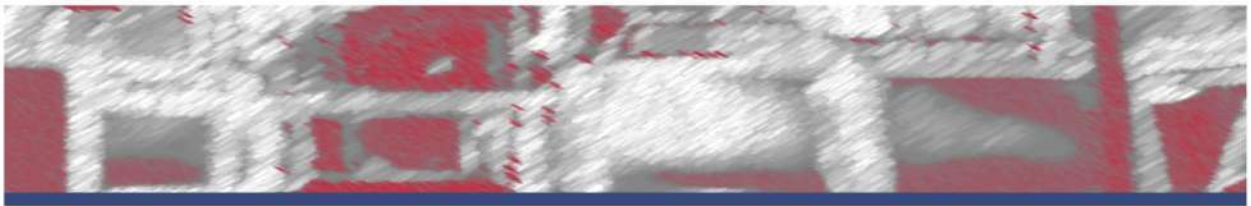
are built on a wide-ranging fixed route bus system and a strong partnership with local employers.

Finally, we provide a list of recommendations targeted to specific stakeholders that flow from the findings in this report.

## Acknowledgments

This report, the second and final phase of our work on reverse commute challenges facing low-income inner-city residents, reflects the contributions of many individuals and organizations. First, we want to thank the Onondaga County Industrial Development Agency for providing the necessary financial support and, in particular, Carolyn May, senior economic developer at the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development, for pointing us to the IDA, sharing her deep knowledge of the local economy, and recognizing the importance of the topic. Carol Hill, director of workforce solutions and community relations at the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, was an indispensable partner in helping us find and collect data from critical sources. As for those sources, this report reflects their experiences and perceptions; we sincerely thank the many jobseekers, job counselors and developers, employers, transportation and planning professionals, and private sector transit operators, who met with us and patiently answered our questions. We are indebted to Shawn Lindabury and Whitney Larsen, students at Cornell University who conducted research on reverse-commute best practices under the supervision of Yael Levitte; their work informed our findings and reinforced our conclusions, and is appended in its entirety. And finally, we'd like to thank our ILR colleagues Lou Jean Fleron, Veronica Moore, and Devon Sanger for their contributions to the end result.





## Introduction

The days are long gone when Americans lived close enough to the factory or fields or store to get to work on foot. Cities now sprawl into suburbs and the locus of economic activity is likewise dispersed. That means employment and transportation are tightly linked: 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans depend on vehicles of one sort or another to get from home to work and back again, often with stops for personal and/or family needs along the way. For a variety of historical, cultural, political, and economic reasons, private cars are the preferred mode of conveyance. In almost every section of the country, public transit is perceived as the vehicle of last resort.

For all too many workers, however, public transit is a limited option. Low-wage and entry-level workers who rely on public transit to get around are at a particular disadvantage. A study released in 2003 by the United States General Accounting Office (now the General Accountability Office) noted that 40% of public transit riders are low-income individuals. And yet, many low-wage and entry-level workers live in cities without well-developed transportation alternatives or in neighborhoods underserved by the local transit company. Making matters worse, bus, train, and subway connections between inner-city residential areas and suburban or outlying neighborhood worksites—where an increasing proportion of low-wage jobs are located—are often indirect, time consuming, or simply nonexistent. According to a study published in 2000 by the consulting firm Multisystems, Inc., 25% of welfare recipients said transportation was one of the biggest obstacles to holding down a job (<http://www.solutionsforamerica.org/livingwage/connecting.html>).

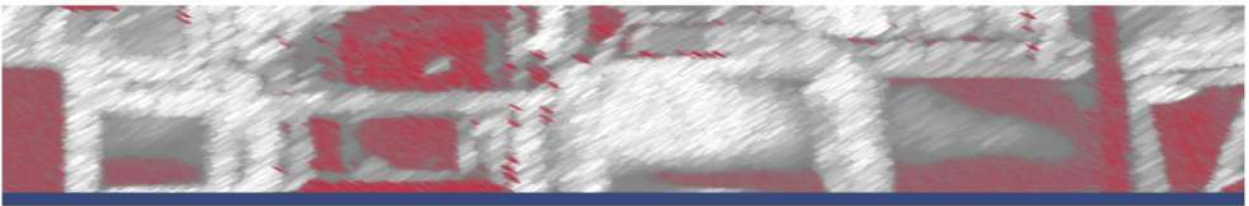
That view is echoed by many service providers who assist low-wage and entry-level workers in Onondaga County. “Along with a lack of skills, the GED, and childcare, transportation is right up there in the package of employment-related barriers,” notes one job developer. “We can find

entry-level jobs,” says a colleague, “but these folks can’t get to them—especially if it’s the second or third shift.”

The inadequacy of the local transit system has implications for the county’s longer-term economic vitality. To the extent that economic growth takes place in the suburbs, employers who rely on low-wage workers may encounter difficulty filling those jobs; meanwhile, low-wage inner-city residents who lack access to a car will have trouble finding a job and keeping it. *A labor market characterized by job vacancies on the demand side and unemployed individuals on the supply side will hamper efforts to revitalize the local economy. Concerns about air pollution, environmental conservation, energy costs, and strained municipal budgets only add to the urgency of addressing the interrelated issues of employment, transportation, economic development, and sprawl.*

This study broadens the investigation of the local reverse-commute/transportation conundrum that we began in 2008. At that time, employers based in the suburbs and outlying city neighborhoods were telling county planners about labor shortages for entry-level positions. A foundational report prepared by Bergmann Associates in 2001 for the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council surveyed employers about the transit needs of low-income workers and individuals moving off welfare. We chose a complementary approach and went directly to the workers who rely on public transit to travel from home to work and back again. Our focus was workers in health care, hospitality, and warehousing—three industries in the county that hire a large proportion of low-wage workers. The resulting report—*Catch That Bus: Reverse-Commute Challenges Facing Low-Income Inner-City Residents of Onondaga County* (Edid and Levitte; 2008)—identified four critical transportation challenges facing low-wage workers who reside in the city and commute to jobs outside the city core:





- limited bus service at non-standard times
- out-of-synch work and bus schedules
- off-schedule and off-route buses
- poorly located bus stops.

We used these findings as the starting point for our current study, *Let's Ride the Bus: Reverse-Commute Challenges Facing Low-Income Inner-City Residents of Onondaga County*. Once again, this report assesses the issue largely from the perspective of low-wage workers and jobseekers.

## Methodology

**T**he methodology for this phase of the study involved qualitative interviews across a broad field of stakeholders. In contrast with the first reverse commute report, which focused on low-wage workers in health services, hospitality, and warehousing, this one draws on the transportation challenges facing individuals seeking entry-level jobs in general. We reached out to a wide circle of sources, including unemployed individuals; job developers, case managers, and other service providers; county planners and transit professionals; private sector transit operators; and employers in the manufacturing, health support services, and retail sectors. During the course of our research, the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development (OCOED) conducted a transportation-related poll of 298 local employers, 98% of whom are manufacturers; the informal poll yielded 40 responses and useful data.

With the logistical and facilitation assistance of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, we conducted focus groups with service providers, in-person interviews with jobseekers and transit professionals, and phone interviews with employers, transit operators, and planners. In all, we interviewed 11 jobseekers, 15 service providers, eight planners, two private transit operators, and three employers. To ensure

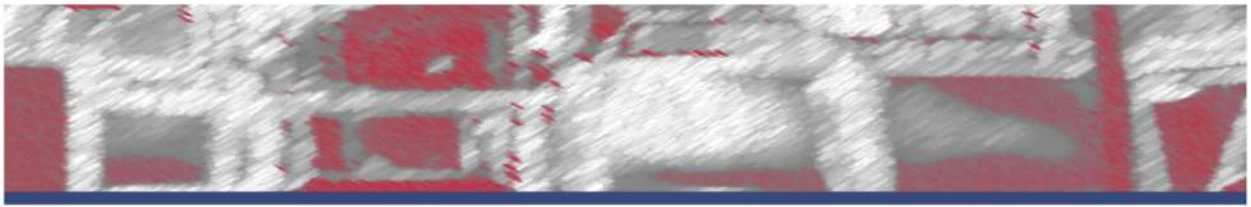
confidentially, no names or other identifying information are included in this report.

As in the first study, the findings presented here reflect the perspectives of the people who talked with us. Our conclusions may be somewhat skewed by the small number of jobseekers and employers we interviewed. We had expected to meet many more jobseekers stymied by the transportation situation, but when we visited CNYWorks in February, only a few of the several dozen jobseekers we approached said access to transportation was an issue—and these were primarily Vietnam veterans. Likewise, the employers in manufacturing, health support services, and retail with whom we spoke for this round of the research said transportation issues do not affect recruitment and retention of low-wage workers; the majority of respondents to the OCOED poll expressed a similar view.

Of course, these perceptions may be colored by the economic crisis afflicting the country, which has swelled the pool of jobseekers, and thus of employers, for whom transportation is not currently a primary concern. They may also reflect a disparity among labor markets; that is, the supply of and demand for labor in manufacturing and retailing may encompass a mix of skills and expectations that differs from those in hospitality, warehousing, and health services (the sectors we studied in 2008). ***Further investigation is needed to determine precisely why workers and employers in manufacturing and retailing are not experiencing significant transportation-related problems while their counterparts in hospitality, warehousing, and health services are struggling to find jobs, on the one hand, and workers on the other.***

Nonetheless, we did find data that confirm transportation challenges negatively affect low-wage inner-city jobseekers. First, we heard numerous and similar anecdotes from service providers, transit professionals, and economic development planners. Second, we know from the earlier reverse-commute report, as well as a





2007 study of the immigrant worker experience (see Edid, *Bridging the Gap: Training Needs Assessment of the Immigrant Workforce in Onondaga County, NY*, 2007), that the local public transit system is ill suited to the needs of low-wage workers who must reverse commute to earn their livelihoods. *Although this issue may not loom large right now, the reverse-commute challenge will no doubt resurface once economic activity begins to revive.*

## Findings

**L**ike many older metropolitan areas in the United States, Syracuse is struggling against a shrinking economic base and a dwindling population. Numerous jobs have disappeared outright—particularly entry-level manufacturing jobs that held out the promise of a middle-class life—while others have migrated to the suburbs. For low-wage and entry-level workers who reside in the city, the current economic meltdown has compounded what was already a daunting situation. Not only are there fewer jobs at decent wages, but the jobs that do exist are often difficult, if not impossible, to reach. Hospitality, retail, and warehousing facilities are increasingly located in the suburbs; in addition, health services jobs, apart from those attached to the urban hospital core, are most often found in outlying city neighborhoods. “There are large numbers of workers on the day shift needing access to areas we do not serve well, like the big box corridor on Route 31,” admitted a transit planner.

As noted in *Catch That Bus*, transportation obstacles hinder the ability of low-wage inner-city workers to reverse commute; that is, to get to jobs located outside the city center. Many jobseekers cannot afford cars and many lack a driver’s license; buses may not pass near their homes or their place of employment. Bringing children to day care or school may mean waking up at 5 a.m. to get everyone where they need to

be at the appointed hour. According to social service providers, the transportation issue inevitably arises when they talk to clients about work. “Can you get there?” is one of the first questions they ask,” said a job developer. Added one Vietnam veteran: “Relying on a bus limits where you can live and it limits your employment opportunities.”

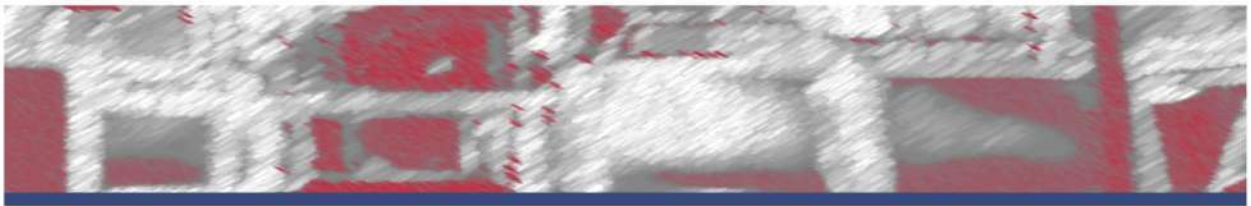
Centro’s hub-and-spoke system complicates and lengthens the reverse commute: workers first take a bus

downtown and then transfer to a second line that gets them closer to their final destination—a trip that can take upwards of one-and-a-half to two hours. Individuals who work the second and third shifts or on the weekends have few, if any, public transit options. Moreover, some work schedules do not mesh with the bus schedule and some worksites are simply inaccessible by bus.

Consider the experience of one job seeker: A slip on the ice forced him onto workers’ compensation. His income fell, he couldn’t make his car payments, and he was forced to give up the car. The big box store where he worked was located well over a mile from the nearest bus stop, which had no service on Sunday or after the end of the third shift (around midnight). He was resigned to using public transit and asked management to change his schedule so he could catch the bus. His request was denied and he lost his job.

Inadequate public transit is a recognized problem in the county. Job developers and other human service providers, economic development and transportation planners, private transit providers, and employers generally agree that the system is ripe for overhaul. The Centro bus schedule and





route structure are best suited to people who work traditional hours Monday-Friday and have business to conduct downtown. Service drops off in midday and after the evening rush hour; buses are off the roads by 12:30 a.m., with 11:30 p.m. being the last possible time to transfer at the downtown hub. Although Saturday/Sunday service has been expanded, buses still run less frequently than during the week. Suburb-to-suburb routes, however, do not exist.

“The transit system operates like it did 30 years ago,” said one planner. “It’s no surprise the service is geared for 9-5 jobs that don’t exist for the people who actually ride the bus.”

Transportation and planning professionals concede that reverse commuting is not high on the list of priorities. Management attention and financial resources are gobbled up by competing and compelling demands—for vehicle maintenance, safety, and facilities. The age of the county’s infrastructure adds to the overall cost structure and raises the price of radical change. So do the low density residential and worksite patterns, the random quit times at many workplaces, and the sizeable number of employers with only a handful of employees. Running a bus of any size out to a neighborhood at dawn to pick up and then deliver one, two, or even seven or eight people to scattered work sites, or scheduling stops at a site where workers clock out whenever the day’s tasks are done instead of at a fixed time, does not make economic sense to Centro. “The largest part of our operating costs sits behind the wheel,” said one public transit professional. “It’s irrelevant whether it’s a jitney or a 40-foot bus.”

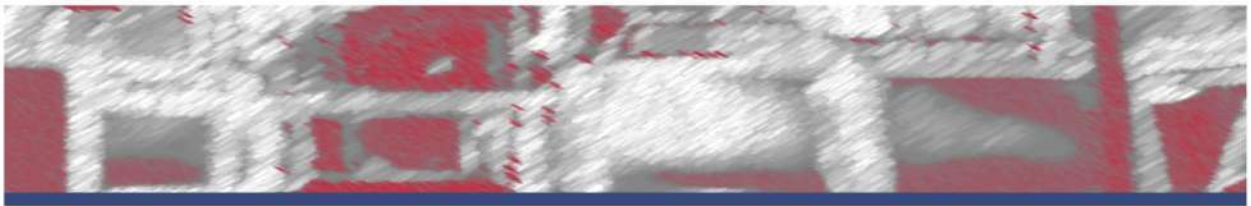
Nonetheless, transit planners assert the reverse commute problem could be solved. “It would mean targeting resources and reframing our priority needs,” said one. “An influx of new money could go a long way.” *Commitment from employers and private transit operators to help deal with the problem is also critical to its resolution.*

## Centro’s Role

Some critics complain that Centro, not unlike local residents and employers, perceives public buses as the transportation vehicle of last resort. They note the paucity of bus shelters and park-and-ride facilities and a website that is hard to navigate for trip planning purposes. Centro is aware of such shortfalls and is trying to address at least some of them. The bus company will soon launch an interactive computer application that will enable riders to find the most efficient route (including the walk from the bus stop) to their destination. And it is constantly on the prowl for federal grants to help defray operating and capital costs and to support new initiatives. As of early 2009, Centro was awaiting an estimated \$200,000 due from state and federal sources and was putting together a proposal for a new two-year \$500,000 grant from the federal Job Access and Reverse Commute program (JARC), which targets the employment-related transportation needs of welfare recipients and low-income workers. These monies will be used to revive and aggressively market the popular Rides for Work program that was launched in 2001 but fell dormant in 2008 when funding dried up. Intended as short-term transportation support for low-income county residents who work odd hours or do not live near a bus line, Rides for Work provided more than 54,000 free rides to 362 people in 2007 but only 150 people in 2008.

The bus company also responds to specific requests from suburban employers for help transporting workers at the start and end of their shifts. Using funds available through JARC, Centro can (and has) provide(d) shuttle service between a central meeting point in Syracuse and an outlying worksite; when appropriate, Centro subcontracts the job to one of four less costly private transit providers. Riders are charged one dollar each way and employers are also obliged to contribute toward the cost. The employer’s share, part of the local match required by JARC, depends on the number of passengers, the vehicle used, the time of day, and the day of the





week; an employer wanting to transport 18 people, say, divided among two shifts, might spend about \$2,500 a month doing so. At least one social service agency has collaborated with Centro, using its own funding sources to share the financial and operational burden of ferrying clients between the city and work in the far reaches of the county.

In an ideal world, Centro would repurpose itself as “mobility broker” for the entire community. Instead of being a plain-vanilla bus company, Centro envisions drawing on the entire panoply of transit services in the county: pulling together funding streams, staffs, and other resources and creating a fully integrated and coordinated system that meets the needs of all stakeholders, from workers to employers to shoppers to seniors to the disabled and the disadvantaged.

### Complicating Factors

Until such time as that goal is achieved, reverse-commuting remains a serious challenge for low-wage workers and some suburban and outer-neighborhood employers. Following is a discussion of key issues that complicate the search for solutions.

#### Employer Attitudes

Before the worst of the financial crisis hit last fall, area employers used informal channels to signal county and city economic development officials about the difficulty of finding and keeping low-wage workers. They identified several likely causes, including workers’ lack of appropriate math, language, communication, and technology skills; an indifferent work ethic; and a sense of entitlement (see Edid, *Bridging the Gap...*). Some low-wage employers, including small manufacturers, hotel managers, and food service and health care supervisors added transportation shortfalls as another contributing factor to the longstanding vacancies and high turnover they were experiencing. As detailed in *Catch That Bus*, many of these jobs require hours and shifts that do not mesh with the bus schedule, and many of these worksites are not on a bus route, are far removed from the bus stop, across a dangerous

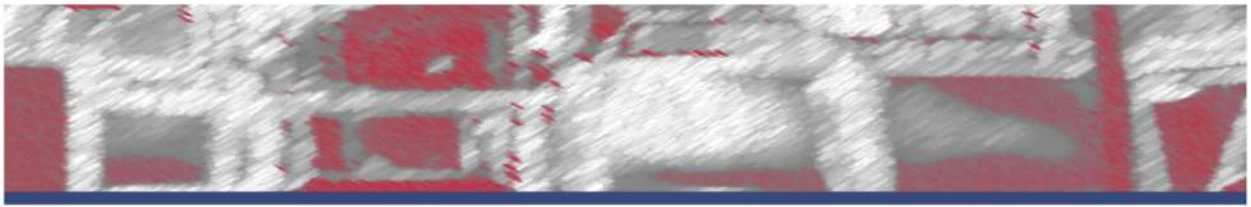
road, or in locales that require passing through unlighted areas at night.

Granted, several of these factors are outside employers’ control and fall under the purview of Centro or state and local authorities. But given the chance to tackle the transportation challenge head on, many local employers demur. Transportation professionals assert their outreach to employer and business organizations has yielded minimal response. Private transit operators say employers who have inquired about custom transportation arrangements fail to follow up. Centro’s Fare Deal program, which encourages the use of public transit by offering employers a federal tax break worth up to \$115/worker, has attracted only about 50 employers. “They say it’s too difficult for HR (the human resources office) to deal with,” commented one transit planner.

These responses (or lack thereof) partly reflect employer concerns about the cost of providing, or subsidizing, transportation. Running a shuttle is certainly not cheap—it costs an estimated \$30 an hour for an eight-passenger van and nearly \$300 a day to run a bus back and forth. But the funds have to come from somewhere and when Centro raises the issue of cost-sharing to comply with JARC’s 50/50 federal/local match requirement, employers scatter. One suburban company lost what had been a free transit service (until state funds being used for the local match ran out) after refusing to pay its share; the company turned to staffing agencies to fill the resulting vacancies, which then appealed for help to Centro, which in turn insisted on negotiating a financial contribution.

“Everyone has a need for employee transportation,” said a transit planner, “and very few are willing to sit at the table after the local employer match comes up. If a warehouse on one of the major thoroughfares gave us \$40,000 and we had some government resources, we’d put a big bus on all three shifts.”





Employers' reluctance to get involved also reflects a presumption that transportation is the workers' problem. "It's not my responsibility to get them to and from work," said one Liverpool employer, most of whose workers commute by car. Experience has taught transit planners that employers tend to regard transportation as a social service matter, not a business issue.

Overlooking the potential improvement to the bottom line that could result from more attention to workers' transportation needs may be short-sighted, however. One employer who launched a two-bus shuttle service between several city pick-up points and its suburban facility in 2003 found that turnover dropped dramatically. "Workers saw that employer-provided transportation was really a benefit," a company official said. "It helps us recruit and retain workers." Even companies whose employees commute by car might benefit from enhanced public transit service. If nothing else, it would expand the pool of qualified job applicants. "The lack of buses in our area definitely has an impact on hiring the best (low-wage) candidates for our jobs," commented one respondent to the OCOED poll. Of the 40 respondents to the poll, seven indicated that lack of bus service or shift schedules that do not match bus schedules negatively affects their ability to attract and hire the best candidates.

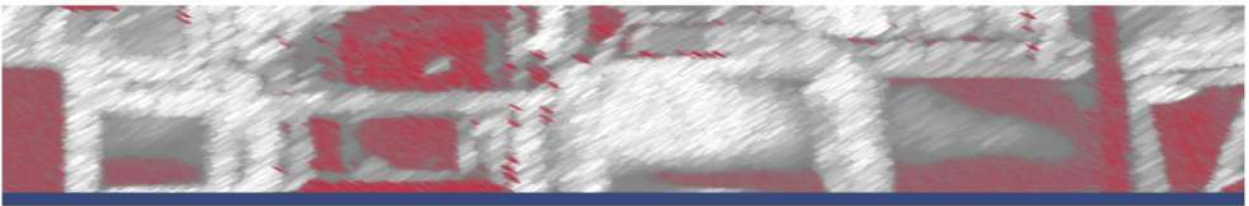
Economic development and transportation planners are baffled by employers' reluctance to deal with the public side of the transportation issue. Indeed, most suburban employers passively and actively support workers' use of private vehicles. "They'll pave a parking lot, plow it, and clean it—and spend upwards of \$30,000 a year doing so—but they won't put money towards the local match for a government transit program to run an employee shuttle," one planner noted.

This bias toward automobiles—pervasive throughout American society—manifests in other ways as well. Employers are technically prohibited from discriminating in the hiring

process based on mode of transportation, although having access to a car can be construed as a job requirement. Many employers routinely ask about jobseekers' plans to get to and from work, a question that disqualifies many low-income individuals. "I've been rejected by some employers because I don't have a car," said a Vietnam veteran. Wrote one employer in the OCOED poll: "In the past we had a lot of issues with workers not being able to get to work due to transportation problems. We are not on a bus route. We solved that problem by hiring people that had their own transportation." Social service providers say the lack of a car has negative connotations, whereas access to a car and possessing a driver's license suggests the job applicant can "make things happen."

Centro, too, can make things happen if employers pitch in. The bus company has occasionally tweaked its schedule—stopping by a facility 10 minutes later, for example, when the employer agreed to move up the quit time so workers could make the bus—but many employers are either uninterested, unable, or unwilling to cooperate. Obviously Centro could not afford to make such changes for every employer in every corner of the county, but the bus company could conceivably add or change routes to better serve dense pockets of employment. Employers' current penchant for hiring temporary workers who may not be working—or riding the bus—after they are laid off in a few months is also a major obstacle to route adjustments. So, too, is the proliferation of work schedules. By way of example, planners cite the varied start and end times for housekeepers at the different hotels in Carrier Circle and for hourly workers at University Hospital. "The hospital asked for more service," said a transit planner, "but we couldn't get departments to agree to similar hours, so how can we run a bus there?"





### ***Lack of Coordination***

Centro does not have a monopoly on transit in Onondaga County. There are at least half a dozen private operators who command fleets of school buses, vans, taxis, and sedans, as well as several human service agencies (both non-profit and public sector) and health care providers who maintain pools of small buses and vans to cart around clients. Centro occasionally subcontracts with one or more private providers to fill particular needs, such as driving Medicaid patients to medical appointments or transporting groups of refugee and new immigrant workers from a central pick-up point out to local farms or to employers in neighboring counties. Centro's limited resources and comparatively high cost structure means there are some services the company cannot provide.

For the most part, the independent providers do not coordinate services or use of their physical assets with each other or with Centro. The resulting system is woefully inefficient: sometimes the private operators' vehicles are in use and sometimes they sit idle. "We have good paratransit here at very high cost," commented one planner. "There's a lot of duplication of effort."

Not surprisingly, turf, financial, and legal considerations impair the ability and willingness of the various transit providers to coordinate efforts. Although the private, public, and non-profit providers serve both discrete and overlapping constituencies, they are accountable to different authorities, adhere to distinct business models, and pursue diverse missions. Providers who transport Medicaid patients, for example, are prohibited by federal regulations from mixing populations on any given trip. Other providers insist on keeping vans at the ready in case of emergency or for staff use during the day before turning them over, say, to after-school programming needs. "Everyone has their parochial interests," lamented a planner. "And some just don't want to lose control of their fleet."

Bureaucracy and insurance requirements are additional impediments. To a person, everyone who has applied for grants or other financial assistance from the federal government complains about the never-ending process, mind-numbing paperwork, stringent limitations on how the money is spent, tortuously slow reimbursement for monies expended, and escalating demands for a local match. These conditions put a damper on providers' appetite for the funds, which in turn denies them opportunities that might have presented for collaborative planning and implementation. The independent providers are further deterred from working with Centro by the company's demand that subcontractors take out a \$500,000 insurance policy, which can be difficult and cost prohibitive to obtain, especially for small operators and entrepreneurs without a track record.

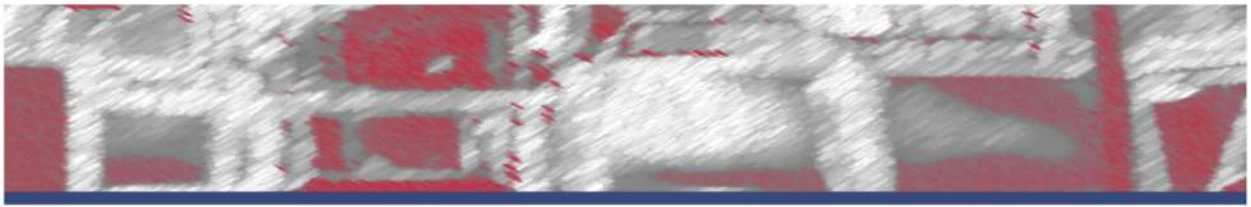
Transit planners argue that coordination among the key players would go a long way toward improving transit services in the county. They point to the collaboration—spurred by the ready availability of federal and state funds—that resulted in the Rides for Work program back in 2001. And yet, planners are realistic about the incentives—financial and otherwise—that will bring people to the table and the importance of outside pressure to break down institutional barriers.

"We can't solve this at the state or local level," asserts one planner. "There are too many interests making money off the current system. We need a federal law that forces cooperation and trip coordination." Or at the very least, insistence by local grantmakers, such as United Way, that grant recipients work together to create and deliver an effective and efficient transportation system.

### ***Resistance to Smart Planning***

Onondaga County comprises one city, 19 towns, and 15 villages. New York State's home rule law grants these distinct municipal entities wide latitude in defining their own zoning regulations. The county planning agency supports this





process by offering advice, information, and educational workshops. Currently, planning professionals are advocating smart growth; that is, land use policies that promote high-density economic and residential development coupled with attention to transit considerations. If planners had their way, housing and economic activity would be clustered in dense concentrations that are pedestrian-friendly, easily serviced by public transportation, and surrounded by acres of green.

But alas, local decision makers have other priorities. And taxes top the list. With demand for more and better local services never ceasing and the cost of providing these services constantly escalating, suburban towns and villages in the county are in a tight race for the revenues generated by sales and property taxes. It's a rare town board that will spurn a developer who wants to build a subdivision with 100 houses on a half acre each, a strip mall on a local thoroughfare that brings new retailers to the area, a senior citizen home on what was once a swamp, or a warehouse or office building with its own campus. "They think they're doing what people are asking for," sighed one planner. "And anything that generates tax dollars—we'll take it."

The resulting low-density commercial corridors, sprawling neighborhoods, and isolated worksites cannot be efficiently serviced by public transit. Centro takes a lot of heat for inadequate and indifferent service, but suburban authorities do not make the bus company's charge easy to execute. *With little to no coordination between transit experts and local officials about vision or strategy, workers and residents are left stranded.*

## Best Practices<sup>1</sup>

Two northeastern cities, Hartford, CT and Albany, NY were chosen as case studies because of their similarity to Syracuse in terms of population, median household income, and degrees of sprawl. The Jobs Access Program in Hartford stands out because of consistent funding and program growth, outreach to employers, and flexibility in meeting the needs of reverse commuters. Albany's two related programs, Corporate Swiper and a shuttle system, are noteworthy due to extensive employer participation, a large fixed route system and complementary flexible shuttle service, and diversified income sources.

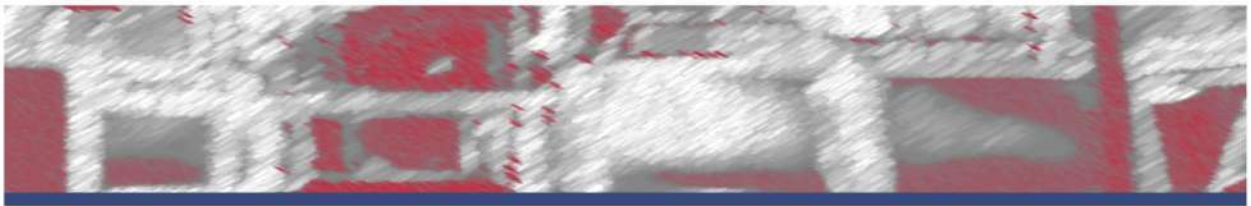
### Hartford

A collaborative effort among transportation providers, social service organizations, the City of Hartford, and local employers, the Capitol Region Council of Governments Job Access Program was launched in 1997 to provide access to suburban worksites that were not served by existing bus routes. Service is provided by private operators using smaller buses, paratransit vehicles, and van pools. Ridership has grown steadily, from 645 riders in 1997 to more than 4,000 riders ten years later.

The program has succeeded due to several factors. The first is its flexibility. Program managers can provide service within 48 hours of receiving a request from an employer if five or more riders live near each other and travel to work as a group. Participants are also offered guaranteed rides home in case of emergency and individuals can request one-time service for a job-related trip, like an interview. The second reason is outreach to employers, which sustains their involvement. Employers sponsor van pools

<sup>1</sup> This section draws exclusively from a report prepared by Shawn Lindabury and Whitney Larsen: "A Comparative Analysis of Reverse Commute Programs and Their Relevance to Syracuse." See the appendix for the complete report.





and subsidize the cost; the human resources department at many companies actively promotes it. In addition, the Council of Governments organizes monthly task force meetings for all stakeholders to assess programmatic needs, and regularly networks with area employers. Finally, the program's funding sources are relatively stable. Riders are charged \$1.25, which is the same fare as the regular bus (the cost may be deducted directly from workers' paychecks) and employers also pay a share. Other revenues flow in from JARC and the Connecticut Department of Social Services.

### **Albany**

Reverse commute services in Albany are provided by the Capital District Transit Authority. The Corporate Swiper Program, combined with a shuttle system to suburban worksites, ensures transit service to 80% of employment locations in the area. The successful program is built on two cornerstones: an existing and wide-ranging fixed route bus system and a strong partnership with local employers, who cooperate with the transit authority to design programs that meet the needs of businesses and workers.

The Swiper card is a flat-rate monthly pass that provides access to all transit authority buses at any time. It is purchased at progressive discounts by employers, who distribute them to employees at a cost determined by the employer. Employees may be charged the entire discounted and tax-exempt price or a portion of the employer's cost; alternatively, it may be provided as part of the benefits package. Swiper cards benefit both parties: workers enjoy a low-stress and low-cost commute on public transit, guaranteed rides home in case of emergency, and free parking up to five times a month in designated lots; employers are better able to attract and retain good workers, minimize parking requirements and associated expenses, and position the company as an environmentally-responsible neighbor.

Three shuttle services provide access to suburban businesses, connections to fixed bus routes, and links to park-and-ride lots. The shuttles ply regular routes and also offer "deviation trips" that can be requested by phone at any time. Two shuttles run late-night (until 11:30 pm) service; after service shuts down, rides home are guaranteed for workers with a Swiper card. Rides are free with a Swiper card, or \$1 without. The transit authority commits about 6% of its resources to the shuttle routes, which serve about 2% of its riders.

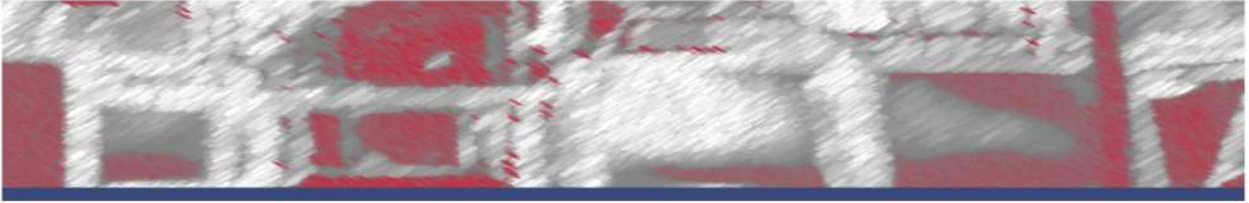
Diversified funding sustains these programs. The authority receives money from several federal sources, including the Federal Transit Administration, Congestion Mitigation Air Quality, and JARC. State resources include the transit operating assistance program. Local funds flow from a small share of mortgage tax receipts, fares, Swiper card sales, advertising revenue, parking charges, and university contracts.

## **Recommendations**

**B**ased on our evaluation of data collected for this study, we submit the following list of recommendations targeted to specific parties affected by the reverse-commute challenge. Additional—and several overlapping—recommendations drawn from the Hartford and Albany case studies are available in the appendix on pages 22-23.

### **For Onondaga County:**

- Conduct comprehensive survey of Onondaga County employers about recruitment and retention challenges regarding low-wage workers
- Conduct survey of independent transit operators and nonprofits regarding fleet size and availability, and willingness to coordinate provision of services
- Convene a community conference of all stakeholders involved with reverse



commute issues to assess needs and willingness to collaborate

- Lobby federal government for more flexibility in spending transportation funds

#### **For Centro:**

- Revisit routes and schedules, with particular attention to locales with large numbers of workers (using data collected from above surveys)
- Initiate aggressive outreach to employers regarding existing incentives and programs that promote use of public transit; hold transportation workshops for employers
- Work with employers to implement “Go Green” campaign to encourage use of public transit
- Create “tool kit” for job developers that helps them market the bus system by providing information to employers about incentives and other Centro programs
- Create debit card for transportation
- Set up call center for county’s transportation needs (central dispatch for public, private, and nonprofit providers)

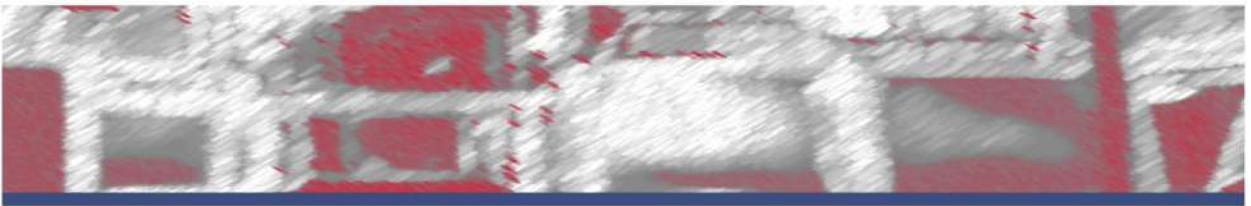
#### **For Transportation Planners:**

- Develop transportation listserv to circulate news about local transit (e.g., new programs, innovative ideas, tax incentives, etc.)
- Work with CNYWorks and job developers to collect and analyze data on transportation needs of jobseekers

#### **For Employers:**

- Be more responsive to employees’ public transit needs (e.g., tweak schedules, coordinate start/quit times with nearby employers, join Fare Deal program)
- Facilitate formation of employee car pools
- Consider cost-sharing transportation programs with Centro and/or nearby employers that would help attract and retain workers



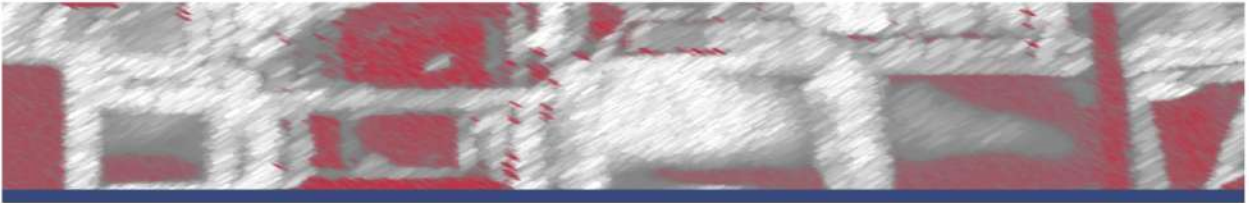


## **Appendix**

# **A Comparative Analysis of Reverse Commute Programs and their Relevance to Syracuse**



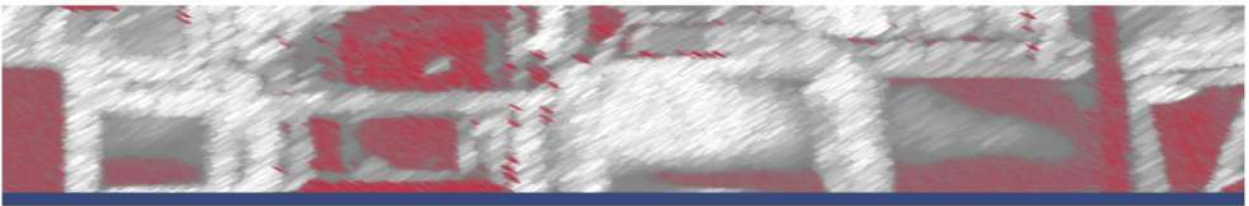
**By: Shawn Lindabury and Whitney Larsen**  
**CRP 3860: Sustainable Transportation**  
**Professor Yael Levitte**  
**May 12, 2009**



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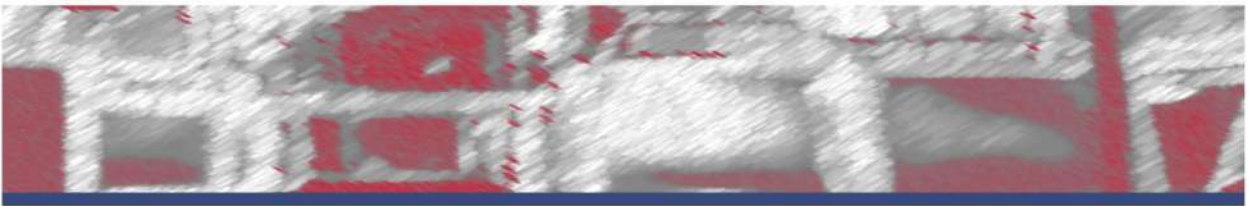




## Executive Summary

Workers who commute from downtown central business districts to the suburbs are known as reverse commuters. As suburban sprawl increases, reverse commuters face growing challenges in accessing their job sites. The 2008 report *Catch that Bus* by Yael Levitte and Maralyn Edid found that reverse commuters in Syracuse, NY face significant challenges due to limited transit service to their job sites. Existing Syracuse initiatives to provide reverse commuting services are not sufficient to meet the needs of Syracuse residents. The current Rides for Work program in Syracuse, operated by the local transit agency Centro, is a temporary program that suffers from inconsistent funding as a result of its reliance of JARC funding. This paper explores two case studies of successful reverse commute programs in Hartford, CT and Albany, NY. Both cities have similar demographics to Syracuse and can serve as models of viable reverse commute programs to help Syracuse better meet the needs of low income residents struggling to access jobs in the suburbs. Several key characteristics make these two programs successful and could be adopted in Syracuse to improve job access for reverse commuters: employer participation and outreach, flexibility to meet the changing needs of commuters, writing a strategic plan to get JARC money, diversifying funding sources by getting state and local governments to match JARC funding, using formula funds to extend regular service, and providing permanent service.

With the rising trend of suburban sprawl over the past century, many employers are locating outside city limits in low density areas where transit service is limited or non-existent. Reverse commuters, or workers who live downtown but are forced to commute to the suburbs to access their jobs, face significant transportation challenges that limit their ability to obtain and keep a steady job. Especially for low income workers who work during non-traditional hours, public transit is lacking and other private forms of transportation are not accessible due to their large cost. The City of Syracuse, NY is no exception to the trend of sprawl and the challenges of reverse commuting. Cities, including Syracuse, and employers have recognized these challenges and designed programs to mitigate them. This paper builds upon the 2008 report by Maralyn Edid and Yael Levitte that examined reverse commuting challenges in Syracuse and the limitations of the current jobs access program. In this paper relevant case studies of other viable reverse commute and jobs access programs are explored to serve as a model and a source of best practices that can be adopted in Syracuse to minimize the transportation and job access challenges faced by reverse commuters.



## Introduction

With the rising trend of suburban sprawl over the past century, many employers are locating outside city limits in low density areas where transit service is limited or non-existent. Reverse commuters, or workers who live downtown but are forced to commute to the suburbs to access their jobs, face significant transportation challenges that limit their ability to obtain and keep a steady job. Especially for low income workers who work during non-traditional hours, public transit is lacking and other private forms of transportation are not accessible due to their large cost. The City of Syracuse, NY is no exception to the trend of sprawl and the challenges of reverse commuting. Cities, including Syracuse, and employers have recognized these challenges and designed programs to mitigate them. This paper builds upon the 2008 report by Yael Levitte and Maralyn Edid that examined reverse commuting challenges in Syracuse and the limitations of the current jobs access program. In this paper relevant case studies of other viable reverse commute and jobs access programs are explored to serve as a model and a source of best practices that can be adopted in Syracuse to minimize the transportation and job access challenges faced by reverse commuters

## Statement of Problem

Entry level jobs in Syracuse are increasingly located in the suburbs where transit service is limited or non-existent. Low income reverse commuters who commute from the downtown to suburbs face significant challenges due to limited or non-existent transit service to their work sites. These challenges result in limited access to jobs causing increased unemployment among low income populations.

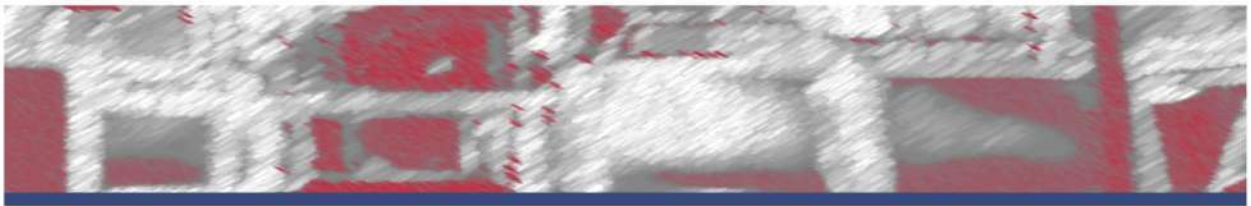
### **Background**

The 2008 report *Catch that Bus* examined transportation challenges for reverse commuters in Syracuse. By conducting focus groups with reverse commuters, the report concluded that reverse commuters who relied on transit to get to work face significant challenges, including "limited service at non-standard times, out-of synch schedules, off-schedule and off-route buses, and poorly located bus stops" (Edid and Levitte 2008).

To address reverse commuting challenges, the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority, which provides transit service to the Syracuse area under the name Centro, established the Rides for Work Program in 2001. Rides for Work is a short term program designed to give low income workers time to arrange alternate forms of transportation to their jobs. The program is funded by federal JARC and state TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) grant money. Private contractors provide services through smaller buses and paratransit vehicles ("Rides for Work" 2009).

The Rides for Work program faces significant challenges in meeting the needs of low income reverse commuters in Syracuse. First, according to a transportation specialist, service is limited to 90 days, so a commuter must find alternate arrangements such as purchasing a car, arranging car pools, or changing residences, shift time, or worksites to access transit. These options may be difficult or impossible for workers to achieve,





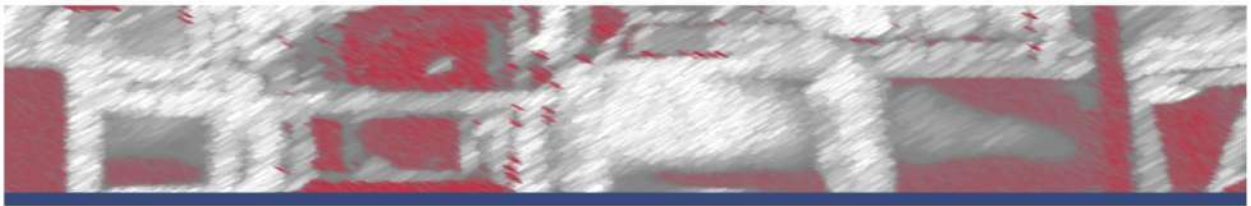
leaving them no viable alternatives to access their job sites. For example, the specialist cited one worker who does not speak English and does not have a driver's license. This worker is lucky enough to have been placed in a permanent company sponsored van pool, but most workers in this situation do not have a permanent option to access their jobs. Second, support for the program from employers in the Syracuse area is virtually non-existent. One van pool was started with support from a company, but mainly employees seek out the Rides for Work program on an individual basis (Syracuse interview, 2009).

Third, funding is a constant challenge because the program relies on competitive grants to continue operations. In 2008 the program reduced service because of funding cuts, resulting in only 150 people participating in the program that year. Syracuse primarily relies on JARC (Job Access Reverse Commute) funding, which has several drawbacks. The JARC program was created in 1998, when Congress passed the Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century (TEA-21). The mission statement of this program identifies several ways in which existing transportation networks provide inadequate access to employment locations and services needed by low-income people. First, it recognizes the spatial mismatch between low-income urban or rural housing and the growth of low-income jobs in suburban areas. Second, it recognizes the difficulty of using existing transportation systems in the off-peak hours that correspond with night and weekend shifts at available jobs. Finally, it recognizes that many trips are complex, including stops at locations of essential services such as supermarkets and childcare centers. By improving access to jobs and services, the goal of JARC is to help the "transition from welfare to work" ("Jobs Access Reverse Commute Program" 2009).

Given these realities, JARC provided grant money to fund reverse commute programs across the country. These grants were awarded at the discretion of the FTA (Federal Transit Administration). However, this system soon gave way to Congressional earmarking instead. In 2004, the JARC funding system was revised under SAFETELU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users). JARC funding was now provided under by the Transit Account of the Highway Trust fund. A funding formula, based on numbers of low income persons, was developed to equitably distribute funds across the country. 60% of the funds were designated directly to recipients in areas with populations over 200,000. 20% was designated to states for areas under 200,000 people, and 20% of the funds were designated for non-urbanized areas ("JARC Fact Sheet" 2009). The formula funding system is still in place, but grant applications have become more competitive. Detailed plans are required for funding, and success is carefully measured based on the number of new jobs that can be accessed due to JARC projects and the number of new rides provided per year ("Job Access Reverse Commute Program" 2009). In addition to grant competition, the JARC program is continuously under the threat of the changing political field.

## **Problem Solving Approach / Methodology**

Relevant case studies of other viable reverse commute and jobs access programs were selected as model programs that can provide useful lessons to improve existing Syracuse initiatives. Two case studies, the Hartford, CT Capitol Region Council of Government (CRCOG) Jobs Access Program and the Albany, NY Corporate Swiper program and shuttle system were selected based on their similar demographics and their relevance as model programs for Syracuse. As summarized in table 1, Hartford and Albany both have similar population, median household income, and degrees



of sprawl. According to one study that measured sprawl in 83 cities in the United States, Syracuse was the 16th most sprawling city, while Hartford and Albany were 19th and 20th respectively (Ewing, Rolf, and Chen 2002). Hartford was also picked for its potential as a model for Syracuse in the areas of consistent funding and program growth, outreach to employers, and its flexibility in meeting the needs of reverse commuters. Albany was picked for its extensive fixed route system that is supplemented with extensive employer participation and a flexible shuttle system. In addition, its diversified income sources provide an excellent model for funding a reverse commute. Albany's reverse commute program was profiled as a success by the Community Transportation Association of America in 2002 ("Job Access Reverse Commute Projects - Profiles of Success" 2009).

	<b>Syracuse</b>	<b>Hartford</b>	<b>Albany</b>
Population* (metro area <sup>^</sup> )	147,306 <sup>^</sup> 732,117	121,578 <sup>^</sup> 1,059,878	95,658 <sup>^</sup> 850,957
Median Household Income*	\$33,026	\$27,051	\$33,375
Sprawl Rank**	16th	19th	20th

**Table 1: Comparison of Demographics between Syracuse, Hartford, and Albany**

\*Source: U.S. Census. 2000 population data. <http://www.census.gov/>

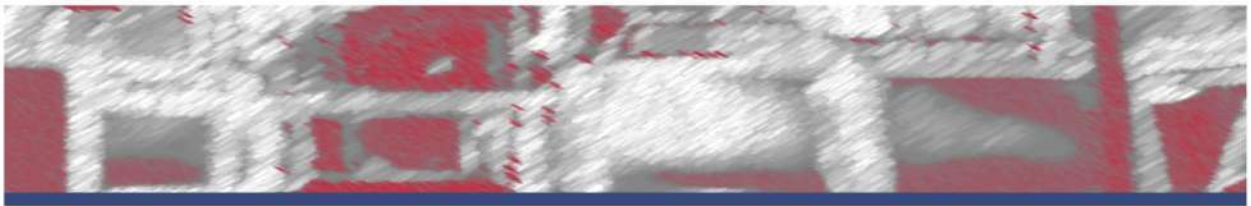
\*\*Source: Ewing, Reid, Rolf Pendall, and Don Chen. "Measuring Sprawl and Its Impact." Smart Growth America (2002)

## Findings and Discussion of Findings

### Case Study 1: Hartford

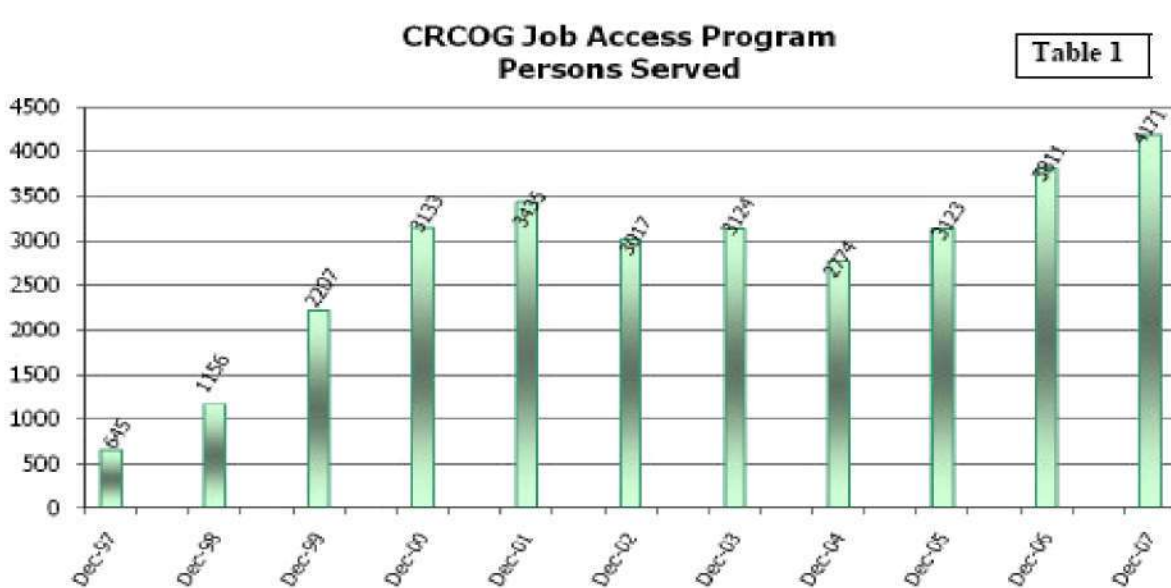
The first case study is the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) Jobs Access Program in Hartford, CT. The program began in 1997 as a collaborative effort between transportation providers, social services organizations, the City of Hartford, and local employers and is cited as a model for other cities by the United States Department of Transportation and the Federal Transportation Administration ("Jobs Access Programs" 2009). It offers access to suburban work sites that are not served by traditional fixed bus routes. The program contracts with private companies to provide service via smaller buses, paratransit vehicles, and van pools. The program has experienced huge growth in recent years (see figure 1) with year 2007 ridership topping 4,000 participants ("2008 Annual Assessment" 2008). The success of the program is due to flexibility,





employer participation, and a relatively stable funding source.

The first reason for the success of the CRCOG program is its flexibility to adapt to meet the constantly changing needs of commuters. The program advertises that it can s service to employers within forty eight hours if five or more riders live near each other and travel to work together ("Program Brochure" 2009). Guaranteed rides home are offered to employees who need to leave work early due to illness or emergency. According to a program specialist, the program will also

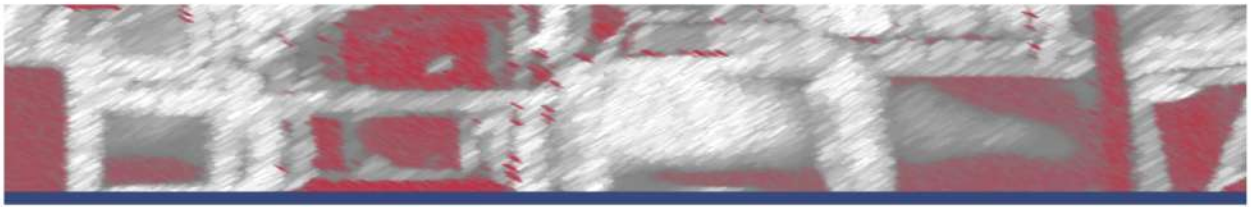


**Figure 1: Growth of persons served by the Hartford CRCOG Jobs Access Program**

Source: "2008 Annual Assessment ." Jobs Access Program. 30 Oct. 2008. 9 May 2009

provide people with one time service for job related trips, such as interviews, providing workers with the resources they need to find a job in the first place. CRCOG is constantly communicating with program participants and reevaluating its service to be sure it is efficiently meeting the needs of the people it serves.

Another reason for the success of the Hartford program is outreach to involve employers in the program's success. Employers sponsor van pools for their employees and pay for some of the cost of this service. The program's services are promoted by the Human Resources department at many companies, so new employees become aware of the program and its services. A constant challenge is to keep in touch with changing human resource personnel. Oftentimes the person who promotes CRCOG's services within a company will leave and the replacement will need to be educated about the importance of promoting the program's services (Hartford interview, 2009). To overcome these challenges CRCOG has monthly Jobs Access Program Task Force meetings where CRCOG, service providers, and employers meet to discuss the program and how it can be improved. CRCOG also regularly networks with area employers to be sure it is meeting the needs of the company's employees.



Finally, the CRCOG program has been successful because of relatively stable sources of funding. Rider fares are \$1.25 per ride which is the same fare as the regular bus. These fares can be deducted directly from an employee's payroll, making it easy for program participants ("Jobs Access Programs 2009). After fares and employer contributions, the program is funded by 50% JARC money and 50% by the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS). The Jobs Access Programs is not limited to low income individuals, but it must prove to the DSS that a significant percentage of its riders are low income and TFA (temporary family assistance) individuals (Hartford interview 2009). Frequently, like the CRCOG example, reverse commuting programs use JARC money matched by a state or local grant to successfully fund a viable program ("2008 Annual Assessment" 2008).

### ***Case Study 2: Albany***

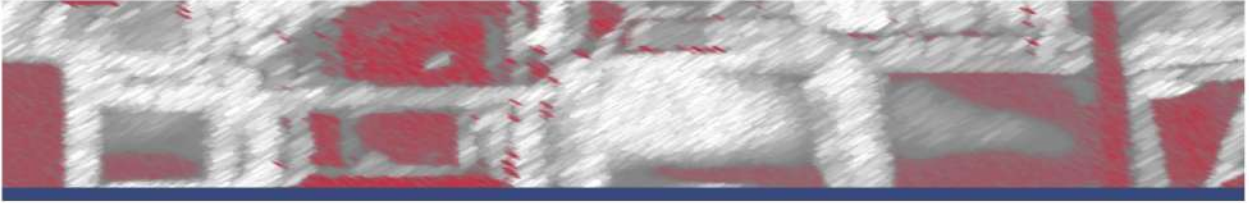
The second case study is the transit system provided by the Capital District Transit Authority in Albany, NY. The CDTA transports about 45,000 customers each weekday via bus, rail, shuttles, and paratransit (for the disabled). The CDTA has two programs that provide improved job access for reverse commuters: the Corporate Swiper Program and a shuttle system to suburban employment locations. With these programs and an expansive fixed-route system, the CDTA provides service to 80% of employment locations in the Capital District ("Strategic Business Plan" 2009).

A Swiper Card is simply a bus pass that provides access to all of the CDTA buses at any time of day at a flat monthly rate. Swipers can be purchased at progressive discounts by employers to distribute to their employees via the Corporate Swiper Program. Employers can choose how the Swipers are paid for. The employee may cover the entire cost (at discount price, tax-exempt), the cost may be split between the employer and employee, or the Swipers may be provided as part of an employee benefit package. Both the employer and employee enjoy numerous benefits from this program. For example, the employees enjoy a low stress and low cost commute, unlimited rides, a guaranteed ride home service in case of emergencies, and free parking up to 5 times per month in qualified lots. In addition, employees benefit from reduced car maintenance and insurance costs. Employers are able to attract and keep worker talent, expand their labor pool, reduce parking requirements and expense, and position their company as an environmentally-responsible neighbor ("CDTA Corporate Programs" 2009).

The CDTA also operates three shuttle systems named ShuttleBee, ShuttleFly, and ShuttleBug intended to provide easy access to suburban businesses, connections to the fixed route buses, and links to park-and-ride lots. Each of the shuttles covers a different area. While the shuttles do have regular routes, they are intended to be flexible and claim to serve all points within a service area. They offer "deviation trips" that can be requested by phone at any time. Two of the shuttles offer late-night service until 11:30 pm. Shuttle rides are free with a Swiper and otherwise they are \$1. With the Swiper, employees can use the guaranteed ride home service if they miss the last shuttle ("CDTA ShuttleBug" 2009). About 6% of CDTA resources are committed to shuttle routes, which serve about 2% of their customers ("Strategic Business Plan" 2009).

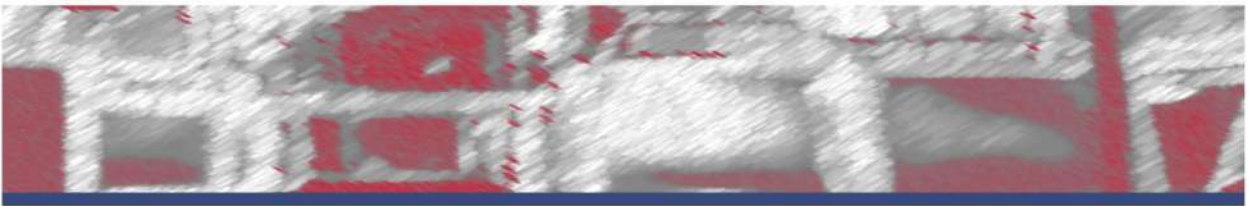
With such an extensive transportation network, the CDTA has many sources of income for capital and operating expenses. From the federal government, the CDTA receives regular formula





funding from the Federal Transit Administration. This money is used for capital investment and preventative maintenance. Also from the federal government, the CDTA receives money through the programs JARC (Job Access Reverse Commute) and CMAQ (Congestion Mitigation Air Quality). The state government helps fund operational costs through the State Transit Operating Assistance (STOA) program. Funding levels for STOA are set as part of the state budget process. On a local level, the CDTA receives one fourth of one percent of mortgage tax receipts of people living in the counties serviced by the CDTA. Finally, passenger fares, Swiper sales, contracts with universities, advertising revenue, and parking charges balance the operating budget ("CDTA Strategic Plan" 2009).

There are several reasons for the success of Albany's programs that provide access to jobs for reverse commuters. First, the programs take advantage of the extensive service already provided by the CDTA. The Corporate Swiper program offers incentives to employers and employees to ride existing bus routes. Also, the fixed route service is easily supplemented with flexible shuttles to drastically increase coverage in high-service areas. Second, the CDTA has worked hard to partner with businesses to design programs that meet the needs of employers and employees. They have heavily publicized the program with individual businesses and with television advertisements ("CDTA Corporate Programs" 2009). The purchase of Corporate Swiper Cards is a great source of revenue, encourages bus ridership, and improves job access. Finally, the CDTA has greatly diversified its funding sources. It does not rely solely on JARC money to fund its reverse commute programs. By viewing these programs as extensions of regular service, the CDTA is able to fund them with federal, state, local, and internal revenue.



## Conclusions / Recommendations

The following are key recommendations of best practices used in Hartford and Albany that Syracuse should consider to improve its reverse commuting program:

### 1. Employer participation

A key aspect of both the Hartford and Albany commute programs is extensive employer participation. In Hartford, employers help coordinate and fund vanpools for employees. In Albany, the transit authority promotes their Corporate Swiper program to employers to encourage bus ridership by employees. In both of these cases, employers provide critical funds and can encourage employee participation. Reaching out to employers is much easier and more effective than reaching out directly to the real targets of reverse commute programs, the employees themselves. Syracuse planners should consider employer outreach to be their top priority in designing a reverse commute program. Both a vanpool system modeled after Hartford and a bus pass program modeled after Albany are excellent models for programs that benefit from employer cooperation. Both models should be considered when designing the Syracuse reverse commute system.

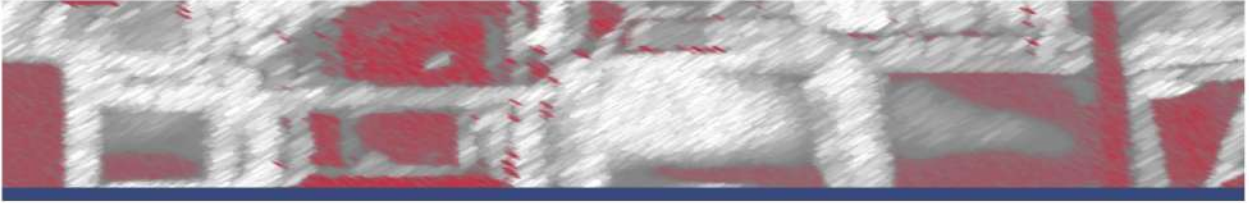
### 2. Be flexible, expect to have to do constant outreach, and publicize well.

Promoting reverse commute services among employers and employees requires a lot of work and considerable flexibility. Outreach must be viewed as a continuous task, not an action taken only at the commencement of service. The continuous changes in company management and personnel require that relationships with program participants must be constantly reformed. In Hartford, this is accomplished with a Job Access Program task force that met on a regular basis. Similar outreach in Albany is supplemented with television advertisements to reach a broader customer base.

### 3. Write a strategic plan in order to get JARC funding

Both Albany and Hartford received money from the federal Job Access Reverse Commute program. While this process may be competitive, with a well-written strategic plan, the grant money is well within reach. This plan should receive community input and include collaboration with relevant stakeholders. JARC may not be a reliable source of funding in the future, but it is currently critical to funding most reverse commute programs in the United States. It is our understanding that the program in Syracuse is currently minimally staffed. If the program hopes to get off the ground, several people will need to be assigned the task of writing a long-term plan and applying for grants.





#### **4. Get state agency to match JARC funding:**

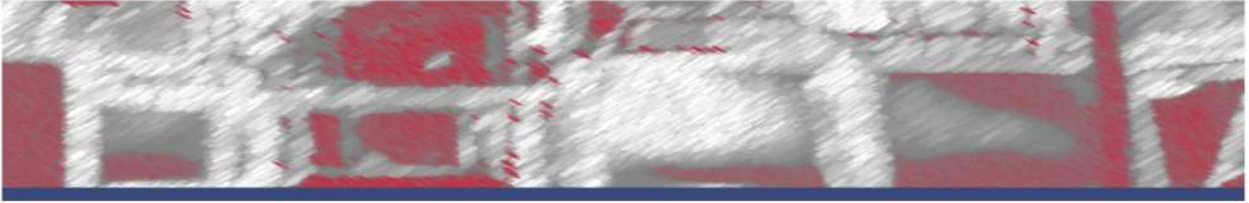
A trend seen among many reverse commute programs in the United States is that state agencies are willing to match federal JARC funding ("Questions and Answers" 2009). This path should be exploited in order to increase resources for a reverse commute program and to diversify funding sources in case one source fails. In Hartford, the Department of Social Services was willing to match JARC funding.

#### **5. Use federal/state formula funds to extend regular service**

By viewing their reverse program as an extension of normal service, Albany was able to use federal and state formula funds to use fixed-route and shuttle service to reach 80% of employment locations in the capital district. While this was not the strategy utilized by Hartford, it offers several advantages. First, the system is therefore open to use by all people, not just those trying to access specific job sites. Second, it removes some of the stigma that may prevent people from participating since people may be wary of using services that are specifically meant for poor people. Finally, it is easy to publicize and promote fixed routes instead of requiring people to create the routes themselves. However, if expanding a fixed-route system is not within the reach of Centro (the Syracuse transit authority), the Hartford vanpool system may be a better model for Syracuse.

#### **6. Provide permanent service:**

Currently in Syracuse, transportation service is limited to 90 days only. After that, employees are forced to find an alternate means of accessing their job site. It seems unlikely that a reverse commute program would be successful if it only provides a temporary solution for job access. Like Albany and Hartford, the Syracuse program must provide permanent transportation service to have a successful program.



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