

mobility

AN AFFORDABLE WAY
TO GET AROUND

share

**Final Report prepared by CarShare Vermont for the
Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission**

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Introduction

In July of 2015 CarShare Vermont received a UPWP grant to review, modify, and re-launch our three year-old MobilityShare program, which serves low and moderate income residents in Chittenden County. The following report outlines a brief history of the program and our steps over the past 12 months to streamline and revitalize it.

Program Background

MobilityShare was initially launched in 2012 with significant funding from a private foundation. Our primary goal in developing this program was to improve the accessibility and equity of our local transportation system by making our carsharing service more available to low-income residents. Reliable and affordable access to transportation is essential for economic and social stability, yet it is elusive for many of the most vulnerable in our community. Carsharing provides an attainable and potentially transformative solution to this problem.

While CarShare Vermont has always striven to serve a broad range of individuals from across the socioeconomic spectrum, our carsharing population has tended to skew more towards middle and upper income households. Through the early development of MobilityShare, we discovered that this trend is in part due to a lack of familiarity with the concept of carsharing in our community, and also an inability to pay for our service. Consequently, the key components of our original program included extensive community outreach and financial assistance.

Between 2012 and 2014 we served over 60 individuals and families, all of whom had very low household incomes (well below 200% of the federal poverty limit at the time). Our original program heavily subsidized the cost of membership, as well as the cost of driving for program participants. We also offered personalized financial education and transportation coaching in partnership with the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO) to help people plan how to get around more easily and efficiently.

As we exhausted our initial two-year grant, we set out to find a way to shape MobilityShare into a sustainable program our small organization could sustain as a permanent membership offering for income eligible individuals and families. We recognized MobilityShare as an actualization of our social mission but needed to develop a more streamlined and financially self-sufficient model that did not rely on significant contributed income to succeed.

In March of 2015 we hosted our first annual fundraiser to support 25-30 new MobilityShare memberships. We then secured a UPWP grant to support our efforts to evaluate our original version of MobilityShare, regroup with essential community partners, redefine program eligibility and parameters, conduct outreach, and re-launch a program that would better achieve our goals for social equity and accessibility.

Program Evaluation & Planning

After evaluating our impact and learning from our past experiences, our goal for the next iteration of MobilityShare was to make the screening and intake process easier and faster. Originally, applicants were required to complete a series of financial education classes in collaboration with CVOEO. Due to the limited schedule of these course offerings, it often took months for applicants to complete them—this delayed the enrollment process significantly for new members and deterred others from joining.

We initially required the financial classes largely because of our partnership with CVOEO. Because CVOEO is a social service agency with substantial experience verifying eligibility for various programs, it made sense for them to take the lead screening MobilityShare applicants on our behalf. Their existing course structure was one way to achieve this by offering MobilityShare memberships to people who may already be enrolled in one of their programs and pre-determined to be income eligible. CVOEO welcomed the partnership because it also allowed them to offer their participants another important resource—a MobilityShare membership with CarShare Vermont.

CVOEO is a skilled and experienced social service provider; we learned from them as we developed a curriculum for offering one-on-one financial coaching to applicants as they planned and budgeted for their CarShare Vermont usage. We designed and co-taught a Managing Mobility class that was integrated into CVOEO's existing financial planning series. The class aimed to show participants how alternatives to vehicle ownership could save them money if carefully budgeted.

Our partnership with CVOEO was also valuable because it allowed us to inform social service providers about CarShare Vermont and the other transportation options that can effectively eliminate the need to own a vehicle. Moreover, we developed a comprehensive resource guide that could be shared broadly among social service agencies to better meet the transportation needs of constituents.

Despite the positive outcomes of our partnership with CVOEO, we ultimately concluded that making the financial courses a requirement of program eligibility proved too burdensome for participants. It added weeks to the enrollment process and created unneeded frustration, including among those participants who felt they did not need the additional education despite their financial need. Another factor that contributed to our decision to eliminate the course requirement was that as grant funding disappeared, we could no longer support the half-time position dedicated to co-teaching the classes with CVOEO and shepherding participants through the lengthy enrollment process. While dropping the course requirement, we decided to retain the one-on-one coaching support for people who needed or wanted extra assistance planning and budgeting for their CarShare Vermont usage.

Without our close collaboration with CVOEO, we needed to develop a new screening and intake process. We looked to other social service providers to glean from their best practices, including the Community Health Center, the YMCA, and other local non-profits for examples of how they verify income and approve applicants for scholarships and/or sliding scale fees. Common practice was to establish income criteria and request proof of income (i.e. a recent tax return, pay stubs, and/or benefit statements). We decided to adopt this intake process because it is relatively easy to administer on our part, and people seeking assistance typically have these types of documentation readily available—therefore, it does not feel overly burdensome.

We maintained the same income eligibility requirement, which is 60% of median income. We had raised the income from 200% of poverty level to this threshold after our first year offering MobilityShare in an effort to attract more participants in the low-to moderate-income range.

Program Modifications

In years past we used CVOEO's paper intake form and a separate entrance survey to enroll new applicants in person at our office. To make the process more efficient for all involved, we decided to combine these forms and shift to an online survey, giving people the option to complete them remotely. This change reduces processing time significantly and makes the process much easier for applicants. It also allows us to more easily analyze survey results and track demographics with less manual data entry and manipulation. The online form automatically alerts staff members when a new person fills out the MobilityShare intake form to begin the enrollment process. We then are able to follow up quickly with the individual to schedule an in-person meeting and proceed to the next phase of enrollment.

Overall this new enrollment process has greatly reduced the total intake time for each new member and we're potentially able to turn around applicants in the same week they apply. This can mean all the difference for someone that is in need of reliable transportation. We also created a step-by-step reference guide for front line staff to make the process simple and easy. Now any staff member can help a new MobilityShare member get started with the enrollment process. In the past, the Program Manager was the only person fluent in the enrollment steps and available to meet with new applicants and explain the process. This kind of integration into our normal operations systems is essential for us to be able to maintain MobilityShare and elevate it to an on-going program of CarShare Vermont.

As mentioned earlier, the original MobilityShare program offered participants free annual memberships *and* heavily subsidized driving rates. The current program continues to waive membership fees but driving rates are no longer discounted. This decision was based on two factors. First, we strive to make our standard rates affordable and reflect the true cost of driving a vehicle; we worried that if we further subsidized our rates, we would risk compromising our environmental mission by overly

de-valuing the cost of driving. Second, we cannot afford to further subsidize our driving rates without ongoing contributed income, and our goal is to make the program financially sustainable.

While we discontinued offering reduced driving rates for MobilityShare members, we did introduce a rate change that has the potential to save all of our members money. We now offer “Night Owl” rates, which cut our standard rates in half between the hours of 10pm and 6am. For people who can shift their trips to these off-peak hours, there is the potential for a significant savings. Our hope is that Night Owl rates will also benefit those who work nighttime shifts when bus service is limited or not available.

Outreach & Marketing

Once our new program was defined and the enrollment process was streamlined, the next step was to develop a new look and feel for campaign. We wanted the outreach materials to appeal to a diverse audience and speak to low to moderate-income individuals and families. They needed to call out the benefits of gaining access to affordable car use while highlighting the offer of a free membership for income-qualifying individuals and families.

We settled on the tagline, “Take control of your transportation cost” and developed an arsenal of new outreach materials, including a poster, brochure, print and digital ads with Seven Days and Kids VT, Front Porch Forum posts, interior and exterior bus boards, and social media posts to support it. The concept was centered on people gaining control in their lives by having affordable access to a car, a means to curb their transportation spending, and the independence that comes from being able to get around with more ease. Although we strongly support and encourage people to walk, bike, or bus as much as possible, sometimes having access to a car means the difference between getting to a doctor’s appointment or job interview on time or not. Car access removes a huge barrier in people’s lives and eases stress. We wanted to emphasize this and educate people that while car ownership might be out of reach, carsharing may be a better way.

Alongside the new comprehensive outreach campaign, we also updated and refreshed our website with a link to the new online intake form and eligibility check list. We added a prominent MobilityShare member testimonial on our homepage and added an on-going column in our monthly newsletter. In addition, we developed a stand-alone rack card for MobilityShare which we showcase front and center with our other rate plans. It is important that we present MobilityShare as a rate plan for all potential applicants.

We recruited a past MobilityShare member to help with outreach and get posters up around town. She also visited all of our social service partners to remind and re-engage them. Additionally, we dropped off resources, tabled at info sessions, and set up in-person meetings and phone calls with our colleagues at the Community Health Center,

CVOEO, Burlington Housing Authority, Champlain Housing Trust, Howard Center, Good News Garage, among many others.

Membership Goals & Evaluation

Our overall goal for MobilityShare is to serve 25 families in 2016. This is based on the available funding we had secured through our fundraiser to support subsidized memberships. We set our recruitment goal at two new members per month and to date, we are just slightly under our target. As of July, we had a total of 17 applicants and ten approved new MobilityShare members. We expect recruitment to continue to pick up through the summer and fall as we continue to make the program more visible in the community. We know that it often takes people a while to consider joining before they actually take the next step to do it.

In general, with the first round of applicants we've noticed that the age range is fairly mixed. Most people live alone and are either retired, work part-time, or have a documented disability. Most are fairly multi-modal already and accustomed to walking, biking, and taking the bus to meet most of their transportation needs. Having access to a car will allow them to drive for the times they need to, such as traveling a greater distance or transporting something. Some new MobilityShare members mentioned that they had considered joining CarShare Vermont in the past but the cost had been a barrier. The free membership has allowed them the opportunity to give it a try.

In addition, there's also been a fair amount of interest from past MobilityShare members that would like to re-join the program. Initially we had decided to make the memberships only available to new members, but because we have space available we may open up membership to past participants that still demonstrate a need. This would allow us to continue to serve members that have clearer seen great benefit from the service.

As some members near the 6-month point, we will plan to conduct a mid-point check in to collect feedback and make adjustment as needed. We'll also meet with members when they approach 9 months in the program to come up with a transition plan if needed.

Referrals & Partnership Opportunities

Now that the MobilityShare program has benefitted from greater visibility, we are starting to see more direct referrals. For instance, we recently set up an arrangement with the Parallel Justice program to help victims of crime enroll in MobilityShare (when eligible) to help meet their transportation needs. We've also seen referrals from Good News Garage and City Market, which is promising.

Conclusion

The re-launch and re-envisioning of MobilityShare allowed CarShare Vermont to effectively streamline the program to the benefit of both staff and participants. The time

between initial intake and final enrollment has been reduced from 1-3 months on average to 1-3 business days, which is remarkable. This means a world of difference for someone that is trying to meet his or her basic transportation needs.

In addition, our new campaign design and marketing tactics allowed us to craft a message that really resonates with our target audience. Using a combination of print and digital advertising, social media, word of mouth, as well as partner referrals we were able to introduce the concept of carsharing to new populations and reach a much broader audience. We'll continue to use this campaign in the coming years to keep MobilityShare visible.

As we continue to see new MobilityShare applications rolling in each month, we know that there remains a need for this program and for affordable and reliable transportation options in general. People continue to struggle to get where they need to go, and with each barrier we remove, the more equitable our transportation system becomes.

Looking to the future, our biggest challenge remains having the time and staff capacity needed to maintain these important partnerships with our non-profit and social service colleagues, and conduct the wide spread outreach needed to keep MobilityShare on the forefront of people's minds. We pride ourselves on making sure that all staff have a basic level of expertise on the transportation options and resources available in our community. We enjoy being able to troubleshoot and offer tailored one-on-one transportation coaching and support to each applicant and member we interact with. Maintaining this high level of customer service and support will remain a challenge, but one that we are confident we'll rise to meet. We will also continue to rely on our partner organizations like Go Vermont, GMT, Local Motion and others to fill in the gaps as needed and offer complimentary services and support.

Overall this process has reaffirmed our belief that CarShare Vermont fills an essential niche within our transportation network. We remain committed to serving people of all income levels and backgrounds, and offering programs like MobilityShare as an embodiment of our social mission.