

Brazos Valley Council of Governments, Texas

Meeting the Needs of Rural Seniors

The image of miles and miles of Texas paints a charming picture of the Lone Star State. But for seniors with limited transportation, miles of rural country side and expansive distances between communities can present a sizable barrier to accessing health care, social services, and even everyday needs such as grocery shopping and socialization.

Recognizing that many seniors in the Brazos Valley region, a seven-county area in south central Texas, faced transportation challenges, the Brazos Valley Area Agency on Aging (BVAAA) *Senior Transportation Program*, which provides door-to-door rides to senior centers; retail stores; and health care facilities for older residents was included in the Brazos Valley Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging initiative.

The Brazos Valley Council of Governments (BVCOG) created the Brazos Valley Building Healthy Communities Coalition to link smart growth and active aging principles in both rural and urban areas of the region.

As a result of the successful efforts of the *Senior Transportation Program* and other components of the initiative, the BVCOG was awarded the Environmental Protection Agency's 2007 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging.

Ronnie Gipson, BVAAA Manager, explains that the program has served as a spark to help develop solutions to meet the transportation needs of seniors throughout the region. Initially the program was completely volunteer-based, and provided transportation services based on the availability of volunteers. Bus drivers initially came from the *RSVP Driver Escort Program*, which makes available qualified RSVP volunteers who provide transportation in their personal vehicles. The RSVP Driver Escort program is a door-to-door service for aged 60 and older adults who are ambulatory and have no other transportation options available.

But as growing needs and available community resources continued to present themselves, BVAAA and the BVCOG worked with county and municipal leaders to find more creative solutions to meet the growing requests of seniors. Gipson noted that one of the initial challenges was that the program was reliant on volunteers who were using their own vehicles to transport one or two individuals at a time. In some cases vans or small buses were needed to transport a number of seniors into town for such things as congregate meals and activities at area senior centers.

To address this type of need, BVAAA acquired three 18-passenger buses through the Brazos Transit District's *5310 Program*. Due to their size, these buses needed drivers who had commercial drivers' licenses (CDL), a qualification few volunteers had. A solution was found by looking to another population group – children. The area school systems all operated school bus programs. BVAAA began to coordinate with the school bus drivers, realizing that they were available from mid-morning until the end of the school day – a time ideal for meeting the needs of seniors. The BVAAA staff began recruiting and tutoring volunteers at the senior center in Brenham, TX to take the CDL Drivers Exam and the Behind the Wheel Drivers Test, so they could to acquire their CDL. This effort netted the program three new drivers.

“The ability to get around is important in rural areas,” notes Gipson. “In some of our towns there are no doctors, medical clinics, or even dentists. People might have to travel 30 or 40 miles one-way to get to these vital services. Providing transportation becomes essential if our seniors are to age in place, since often they are unable to drive themselves. Now, with the transportation program, we are able to get people into the larger municipalities where they have access to doctors, dentists, physical therapy, and other health resources. And they are now able to enjoy town centers, parks, shopping, and other community amenities that are not available in the country.”

He added, “Another aspect of this program is that it is assisting rural towns and county governments with acquiring resources and seed-money to help run and maintain transportation vehicles to serve their rural populations. It has become a remarkable program that improves accessibility to amenities and to walkable parks and town centers creating more livable community for older residents.”

Other projects of the Brazos Valley Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging recognized by the EPA included the *Brazos Valley Health Status Assessment*, which was carried out by the Brazos Valley Health Partnership. Based on the findings of the assessment, several health resource centers were developed to meet the needs of residents of rural communities. *Active Options* (<http://activeoptions.org>) has helped older adults, health care providers, and aging services professionals identify appropriate and accessible physical activity programs for older adults in the region. The *Wolf Pen Creek Park* was developed by the City of College Station to balance the interrelationships between recreation, erosion control, and drainage along a local creek. The park offers a variety of outdoor recreation options for people of all ages. The *Downtown Bryan Revitalization Project* focuses on the creation of a vibrant historic business district that takes into account needs for today’s multi-use business and residential environments.

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About the Award

2007 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging

The award honors the communities that are planning for, and beginning to use, smart growth and active aging. Active aging strives to promote strategies that engage older adults through structured and unstructured opportunities for physical activity. Active aging is supported by safe, walkable environments. Smart growth strives to minimize the impact of the built environment on both human health and the natural environment by integrating environmental considerations into development patterns. Using smart growth, communities create attractive, walkable neighborhoods that give people of all ages, income levels, and physical abilities a range of safe, affordable and convenient choices in where to live and how to get around.

For additional information, please visit the EPA’s Aging Initiative Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/awards/index.htm>.