



Agency Happenings

HAPCAP Demonstrates a Lack of Transportation is Both a Symptom and Cause of Poverty

On April 5, Hocking-Athens-Perry Community Action Program (HAPCAP) and the Athens County Job and Family Services held a press conference to release their joint report on transportation in Athens County entitled “Lack of Transportation: A Symptom of Poverty and a Cause of Poverty.” The report examines the costs of owning and operating a vehicle; the problems a lack of transportation can cause for individuals, families and the community; what public transportation options are available in Athens County; and provides recommendations for improving transportation problems.

When Athens County JFS Director Jack Frech mentioned doing a report on transportation issues in the county to HAPCAP, they were very interested because they have found transportation to always be at the forefront and wanted to raise awareness. “People don’t understand the problems people face with transportation, and it’s not unique to Athens County, it’s widespread,” said Jessica Stroh, HAPCAP community services director.

The report states that according to research from AAA, the average cost of owning and driving a small car in America is \$8,946 per year. That cost includes the price of fuel, maintenance, tires, insurance, license/registration fees, depreciation and finance charges. According to the IRS, based on their figures for owning and operating a business vehicle, the annual cost is \$5,650. And according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average annual cost for a car is \$6,016. All of these figures are difficult for low-income people.

According to the report, nearly one-third of all people living in Athens County live in poverty. For a single person, that means having an annual income that is at or below \$11,490. A person with that income would have to spend nearly half of their income on a car each year. An individual working full-time at

the state minimum wage of \$7.85 would earn \$16,328 a year before taxes. If it costs \$5,650 to own and operate a vehicle for a year (the low end of the estimates), an individual making minimum wage would have a little more than \$10,000 left to pay for taxes, rent, utilities, food and other expenses. The average Social Security benefit for a retired person is even less, at an average annual income of \$15,132. Those receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for disability assistance only receive an average of \$8,520 for a single person and \$12,792 for a couple. The average annual benefit for a family of three receiving Ohio Works First, (OWF) or welfare, is only \$5,496. This means that most, if not all, of the payments would be needed just to maintain and operate a vehicle and these recipients are required to work to receive assistance, and in most cases, need a vehicle to do so.

The report specifically reviews the costs of gas and insurance when owning and operating a vehicle. Given the high costs of insurance, estimated to be anywhere between \$619 and \$1,099 annually according to the report, many people drive illegally without insurance. In Ohio, 16 percent of all drivers have no insurance, according to figures from the Insurance Research Council. But due to the need to get to jobs, doctor’s appointments and other activities, people risk being arrested and large fines by driving without insurance and/or with suspended licenses from driving without insurance. A quote from a low-income Athens County resident from the report said, “While I appreciate the help we get, it’s not enough. The government requires you to carry car insurance, but yet when you get help it’s not enough to pay for it. We try to drive to work and get pulled over, and that’s more money to the courts and the car gets towed. It’s an endless cycle.”

According to figures from the U.S. Department of

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Transportation Federal Highway Administration, Ohio has more than 7.98 million licensed drivers. Currently in Ohio, more than 1 million of these drivers are facing license suspensions, according to figures provided by the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles. “For Athens County there are an average of 3,500 license suspensions, but those are for only 1,000 people because the same people are having their license suspended again and again,” stated Doug Stanley, executive director of HAPCAP. “Suspensions are not keeping people from driving. And now these people owe so much in fines, they’re never going to get out of hock. I don’t know what the solution is, but the only possible solution I can see is to have a payment plan for paying fines.”

Besides the obvious problems of not being able to drive to work, medical appointments or social engagements for individuals and families, a lack of transportation can cause problems for the community as well. The report points out the problems this can cause employers when employees don’t have access to public transportation and are late for work or miss work. This can cause a drop in productivity and difficulty finding qualified people to fill positions that require a person to drive. Another quote from an Athens County resident in the report said, “I actually had a job where I made pretty good money, but my car blew up and I couldn’t get to work every day. Sometimes I would have to go in late because my ride wouldn’t be there on time. The boss got tired of it and they had to let me go.”

The lack of reliable transportation can also cause problems for local healthcare systems when patients miss appointments or call an ambulance to take them to the emergency room for non-emergencies when they need to see a doctor, but have no transportation or insurance. A quote from a resident in the report said, “I had an appointment when I was pregnant with my son. I have missed two or three appointments because I didn’t have a ride. My doctor was getting a little upset because he has scheduled a C-section and was keeping checked up on me. I was two weeks late when I went for my C-section. I had to pay \$15 to get to the hospital. I couldn’t get my WIC (Women, Infant and Children) all the time because I never had a ride.”

In addition, senior citizens are sometimes forced to move into long-term care facilities because of a lack of transportation, which increases healthcare costs for the community. A quote from the report said, “As an elderly widow, car repairs are nearly out of the question for me. I am driving (when I can buy gas) a 1994 car that needs brakes, front end alignment and tires. I know there are agencies that provide transportation for doctor’s appointments, but if this car isn’t repaired I will have to go without food, and less important, companionship.”

Schools also have problems when students have to arrive late or leave early or attend after school activities, but transportation is not available. “All of this shows a need for more resources in the area, and all over,” explained Stanley.

Currently HAPCAP and Athens County JFS offer several public transportation options for low-income people, which the report reviewed, but it is not enough. The report states, “All of these programs provide a great deal of assistance to a large number of low-income area residents and senior citizens who need to get to medical appointments, but it is just a small part of the overall need for transportation assistance in Athens County.”

The report provided a number of recommendations to help alleviate the transportation problem:

- Increased funding for public transportation.
- Collaboration between public and private agencies, including a county-wide transit authority to examine ways to improve public transportation and formation of a county-wide transportation system.
- Legislative initiatives to help families and individuals afford the price of transportation, such as increasing minimum wage, increasing OWF and SSI disability assistance, and restoring Prevention, Retention and Contingency (RPC) program funding, which provided Ohio JFSs with funding to help low-income people repair or purchase vehicles to get to work.
- Legislative initiatives to help Ohio residents keep/reclaim their driver’s licenses and afford car insurance, including studying the viability of a car insurance pool program; creating a payment plan for reinstatement fees; changing the law so that drivers do not lose their licenses for so many issues unrelated to their ability to drive and/or to make it easier for safe drivers to regain their licenses.
- Development of additional Park & Ride locations.
- Development of carpool programs for businesses and other organizations.
- Continued development of the bike path system to connect communities in Athens County.
- Increasing support for car donation programs, such as HAPCAP’s By Car program that helps low-income people save for and purchase a car.
- Working with local credit unions to encourage them to provide low-interest loans to low-income area residents who need to purchase vehicles.

HAPCAP and Athens County JFS have released the report to community organizations, the media and legislators, but as Stroh said, “We’re not going to let the report sit on the shelf.” They are looking at the recommendations and putting together a timeline for following up on them. One recommendation that they are currently working on is to develop a payment plan with the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles for license suspension fees. Stanley thinks this is something that they’re going to do.

The report and many quotes from those affected by transportation issues, demonstrates how a lack of transportation can not only cause poverty, but keep people in poverty. But HAPCAP and Athens County JFS are working to find solutions.