



# Oregon

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**DATE:** May 9, 2013

**TO:** Senate Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness

**FROM:** Hal Gard, Administrator  
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**SUBJECT:** Legislative Task Force on Veterans' Transportation Report Implementation

## INTRODUCTION

Oregon has historically recognized the value of supporting programs that contribute to an individual's ability to live independently and contribute to community life. The state has invested in a "safety net" of local public transportation options for seniors and people with disabilities. Veterans with medical needs are populations that sometimes need assistance to travel successfully to medical and community services. Veterans' transportation is historically supported by separate veterans' programs and volunteer services to help them access medical and other services. In recent years, veterans needs have changed and programs to assist have not been able to ensure returning veterans have appropriate access to transportation to meet their needs. A growing concern by veterans' associations, state agencies, the Governor's office and the legislature suggested that a new look at meeting the transportation needs of today's veterans was important. All recognized that Oregon's veterans with medical conditions must be able to access services to achieve the best chance of success as they return from active duty.

## BACKGROUND

The 2009 Legislature passed Senate Bill 98 creating the Legislative Task Force on Veterans' Transportation. ODOT Public Transit Division Administrator, Michael Ward (now retired), chaired this task force which developed a list of actions to pursue and championed ODOT participation in implementing the recommendations. In October 2010 the Task Force published a report that identified fifteen activities to support veterans' transportation. ODOT noted seven activities that the agency might be able to move forward.

Recommendation 2. Encourage the Oregon Department of Transportation to seek federal grant monies for veteran transportation

ODOT Public Transit Division will apply for funds from USDOT Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to support operation of veteran transportation, if they become available. Current federal funding authorization (MAP-21) allows ODOT to buy accessible vehicles that can be coordinated for use but does not include a program for operating funds for veteran transportation.

Recommendation 3. Seek transportation partnership between the Oregon Department of Transportation, the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Veterans Health Administration in order to eliminate barriers to veteran transportation in Oregon and to educate VHA on existing transportation modes for veterans

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Although we have no formal partnership, ODOT Public Transit has a current working relationship with ODVA. ODVA is participating in the planning and oversight of an ODOT supported veteran transportation project (see #5, below) and the study regarding transportation coordination (see #4, below).

ODOT's Public Transit Division and the Association of Oregon Counties have undertaken a study to assess the current status of coordination of public transit and human service transportation services and funding at both the local and state levels. It is expected that the study (now in final draft) will result in a recommendation for a state agency level coordination task force that would include ODOT, Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA) and others. The scope of the study does not include federal agencies.

Recommendation 4. Encourage the Oregon Department of Transportation in partnership with the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs to help develop better coordination of public transportation for veterans

ODVA is a participant in the study mentioned in Recommendation 3 above intended to assess the current coordination. Veteran transportation is explicitly referenced in the study. Participants include ODOT, ODVA, Oregon Departments of Education, Housing and Community Services, Human Services, and Oregon Health Authority. The study results are in final draft and recommendations are expected to be published in May 2013.

Recommendation 5. Establish a pilot project using an existing public transit ride scheduling system to include transporting veterans to and from VA medical appointments

ODOT Public Transit Division identified \$100,000 of state-source funds (Special Transportation Funds) to develop a pilot project that builds upon the existing technology systems and service capacity managed by three of the public transit agencies who are also medical transportation brokers. Medical transportation brokers are transit entities that contract with Department of Human Services (DHS) to coordinate, dispatch, and "broker" efficient non-emergency medical trips for DHS eligible participants for a defined service area. The project duration is November 1, 2012 through June 30, 2014.

The project has operated briefly but preliminary results suggest that needs exist, and local coordination can increase access for veterans and may prevent long distance trips.

There are two aspects to the pilot project:

- 1) Investigate, develop and implement a replicable shared ride transportation program designed to get Vets who do not have personal or other transportation options, or who need special accessible public transit vehicles, to get to their Veterans Administration-sponsored medical care
- 2) Define the magnitude of the need and the cost for a statewide program to be implemented at a future date

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The three transit agencies participating in the pilot are:

- Rogue Valley Transportation District for the area of Jackson, Josephine, Douglas, Klamath, Coos, Curry and Lake Counties.
- Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council for the area of Crook, Jefferson and Deschutes Counties; and
- Cascade West Council of Governments for Linn and Benton County

Each project is designed to provide the following:

- Transportation for Vets will be available on a share-ride basis, to the extent that a shared opportunity is available. For example, vets may be transported to a location where they may access other services, such as the Disabled American Veterans, Inc. (DAV) van or intercity bus, or may be provided with an alternative resource.
- The project will be designed to meet the needs of the defined service area, in consideration of existing local resources, origins and destinations of the Vets, and in consultation with Vets Service Offices, VA service providers and others.
- Each transit agency will work with the Vets, VA providers and Vets Service officers to create a service that meets the needs of the Vets, but may have constrained eligibility. Some services may require that Vets pay a fare.
- Each transit agency will identify a plan for communicating with the Vets in their areas to explain the availability and limitations of the service.
- Transit agencies may provide education and specific trip options information for individual vets where there are local rideshare or buses available to help them choose independent travel, in lieu of providing a special trip.

At the end of the project period, ODOT will receive a narrative report from each participating transit agency providing:

- A description of the Pilot Project approach
- The number of individual veterans used the service
- The number of trips does each Vet generally needs
- A description of the travel patterns
- An estimate of the service area need, based on the Pilot Project statistics
- The service cost in rural and in urban areas
- Whether the efforts to “coordinate” veterans’ rides with other trips/services result in service savings and increased opportunity for veterans

In addition, several transit agencies are using discretionary grant funds from the Federal Transit Administration, called Veterans Transportation and Community Living Initiative, to develop or improve the infrastructure to support and program to promote "one-call" information centers for veterans. These agencies include Rogue Valley Transit District, Lane Transit District, and Ride Connection, Inc Portland OR. This program was not continued in MAP-21.

Recommendation 11. Create a veterans transportation informational booklet to inform veterans of the various existing transportation modes available for their medical transport.

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This is a good project, one that ODOT may pursue in the future, if resources allow. It would complement our goal to greatly improve access to transportation options through use of contemporary web tools.

Recommendation 12. Ensure that veteran's transportation must be included in all local Public Transit Human Services Coordinated Transportation Plans

This recommendation is met at this time: these plans already address issues and needs related to veteran access to medical services. Public Transit Human Services Coordinated Transportation Plans are adopted by the 42 STF agencies in Oregon. The Coordinated Plans identify transportation gaps and needs for seniors, people with disabilities and people with low incomes—many veterans are included in one or more of these target groups. The goal of the plans is to prioritize strategies and services that are paid for by state and federal transit funding. However, due to increasing need for veteran transportation and the variety of federal, state, local, non-profit and government groups representing veterans, ODOT will provide additional guidance to local transit agencies to enhance this aspect of the plans as they are updated.

Recommendation 15. Request that the Veteran's Administration re-visit their policy on only allowing the receipt of new vans for DAV transportation services

ODOT Public Transit Division does not have resources to provide new vehicles to DAV for exclusive veterans' use. The division, as an interim measure and in coordination with the VA, has donated several used accessible vans to VA hospitals and to other transit and veteran organizations that provide veteran's transportation.

ODOT collaborated with Ride Connection, a Portland area non-profit that provides training and travel connections for seniors and people with disabilities, to train the veteran's volunteer drivers so they could use the rehabbed lift equipped vehicles safely. ODOT learned that rehabilitating used accessible vehicles is not a cost effective strategy as several of the refurbished vehicles have already gone out of service because of maintenance issues.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, ODOT is encouraged that increased coordination between state agencies can build knowledge on how best to use existing resources to serve veterans' transportation needs. It also appears that new tools and efforts can add access for their success.

Initial results of ODOT's pilot project suggest that veterans can successfully use locally coordinated public transportation services when additional focus is placed on veterans travel needs, destinations, and how to provide travel information to veterans. If so, the challenge will be to add operating funds for those agencies to provide this focus. The analysis of this project in 2014 should provide information for future program recommendations.