Topic: Transportation

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Addressing Health Disparities through Non-Emergency Medical Transportation Programs

Imagine having to get to a medical appointment and not having access to a private vehicle. What would you do? Well, you could walk, catch a bus, hail a cab, or call Uber, Lyft or some other service. Now imagine that the appointment is over twenty miles away and there is no bus, Uber or Lyft in your community. In the case of Garrett County there are two registered Uber drivers for the entire County. You will probably have to cancel the appointment unless you find a neighbor who is not working or some other kind soul to give you a ride. Rescheduled and missed appointments lead to delayed care, lapses in medication use, and poor management of illnesses.

The scenario above is repeated daily across the country in most communities but the situation is exacerbated in rural communities that are sparsely populated, have very limited public transportation and fewer medical providers. Some of the practices that communities are using to provide greater access to health care are: home visiting programs; tele-health; mobile clinics; satellite offices; and pools volunteer drivers. Most communities are using a combination of these practices to address access.

Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT), a program funded in part by Medicaid is an incredible resource that helps communities address access issues to covered medical services that demand a transportation solution. All of Maryland's jurisdictions have NEMT programs in place but some communities face unique challenges due to their lack of "fixed route" systems that are highly efficient in urban areas but very inefficient in more rural communities.

The Maryland Department of Health is working with the Garrett County Health Department on a pilot project to assure access in Maryland's most sparsely populated county that improves health access and parity utilizing non-emergency medical service pilot funds to address rural transportation challenges. The program began in July 2018.

An excellent toolkit to assist communities wishing to address transportation access barriers to health care is available at the Rural Health Information Hub, https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/transportation.