EVALUATION OF THE AFFORDABLE BUS PASS PROGRAM PILOT (2013)

This poster provides a summary of the findings from an evaluation of the Affordable Bus Pass Program (ABPP) that was conducted at the conclusion of the pilot period in 2013. It demonstrated that the pilot program had achieved all of its stated goals, and that it had made a difference in the lives of more than 2,000 people living in poverty in Guelph. The program was also found to have been more popular than expected, and more complicated to manage. Recommendations were provided regarding investing in program management, streamlining the application process, and simplifying ongoing data collection and reporting.

Introduction and Research Goals

The Affordable Bus Pass Program (ABPP) is a bus subsidy program designed to increase the affordability and accessibility of public transit for people living with low income. The pilot phase of this program was initiated by the City of Guelph in 2012, in response to feedback from the community. The ABPP was expected to reduce barriers to accessing work, recreation and other amenities so all citizens can participate in the community.

The target population of the pilot was individuals and families living with a low income in Guelph. For the purposes of determining eligibility, Statistics Canada’s Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) was used to define low income, and only those who had incomes below this cut-off were eligible. Many of those who were eligible for the ABPP were receiving income from Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The pilot was managed by Community and Social Services, with Guelph Transit as a key partner.

The following questions guided the evaluation:

• To what extent was the program utilized by members of the target population?
• Were the program goals and objectives met?
• How did the program impact transit usage?
• What are the program strengths, challenges, and opportunities?
• What are the recommended areas for change and improvement?
• Were the budget and resources allocated to the program sufficient?

Methods

This evaluation study used qualitative data from focus groups and interviews. It was also informed by quantitative data from application forms submitted by citizens entering the ABPP.

“Simply stated, affordable transportation is absolutely necessary for families and individuals who already have to be extremely careful where their limited money is spent. Knowing that there is a reliable, accessible and affordable public transit system means there is more money to save or spend elsewhere, and also means that there are more opportunities for improving one’s own and family’s wellbeing.”

— Guelph Wellington Poverty Taskforce

Research Findings

Who Used the Affordable Bus Pass?

• As of July 2013, approximately 2,700 individuals had applied for the affordable bus pass as primary applicants, and 2,178 had been approved. Because applicants could include other family members in their application, we estimated that the successful applications covered a total of 2,596 people. From these figures, we estimated that about 27% of people living below the LICO in Guelph had become users of the Affordable Bus Pass.

How Accessible was the Affordable Bus Pass?

• Application process: All users who participated in focus groups believed the application form was straightforward, but several suggested that more plain language information about the application process would be helpful.
• Appeals process: The ABPP team had considered some appeals from people who were ruled ineligible. However, the challenge of maintaining consistency when a customer received an exception to the rules was felt by users and service staff alike. In focus groups and interviews, staff expressed a desire for clear, black-and-white rules for appeals.
• Pass Sales: Locations for sales of passes were deemed sufficient by users who participated in focus groups. However, at the time, there was no location in the South end of Guelph.

How Did the Pass Help the People Who Used It?

• People with low incomes who had not been eligible under the previous program (which only provided subsidized passes to people with disabilities) purchased passes and used transit more frequently.
• Public transportation consumed less money from their monthly budgets, leaving more for food and shelter. Most importantly, increased access to public transit improved overall wellbeing. In particular, the pass enabled people with low incomes to use transit in a more frequent and flexible way. In other words, the ABPP helped to build the “assets” of people living in poverty.
• It built financial assets by reducing the cost of transit. It built physical assets by enabling users to get to work, apply for jobs, and access the services they need more consistently.
• It also built social assets, by enabling users to make more trips for a greater variety of reasons and in a more flexible way.

How is Program Administration Working?

• The staff team that ran the pilot were very effective. They worked together closely and showed dedication to the success of the program. However, they also identified some challenges.

Conclusions

The City of Guelph created an affordable bus pass program because access to transit is essential for anyone working to overcome poverty. The pilot phase of Guelph’s Affordable Bus Pass Program was very successful. This pilot program attracted more users than expected, and made transit more accessible for a diverse cross-section of the community. It continued to meet the needs of people with disabilities (who had been the primary user of the previous pass program), while growing to serve a number of other groups of people who live with low incomes. This success was a direct result of the hard work of many people within City government and the community. Managing the ABPP pilot took a great deal of energy and dedication from staff in several different city departments, as well as a willingness to work together towards a common goal and a commitment to documenting the journey carefully. Consequently, much was learned.

Moving forward, this program was found to require more administrative support than it had received. It also needed dedicated management. The summary of recommendations (Figure 1) identified a number of ways in which the administration of the program could be streamlined to reduce the administrative burdens.

Summary of Recommendations

• Explore streamlining turn-around time for applications, while maintaining customer focus.
• Explore the possibility of having key partners play larger role in setting passes.
• Consider and implement online application and sales system.
• Consider an alternative approach to income verification to support the use of OW and ODSP (or users whose income is in transition due to recent employment, immigration or transition from child support).
• Reduce and standardize the process for analyzing and reporting program data.
• Create a dedicated program manager position and simplify program structure.
• Provide a plain language summary of the eligibility criteria and the application process.
• Design and run a training program for new staff.
• Create a centralized, transparent appeals process.

Figure 1. Summary of recommendations provided in 2013.

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