



## COMMISSION ON AGING

May 2, 2022

To: Councilmembers Tom Hucker, Hans Riemer, and Evan Glass

From: Barbara Selter, Chair  
Montgomery County Commission on Aging

Subject: Use of the Transportation Services Improvement Fund (TSIF)

The Montgomery County Commission on Aging (CoA) appreciates this opportunity to comment on the recommendations offered by Councilmember Riemer on April 27<sup>th</sup> to the Transportation and Environment (T&E) Committee regarding the future use of the Transportation Services Improvement Fund (TSIF). The CoA is authorized by the Older Americans Act and was established by Montgomery County in 1974 to advise County government on the needs, interests, and issues of older adult residents, and to advocate on their behalf at the local, state, and national levels. We offer this input for your consideration at the May 2<sup>nd</sup> T&E Committee meeting.

One of the principal goals of the TSIF is to enable improved delivery of better wheelchair accessible transportation services for seniors with disabilities and low-income residents. This is reflected in the wording of the Preamble to the law that created the TSIF – “to provide for disbursements from the Fund to be used to improve the delivery of accessible taxicab services and “transportation to eligible senior citizens and persons of limited income””. We urge the Committee to consider more flexibility for the funds to enable expanded service opportunities. We also recommend that the Committee consider conducting a study on the role of Uber-like programs in the future delivery of transportation services to older adults and people with limited income.

We offer the following comments for the TSIF discussion.

- The TSIF program should not be exclusively used to bring back more taxis in the County. Taxi services are indeed an important part of providing medical trips, but they are not the only effective method. We understand the need to provide the County’s taxi service providers with incentives to do a better job at delivering wheelchair accessible transportation. However, we also understand that the taxi service providers are not the only way to achieve better services. While the County's industry previously had over 700 taxis collectively, there are now typically fewer than 200 on the road on any given day. This may explain the results of a recent survey of older adults and people with disabilities

reflecting their experience with inconsistent reliability and customer service. Local nonprofit organizations can and do provide effective transportation service and would be able to expand or enhance these services with a TSIF grant. We do not believe that all the “eggs” in the TSIF basket need to support the taxi industry; moreover, we believe that other nonprofit providers of “escorted” transportation services, such as the Jewish Social Service Agency (JSSA) and the Senior Connection, could participate in the program. Both programs provide reliable transportation services that can benefit from the support of TSIF dollars.

- TSIF funds should be used to support government agencies and non-profit organizations providing transportation to the target populations in urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the County, including Recreation and Health and Human Services contractors, aging-in-place villages, and more. TSIF funds have accumulated, at least partially, due to tepid participation in the TSIF by taxi drivers and fleet owners. While increasing financial incentives may increase participation, using some of the accumulated funds to support other providers of accessible transportation seems wise. In addition, the CoA supports using some of the accumulated funds to help low-income clients to get to medical appointments and other activities important to their quality of life. The CoA envisions an increase in the overall number of rides, not just rides provided by a struggling taxi industry. We urge the T & E Committee to support funding the nonprofit grant program as recommended by Department of Transportation. There needs to be a commitment to share the funds with nonprofit organizations, even if funds come from another source in the County’s budget.
- Periodically, the County should provide sensitivity training for improved customer service to every driver whose company or organization receives grant funds from the County. The CoA has heard, on numerous occasions, about drivers who are verbally abusive, insensitive, and lack proper understanding of the equipment. It is important to provide better people skills and sensitivity training to drivers who serve older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income residents. It is also important to compensate these drivers for their time in training to incentivize participation.
- The CoA supports the recommendation to increase income limits for the Call-n-Ride Program. We agree that increasing income levels can result in more people being eligible for discounted services and help to create new demand for taxi trips. Adding a new category of eligibility for non-disabled residents between the age of 50 and 65 years old will also create more demand for services.

We hope this input will help you continue to formulate plans for the TSIF and we look forward to discussing them further with you and/or your staff as the opportunity arises

Sincerely,

*Barbara Selter*

Barbara Selter, Chair