

LYNX Builds Connections to Better Serve Veterans



LYNX worked with Congressman John Mica and veterans' leaders to secure a new van for trips to the new Orange City medical care clinic.

by Rich Sampson

In 2008, Veterans Administration (VA) leaders in Seminole County, Fla., were faced with a challenge. Its existing Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Sanford was lightly-used and sparsely-staffed. A new facility in Orange City – about 13 miles to the north – would offer better services and reach more veterans in need of care. However, the relocation of the CBOC to Orange City would introduce travel difficulties for those veterans utilizing the Sanford clinic.

Although the Orange City clinic registered 33 percent more patients than the Sanford facility after its opening in May 2008, the clinic's director, Dr. Martin Schnier, noted that many of the registered patients were not fully accessing the facility's available services – due to a lack of transportation options. Seeking a remedy to the situation, Dr. Schnier met with U.S. Representative John Mica on Veterans Day, 2008.

An Opportunity Based on Partnerships

Rep. Mica, after consulting with Sanford County VA officials and veterans organizations, decided to try transit first and turned to the local experts in addressing mobility needs: LYNX, the region's public transportation system. Fortunately, LYNX was already actively involved in working with area veterans and their advocates to overcome transportation challenges. The agency's leadership had cultivated relationships with veterans' service officers in Seminole, Osceola and Orange counties, as well as officials at the Orlando VA Medical Center, to provide veterans with unlimited-use transit passes and evaluate how the system's fixed-route and AccessLYNX paratransit operations responded to veterans' transportation needs. These joint efforts between transit professionals and veterans representatives established a foundation to build future enhancements for veterans'

mobility.

"We're all focused on ensuring that everyone has access to our communities," explains Sue Masselink, Human Services Transportation Coordinator for LYNX. "Through our work together, we've been able to hone-in on the needs of veterans and conduct a good deal of outreach to veterans themselves."

For Orange County Veterans' Service Officer Mike Dixon, the work represents a natural partnership.

"It's pretty intuitive that to get our veterans where they need to go for medical care and other services, LYNX can be a great asset," says Dixon.

Dixon's counterpart in Osceola County, Tommie Maldonado, agrees, saying, "Sue Masselink and her colleagues at LYNX have been real partners with us. We've found a mutual interest in that our veterans

need transportation and they need riders on their routes.”

A Van for Veterans

Due to the groundwork established between LYNX and the veterans’ community, a solution to the challenge in Seminole County became readily apparent. Rep. Mica and LYNX Chief Executive Officer Linda Wilson arranged for one of LYNX’s VanPool vehicles to be assigned to the Orange City VA Clinic, which would operate the vehicle between the Central Florida Regional Hospital in Orlando and the Orange City clinic. LYNX also would deliver veterans to the hospital via its Link 34 or 46 fixed-route bus lines, or on its AccessLYNX service.

The arrangement allowed LYNX to leverage its existing service network to provide the connection to link with a regional transportation nexus – the Hospital, in this case – while the VA was able to prioritize its transportation resources to ensure veterans could access its services. For area leaders, the solution represented both an efficient and responsive outcome to a significant, but not insurmountable challenge.

“This new service will provide our veterans greater access to modern health care treatments at the new state-of-the-art VA outpatient clinic in Orange City,” says Rep. Mica. “Our area has recently benefited from several new veteran clinics and a future hospital, but without transportation many of our veterans would regularly miss their appointments and risk developing long-term complications from treatable illnesses. With this new transportation service, the VA is able to treat more of our brave men and women who have sacrificed for our nation.”

“The opportunity to give back and fill a specific need is tremendous for us,” says LYNX’s Wilson. “We

appreciate Congressman Mica bringing LYNX and the VA together.”

“This van represents the community pulling its resources together to meet the needs of veterans,” said Timothy Liezert, Director of the Orlando VA Medical Center.

Planning for A New VA Center

Although the work orchestrated to-date between LYNX and veterans’ service officials has produced important mobility resources and targeted service for veterans in central Florida, more opportunities lie ahead.

Through Rep. Mica’s leadership in Congress, a new VA Medical Center is under construction in Orlando’s Medical City health services campus in Lake Nona. Scheduled for completion in 2012, the Lake Nona Orlando VA Medical Center will include 134 inpatient beds, a 120-bed community living center, and 60-bed rehabilitation center. Projected to employ more than 2,100 people and serve more than 113,000 veterans each year, the new facility will also be located near the University of Central Florida’s Medical School, the Burnham Institute for Medical Research and Nemours Children’s Hospital.

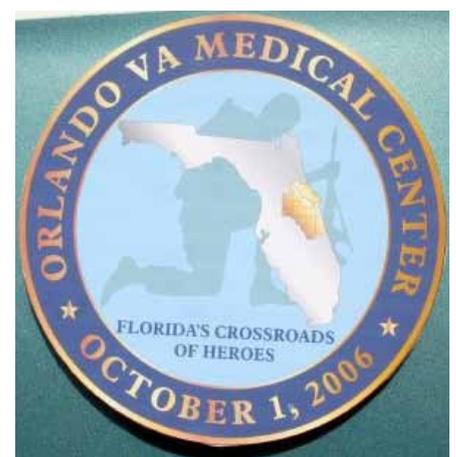
Already, LYNX is planning for how best to serve the thousands of riders it projects to carry to the campus. The new Center’s substantial size, innovative medical services provided and the numerous clientele to be treated by the various facilities at the Medical City campus demands it. Significantly, planning efforts will include participation from the veterans’ community. LYNX’s coordinated planning boards in each of the three counties where it provides service includes each county’s veterans’ service officer as well as participation from local veterans organizations. Meeting every

three months, these boards shape the direction for transportation service in the region, including coordinating how best to serve vital regional destinations like the Medical City campus.

“The new Lake Nona VA Medical Center will be an important origin and destination of trips across all of LYNX’s services,” says Masselink. “We will be diligent in making sure that the veterans who need transportation to the care the center will provide will be able to access it.”

Lessons Learned

By establishing an ongoing dialogue, leaders of transportation and veterans’ services organizations were not only able to respond to the evolving needs of Central Florida area veterans to reach health care locations, but also build momentum for a cohesive plan for future challenges and opportunities. While the region has benefited from the specific work of key figures such as Representative Mica, LYNX’s transportation professionals and their counterparts at the VA and veterans’ service offices, their approach is one that is universal – cultivate organization connections through mutual interest, identify and implement a set of workable improvements, and translate those actions into a more lasting partnership to affect significant change.



The North Star State Guides the Way for Veterans Mobility



Minnesota veterans can ride any fixed route transit service in the state, including Minneapolis' Hiawatha light-rail system.

by Rich Sampson

Across Minnesota – a land dubbed with evocative nicknames such as the *North Star* or *Gopher State*, or the *Land of 10,000 Lakes* – community and public transportation systems provide more than 11 million rides each year, spanning 76 of the state's 81 counties (68 of those offering county-wide service). Meanwhile, more than 50,000 disabled veterans live across Minnesota. As of the summer of 2009, *all* of them can ride for free on any fixed-route transit service in the state.

An Opportunity to Serve Veterans – Efficiently

From Minnesota's largest metropolitan region – Minneapolis/St. Paul – to its small urban and rural

communities, the state's veterans – disabled or otherwise – depend on access to vital destinations such as health care services, employment, social programs and the numerous other aspects that contribute to daily life. However, opportunities to access these key locations present challenges when connections provided by volunteers are shrinking and individual budgets are fixed. In Minnesota, such an environment led to atypical conversations and, eventually, results.

As officials from the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs received reports from across the state that mobility linkages for disabled veterans were preventing many from accessing state and federal veterans programs, they sought a solution that was both easy to implement and cost-

effective. Accordingly, they turned to their colleagues at the Minnesota Department of Transportation to craft an approach to respond to these growing needs.

Since the state's budget – like so many others across the nation – had become strained in the wake of the economic downturn, few resources were available through either department to initiate new services. However, in working with Minnesota's transit industry through the Minnesota Public Transportation Association, state transportation officials seized an opportunity.

The existing fixed-route transit lines operated by systems across the state could accommodate disabled veterans without much – if any – fiscal impact on their already constrained operating

budgets. In June of 2008, the Minnesota State Legislature approved a measure authorizing free travel for disabled veterans on all of the state's fixed-route transit services. Soon after, the legislation was signed into law by Governor Tim Pawlenty.

"It was a reasonable idea," says Tony Kellen, President of the Minnesota Public Transportation Association. "Moving veterans on our existing services wasn't a question that required too much convincing – it was the right thing to do."

"The transit providers in Minnesota are an important part of our multi-modal transportation system," says Tom Sorel, Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Transportation. "We appreciate that the fixed-route transit providers are acknowledging the contributions of our disabled veterans by offering them free service."

A Card for a Ride

To participate in most programs offered through the VA and state veterans departments, clients must utilize a Veterans Identification Card (VIC). Beyond a proof of identification, VICs also designate the programs for which an individual veteran is eligible. To take advantage of the state's free transit benefit, a veteran must be designated as disabled due to service-related reasons, a marker which appears on their VIC. This is the same indicator which transit operators across the state are trained to spot to welcome disabled veterans aboard. The program also allows personal care attendants to travel free to assist disabled veterans navigate through the system.

The disabled veterans transportation program was easily adaptable to existing VA requirements and processes, which was essential, according to the state's top Veterans Affairs official.

"This initiative was a very workable solution for us, and it provides a tremendous service for disabled veterans in Minnesota," says Clark Dyrud, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs. They are our nation's heroes."

And the veterans transportation program not only applies to fixed-route bus services across Minnesota, but also the Hiawatha light rail and Northstar commuter rail services in Minneapolis. Access to the Hiawatha line – which opened in 2004 between downtown Minneapolis and the Mall of America in Bloomington – is essential, as the state's largest VA Medical Center is located along the route and is served by a direct station.

Meanwhile, Metro Transit – which operates both the Hiawatha and Northstar rail services – also provides direct fixed-route bus service to the VA Medical Center on its route 22 and 515 lines. Additionally, plans are underway to expand the Northstar commuter rail operation to Saint Cloud, home to the state's second largest VA Medical Center. Commuter bus service between Saint Cloud and the line's current terminus in Big Lake is already underway following the initiation of commuter rail service on Nov. 16, 2009. Metro Bus – Saint Cloud's public transit system – serves the VA Medical Center via three different routes.

"How appropriate that this benefit for disabled veterans begins so close to the Fourth of July when we show our respect and support for those who defend the freedoms we enjoy," says Peter Bell, chair of the Metropolitan Council, which oversees Metro Transit, when the program began in the summer of 2009.

Across Minnesota

While providing access to the large VA Medical Centers in Minneapolis and Saint Cloud is essential for the state's largest metropolitan region, offering connections to the handful of

Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) across the state is equally important and offers a key avenue to improve mobility options for veterans.

Disabled veterans in Duluth, for example, can now reach the Duluth Vet Center downtown on Superior Street on any of Duluth Transit Authority's 20 routes, while Rochester City Lines' Route 12 bus serves that city's CBOC.

The Next Step

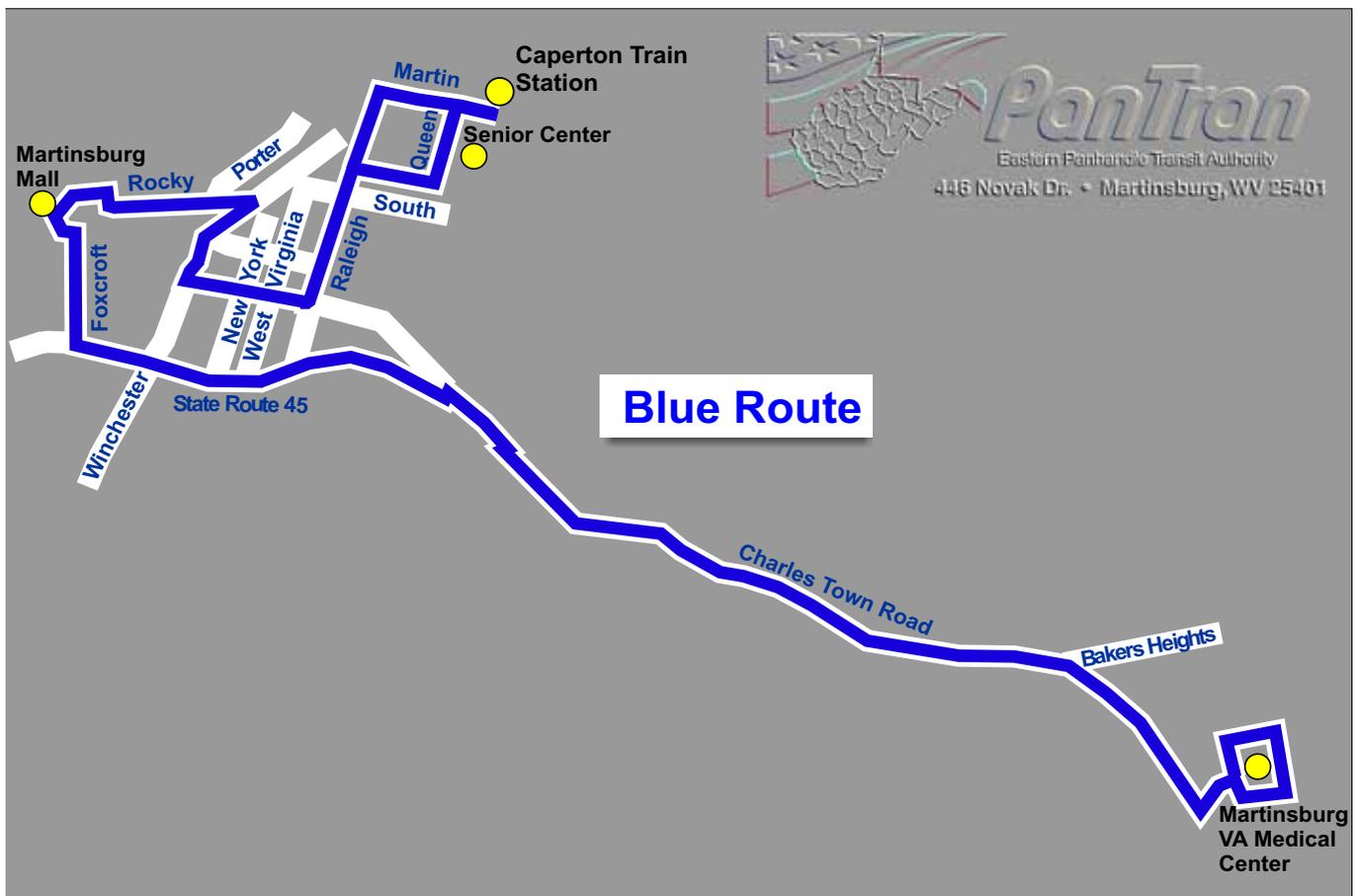
Today, Minnesota's disabled veterans transportation program is limited to communities offering fixed-route transportation. However, as most transit providers in smaller urban areas – such as Paul Bunyan Transit in Bemidji and Crow Wing County Transit serving Brainerd – operate demand response services, the program is yet unable to support free trips on these systems. Extending the transit benefit to veterans in these areas stands as the next benchmark for Minnesota's transit providers.

"Initiating the programs for veterans on our systems with fixed routes was a good first step," explains MPTA's Kellen. "Our next goal is to see it applied to the rest of the systems across the state to ensure more veterans can get where they need to go."

Lessons Learned

The perfect blend of leadership and collaboration by Minnesota state officials – both in its Transportation and Veterans Affairs departments, along with the state's public transportation systems – has produced a substantial outcome for veterans across Minnesota. By leveraging a significant, existing asset – fixed route public transit services, opportunities for veterans to not only access health care, but the entirety of their communities, instantly improved through a very modest level of investment. That effort marks a level of commitment that is not beyond the reach of any community.

Service to Veterans Provides a Focal Point for West Virginia's PanTran



PanTran's Blue Route links downtown Martinsburg to the regional VA Medical Center, while the Orange Route (opposite page) also links the Medical Center to Charles Town.

by Rich Sampson

Near the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, three states come together – Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia – in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. And much like the meeting of these iconic waterways at Harper's Ferry, W.Va., the meeting of mobility options in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia is equally significant.

Near Martinsburg, W.Va., the Blue and Orange Routes of the Eastern Panhandle Transit Authority – known locally as PanTran – meet at the Martinsburg VA Medical Center. Here, PanTran's bus lines originating from the small cities of Martinsburg and Charles Town serve one of the

region's most important destinations – one that serves more than 129,000 veterans in Western Maryland, West Virginia, South Central Pennsylvania, and far Northern Virginia. That the facility serves as the terminal point for two regional transit routes is not one of coincidence, but of strategy.

"The VA Medical Center is a critical point of activity in our region," says Besty Waters, Director of PanTran. "We've been serving it with our Blue and Orange Routes since _____ and it's one of our largest sources of ridership."

Connecting Veterans to the Community

In as much as PanTran's routes to the VA Medical Center anchor

two of the system's five routes with a steady stream of veterans and employees accessing the facility, the services find just as vital role in connecting those veterans with other destinations and community-based services in the region. The Blue Route – which offers 11 trips on weekdays and seven on Saturdays – provides connections to the Martinsburg Mall, Senior Center and Martinsburg train station, which hosts Amtrak's *Capitol Limited* between Washington, D.C., and Chicago as well as MARC commuter trains to the nation's capital.

Meanwhile, heading south from the Medical Center to Charles Town, the Orange Line offers service to the Potomac Town Center shopping area, Beckley County services

in downtown Charles Town and the Charles Town Race Track – a leading regional employment and entertainment district. By providing direct service from the VA facility to these important destinations in both Martinsburg and Charles Town, PanTran encourages area veterans to fully participate in all the region has offer. Moreover, the system facilitates affordable travel on its routes by offering persons over 60 and people with disabilities 50 percent fare reductions for both its fixed-route network and demand response service.

“PanTran is a tremendous resource for veterans in the area,” says Bobby Simpson, Veterans’ Service Officer for Jefferson County. “Because of their half-price fares and direct lines to and from the VA center, it’s easier for our veterans to become involved in the community.”

“We believe it crucial not only to our success as a transit system, but also an important part of our mission to serve the community,” says PanTran’s Waters.

The system’s approach to serving veterans as a core of its ridership is attracting attention from transit providers elsewhere.

“PanTran’s efforts to tailor their services to veterans is a good example for other systems, both here in West Virginia and in other communities,” says David Bruffy, President of the West Virginia Public Transportation Association and General Manager of the Mountain Line Transit Authority in Morgantown, W.Va. “By providing good public transit, they are ensuring veterans can have a full role in their community.”

Transportation to Treatment

Beyond the coordination of its two transit routes at the Medical Center, PanTran also serves veterans more directly, by contracting with the VA to provide trips to veterans

on Tuesday and Friday evenings to ongoing rehabilitation treatment outside the Medical Center in Martinsburg and Charles Town. For more than a decade, PanTran has partnered with VA to operate two vehicles, which have produced more than 6,500 rides over that span.

Since rehabilitation treatment is vital for continued well-being, but not urgent medical care, it is provided off-site from the VA Medical Center. Rather than establishing its own transportation operation to transport these clients from the Medical Center to the treatment facilities, local VA officials tried transit first.

“PanTran are the folks around here who know how to provide transportation,” explains the VA’s Simpson. “Since the treatment is offered on a predictable schedule, working with the transit system made the most sense. It’s been a great partnership for us.”

“It’s a very rewarding part of our work,” adds Waters. “We’ve been providing rides to many of these veterans for around a decade, and our drivers and staff like being part of their lives every week.”

Lessons Learned

In targeting the regional VA Medical Center as a connection point for two of its routes, PanTran allowed for easy and efficient

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transportation for veterans, while at the same time positioned its service to a significant destination for its overall ridership base. That focus was bolstered by a partnership developed between PanTran and the VA to ensure that additional treatment needed by many veterans would be available. These achievements made by PanTran and its partners are not unlike others made by operators of community transportation in small urban and rural areas across the nation – assess the needs of the region and foster useful partnerships to deploy practical solutions to address those needs and overcome greater challenges.



Military Personnel Ride Free on BART

by Rich Sampson

The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system – serving the metropolitan areas of San Francisco and Oakland – is one of the busiest transit networks in the nation. With five lines operating over 100 miles of rail, BART connects 43 stations and moves nearly 350,000 passengers daily. And in early 2010, it will become the largest transit system to offer free trips to all active duty military service personnel.

Valuing Sacrifice

With a large number of military personnel living or stationed in the Bay Area, BART's regional rail

network is a crucial means to access destinations across the area. As a result, on Nov. 19, BART's Board of Directors voted to offer a \$50 ticket to any active duty military service personnel on formal leave from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The idea to extend the benefit to military personnel stemmed from BART Board Member Gail Murphy.

“Regardless of how people view these war efforts, we want to recognize the tremendous sacrifices the men and women of the military make,” said Murphy, who represents the Contra Costa County communities of Concord, North Concord, Lafayette, Martinez, Orinda, Pleasant Hill and Walnut

Creek on the BART Board. “Even in these tough budget times, we want to send our military personnel a message that BART, on behalf of the Bay Area community, values their service and sacrifice.”

Making a Local Commitment

Through the Board's leadership, BART established a one-year investment of up to \$50,000 to support the provision of the tickets. If demand for the program exceeds the authorized level during 2010, the Board will consider its expansion. BART already offers fare-free travel for BART employees, their families and Bay Area police officers.

In order to participate in the program, military personnel need to



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visit the Lake Merritt BART station in downtown Oakland and present documentation confirming their status as active duty and a valid leave order from the Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom [Afghanistan] operations.

“This is a small token of our deep appreciation to the men and women who leave their loved ones behind and put their lives on the line to defend our freedom,” said BART Board President Thomas Blalock.

Lessons Learned

Although they oversee a transit operation that moves hundreds of thousands of riders each day, BART’s Board of Directors were still able to recognize the needs of some of their riders who could use the help of a free trip now and then. In a community of any size, in any part of the country, a commitment by local leaders demonstrates the fundamental interrelationship that exists between transit systems and those in most need of their services. BART’s leaders made such a commitment for veterans in its region, and is one that will not go unappreciated.

