

Medical Escorting: Improving Access to Health Care



Background

During their lifetime, older men and women will need on average 7 and 10 years of transportation support respectively (Dickerson et al., 2007). While many look to family and friends for this transportation support, some older adults are less fortunate. Available options for travel continue to grow, yet research indicates as many as 42 percent of older adults with access to public transportation are not using it (Bailey, 2004). Some elders need another level of assistance and support when traveling, and often find public transportation inadequate.

These non-driving elders are not only getting to fewer medical appointments, but are at an increased risk for depression, isolation, and negative health outcomes (Dickerson et al., 2007). Transportation difficulties compound with issues navigating the hospital, street safety, and accessibility of the building (Scheer et al., 2003) resulting in over 1 in 10 disabled elders to missing a doctor appointment due to inadequate service (Allen & Mor, 1997). The FriendshipWorks Medical Escort program is a *door-through-door* service with the goal of addressing barriers to health care by providing trained volunteers to accompany elders on their needed medical appointments.

Project and Research Description

A thorough evaluation of the Medical Escort program was conducted in 2010 by two students in the gerontology PhD program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Subject recruitment extended to all recipients who had utilized the Medical Escort program in the past year. The survey questions were designed in collaboration between program and research staff, and the Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8) and the short physical functioning section of the SF-12 were also used.

Findings

Who Do We Serve?

The average Medical Escort recipient is a 71 year old white, female who is living alone, low-income, and disabled. As Table 1 shows, though we have no income restrictions, the majority of people who need our services are low-income and isolated. Approximately 45.5 percent of the elders utilizing this service have no family or friends living nearby (i.e. within the Boston area).

A striking finding from our evaluation shows that 41.7 percent of our sample has never been married. Among older Americans, the proportion of never married individuals is historically very low at about 4-6 percent of the population (Census, 2003). The number

Table 1. Demographics for 2010 Medical Escort Recipients (n=164)

Gender	Female	64.6
	Male	35.4
Age	65 and younger	24.3
	66 to 75	29.7
	76 to 85	21.6
	86 and older	24.3
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	73.2
	Black/African American	20.4
	Other	6.4
Income	Low-income Status	73.6
Marital Status	Married	6.5
	Divorced	24.0
	Widowed	27.8
	Never Married	41.7
Living Situation	Lives Alone	94.6
Disability	Disabled	43.1
	1 or more functional limitations	80.0
Social Networks	2+ family/friends nearby	36.4
	Only one living nearby	18.1
	No family/friends nearby	45.5



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of never marrieds will only rise as the Baby Boomers age, increasing the importance of our Medical Escort service.

A number of recipients are clinically disabled (43.1%) and we find increased mobility impairments when respondents self-reported on functional limitations. Eighty percent had at least one constraint:

- o **71%** of program recipients had trouble climbing several flights of stairs
- o **65%** had difficulty in performing moderate activities (like vacuuming)
- o **58%** had physical difficulty traveling to places or appointments

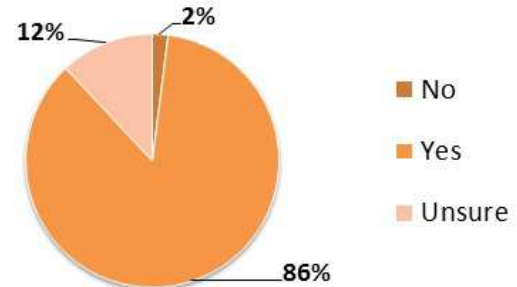
Satisfaction in Accessing Health Care

Recipients of the Medical Escort services are overwhelmingly pleased with the program. Using the CSQ-8 we were found high satisfaction among 85 percent of our recipients. In terms of answers to specific satisfaction questions:

- o **87%** are mostly or very satisfied
- o **90%** said most or all of their needs were met by the program
- o **94%** would recommend the service
- o **94%** would come back if similar assistance was needed

One of the more important findings that came from this research project highlights the great need for elders to have adequate access to health care. We found people experienced stress and anxiety about getting to the doctor, and the anxiety stemmed from having no supportive transportation option.

Did the Medical Escort Program Relieve Your Stress about Scheduling Medical Appointments



About 56 percent of recipients self-reported feeling stressed or anxious when planning and scheduling for a medical appointment due to their lack of transportation and assistance. These anxious elders overwhelmingly stated the program relieved this anxiety (figure above). In fact, 72 percent said they were unsure if they could get to their medical appointments without this service.

This study finds stress and anxiety about one's ability to get to the doctor, in addition to physical limitations, may be effecting older patients' access to care. If this is the case, then providing personalized, assistive transportation to, during and after medical appointments is vital to ensure comprehensive care for frail, isolated populations.

Conclusions

The program is very successful and has provided benefits to the elders enrolled. In general, the elders using this service needed both physical support beyond the front door and emotional support during the appointment, and didn't have anyone nearby to help. There is a clear need for door-through-door transportation options and more should be made available for seniors to help improve their access to care.

This Fact Sheet was created January 2013 and can be found at www.fw4elders.org