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IN THIS ISSUE

Connectivity to
Employment; Access
to Quality Food
2

Positive Impacts on
Resident Health;
Educational Flexibility
for Children and Parents
3

Transportation and
the Community;
Transportation Programs
Offered by Catholic
Agencies in Michigan
4

Transportation, Community, and the **Common Good**

“[The demands of the common good] concern ... the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom.”

Compendium
of the Social
Doctrine of the
Church

Every day, individuals around the state are traveling to work, to the grocery store, to appointments, to church services, or to visit family and friends. In doing so various methods of transportation are necessary to stay connected to the world. Access to a range of options in a given area, including quality public transportation, is beneficial for individuals and families to reach and affirm the goods necessary for life, including employment, quality food, medical services, and education.

In addition to other methods of transportation vital to residents, public transit serves individuals in all of the state's 83 counties. The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) currently lists 79 agencies in the state that operate transportation services that include bus lines, light rail, ferries, vans, and dial-a-ride services. From October 2014–September 2015, MDOT reported almost 89 million public transit rides, including 4.3 million rides for elderly passengers and 8.4 million rides for passengers with disabilities.

For low-income and disabled individuals in particular, a lack of transportation options makes it difficult to travel throughout the day. In a 2011 survey from MDOT, 22% of Michigan's intercity bus passengers reported they would not have made a trip if the intercity bus service was not available. Some 36% of bus passengers also reported they were from households without a car. Whether for

business or personal reasons, public transit services provide mobility for individuals that are otherwise unavailable. Senior citizens, similarly, rely on public transit for increased mobility and independence. Over 20% of Americans 65 and older do not drive and more than 50% stay home due to a lack of transportation options on any given day.¹ Options that provide flexibility keep residents connected to the community.

Public transportation also benefits the community as a whole. According to the American Public Transportation Association, investing public dollars in transportation yields economic impact, bringing in four dollars of economic benefit to the region for every one dollar invested. Businesses are drawn to these areas, and home values improve an average of 42% “if located near public transportation with high-frequency service.” Additionally, living near public transportation can “[impact] everything from traffic congestion to property values to air quality.”

As areas of the state continue to examine transportation systems, communities are well-served by listening to the voices of residents, including the most vulnerable, and seek solutions that meet basic needs. This issue of **focus** explores the importance of vibrant transit systems, with special attention to their impact on marginalized populations, the environment, and community growth. ■



Connectivity to Employment

“Labor makes possible the development of society and provides for the sustenance, stability, and fruitfulness of one’s family.”

Pope Francis
Amoris Laetitia
2016

The opportunity to earn a decent living through employment is linked to the dignity of the human person. Pope Francis, continuing the longstanding Catholic teaching on the subject of work, has called it “proper to the human person” and a vehicle that “expresses the dignity of being created in the image of God.”² Individuals draw a strong sense of self from work, thereby providing unique gifts that are vital to the life of communities. Too often across the state individuals and families struggle to rise out of poverty, to find meaningful opportunities for employment, and to travel to those opportunities. Work matters, especially to the individuals who make up the over 16% poverty rate in Michigan, and the thousands of other families making too much to be considered poor but too little to pay their expenses.

Research has shown that a lack of adequate transportation can be a significant barrier to employment, whether from a lack of access or a lack of connection to opportunities. In a May 2011 report, The Brookings Institute analyzed transit and jobs in 100 metropolitan areas of the country. In the

Detroit-Warren-Livonia area, 90% of working age low-income individuals lived near a transit stop, with 60% of all working-age individuals living near one. Unfortunately, the study also showed that only 22% of all jobs in the region are reachable within a 90 minute transit ride. The greater Detroit area has the widest job sprawl of all metro areas analyzed in a 2013 Brookings report, with 77% of the region’s jobs at least 10 miles outside of the downtown area.³ Sprawl creates challenges for low-income families in search for work, forcing more time away from families as opportunities require a greater amount of travel. Community discussions about transit offer the chance to consider the need for a variety of options that connect people to opportunities. ■



Access to Quality Food

“A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress. Frequently, in fact, people’s quality of life actually diminishes — by... the low quality of food or the depletion of resources — in the midst of economic growth.”

Pope Francis
Laudato Si
2015

In addition to connecting individuals to employment options, access to transportation plays a considerable role for families to shop for food. Those who do not have a car or live in neighborhoods with poor transit access are often unable to easily access fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Since those options may otherwise be available outside the community, low-income individuals who rely on public transportation, walking, or biking are left to decide between longer travel times (multiple buses), more expensive travel (taxis), or the more frequent purchase of unhealthy food options. While unhealthy food may save costs in the short term, foods that lack healthy ingredients can lead to negative health consequences and higher health care costs in the future.

A 2002 study found that 48% of residents in the San Francisco Bay area were not within walking distance of a supermarket. Of those residents, 42% took the bus to grocery shop. Other residents around the country and the state rely on public transit, such as buses, to purchase groceries. Unfortunately, not all public transit systems go near grocery stores or run as frequently when residents have the time to shop. Allowing for public input during the route decision process, especially from low-income individuals, allows citizens to suggest routes to better fit daily needs.⁴ ■





Positive Impacts on Resident Health

“Health is not a consumer good, but a universal right, so access to health services cannot be a privilege.”

Pope Francis
Address to Doctors
May 7, 2016

Health care is a basic good that is valuable to individuals, families, and communities, and is “an essential safeguard of human life and dignity.”⁵ Public transportation is connected to individual health and health care in several important ways, including its ability to link people with necessary health care services.

For some individuals, traveling to health care check-ups, picking up prescriptions, or receiving necessary medical treatments can be difficult. In 2013, a report found that approximately 25% of low-income patients have had to miss or reschedule health care appointments due to a lack of transportation.⁶ Skipping or delaying check-ups exacerbates current problems, leading to greater stress or financial hardship down the road. Elderly persons are at greater risk of health conditions as they age, making access to medical care even more crucial. Vehicles, whether personal or those of a family member or friend, are the most common means to help individuals access care, but for those without a car, public transit provides a cheaper and invaluable option. In Michigan, the majority of seniors have access to some sort of publically-funded transportation services, as outlined in a 2005 study from the State Office of Services to the Aging. Challenges remain, however, including a continued need for funding, and a lack of coordination among agencies that provide the service, especially in urban areas. Adults with disabilities must also be considered in any discussion about transportation. The Centers for Disease Control says the handicapped “are twice as likely as those without disabilities to have inadequate transportation,” and a higher percentage go without health care.⁷

Areas with public transportation also contribute to public health in other beneficial ways. These areas tend to have lower traffic fatality rates than those without public transit travel. Public transit provides suitable alternatives to high-risk driving, allowing individuals who are ill or too tired to be mobile without putting themselves and others at risk. Additionally, public transportation and the development that occurs around it often leads to increased physical fitness, as “most public transit trips involve walking links.”⁸ Increased physical fitness helps to combat obesity and diabetes that continues to challenge many Michigan residents. ■



Educational Flexibility for Children and Parents

“We need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values.”

Pope Francis
Evangelii Gaudium
2013

With a growing number of school choice options across Michigan, students no longer simply attend the educational institution nearest their home. While significant constitutional changes are necessary to the state’s ban on aid for non-public schools, more parents today are taking advantage of options for their children’s education. The Catholic Church teaches that parents “have the right to choose a school for [their children] which corresponds to their own convictions” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2229). As such, allowing more school choice is necessary.

Many factors influence schooling decisions for parents and students, especially the availability of transportation. For example, a family without reliable transportation may simply send their children to the nearest school as the only convenient option. Unfortunately, a 2009 study showed that low-income families, compared to those with higher incomes, are more likely to live by schools that are low-performing, so those without access to a car or public transit would have a difficult time attending a higher quality school.⁹ The study also reported that almost two-thirds of those surveyed, and 80% of the parents with the lowest incomes, reported they would choose a better school farther from their home if transportation were provided. Education plays a large role in the lives of children, potentially offering a pathway out of poverty and preparing students to learn critical thinking and values. Low-income families deserve opportunities to find a school that works best, rather than being confined to a school due to poor transportation options.

In a 2014 discussion on transit and higher education facilitated by the Harriet Tubman Center, Michigan colleges and universities emphasized the importance of public transit options for students. The acting president of Oakland Community College, Royal Oak and Southfield Campuses, mentioned that over half the students at the two campuses would take additional courses if there were some sort of transit service. Other university leaders spoke about the need for more services for students who travel downtown or have internship placements in the city. ■



Transportation and the Community

“Good transportation makes it possible for people to have a good life; it provides options so families can thrive and communities can prosper.”

Michael Ford
CEO of the Regional
Transit Authority
2014

Transit plans that help create a sustainable and economically viable region while assisting the transportation needs of the community, especially the vulnerable and marginalized, can be beneficial. Public transportation plays an important role by providing health and education solutions for families while at the same time realizing cost savings that, at times, can be significant. Around the country, households near public transportation tend to drive an average of 4,440 fewer miles than those who lack access, according to the American Public Transit Association. Additionally, households that use public transportation save, on average, more than \$8,000 a year on expenses. These savings are significant for families, especially those struggling to make ends meet.

Along with cost savings, public transit can have positive impacts on the environment, including the reduction of pollution, while still allowing mobility for residents. Fewer miles on the road help to decrease traffic congestion, save gasoline, contribute less carbon dioxide in the air, and potentially develop land-use patterns in a more efficient way. Pope Francis wrote of transportation improvements in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si* that “these achievements do not solve global problems, but they do show that men and women are still capable of intervening positively” in the environment.

Here in Michigan, it is important for residents and elected officials to promote livable communities with transportation options that take into consideration flexibility, independence, and the ability to meet the basic needs of families and residents, especially poor and vulnerable populations. ■



Transportation Programs Offered By Catholic Agencies in Michigan

Catholic Charities of Jackson, Lenawee and Hillsdale Counties: Provides volunteer transportation to medical services and prescription assistance for the frail elderly (60+) and veterans of any age in Jackson County who qualify. **(517) 783-6102**

Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan: Offers wheelchair accessible transportation within a 15-mile radius to those seniors in CCSEM’s Adult Day Services program, which is offered in Warren, Auburn Hills, and St. Clair Shores. **(855) 882-2736**

Catholic Charities Shiawassee and Genesee: Provides free medical transportation for qualifying children in need. **(810) 397-9924**

Livingston Catholic Charities: Offers transportation services for aging adults and their families. **(517) 545-5944**

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this focus, contact Michigan
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Fax: (517) 372-3940
Email: kmay@micatholic.org

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