

Food Policy Assessment: Transportation Policy in Erie

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Abstract

A healthy lifestyle needs easy access to food for people who want to obtain sufficient amounts of more nutritious and fresh foods. It is not possible for everyone to have adequate food and groceries. Due to a shortage of transportation, people who are low-income, senior folks, or reside in rural areas far from grocery stores or food markets and have impairments can have difficulty acquiring any meals and groceries. Erie's Transportation policy and programs help people to get transportation to access grocery and fresh food. People can receive free or low-cost transportation based on their residency status in Erie County. The questions which asked in the interview aim that people are able to access transportation to get their groceries and fresh foods. The results of the interview found that free fare and discount fare transportation are available for different kinds of people such as low-income community, disabled people, and rural community in Erie County. In this paper, I examined policies that Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority regulations which offer people to get enough of transportation, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program online shopping program, and policies on Meals on Wheels Program. The research questions

Introduction

Lack of mobility and long distances between homes and supermarkets or grocery stores limit access to healthy food. Food insecurity is likely to occur in areas with limited transportation options, long journeys to stores, and few supermarkets. Physical access to food can be hampered by the environment. Some large cities, rural areas, and low-income communities, for example, may have restricted access to full-service supermarkets and grocery stores (Leuthart et al, 2021).

A "food desert" is an area where there is a shortage of cheap and nutritious food. Food deserts have more convenience stores and smaller independent retail stores than full-service supermarkets and grocery stores (Leuthart et al, 2021). These facilities can be costlier, have less quality and variety of items than supermarkets and grocery stores.

If transit and field usage are coordinated to meet national food security needs, links can be established between farmers, grocery stores, and buyers. Traffic regulations are necessary for low-income families, the elderly, and other people with mobility problems and special dietary needs to access supermarkets, farmers markets, and other affordable healthy foods (Walker et al., 2010). Transportation programs are also a means of helping these people. Small farmers can also receive the help of innovative regulations and programs to bring their products to market and meet the demand for local fresh produce (Walker et al., 2010).

These connections have the potential not only to revitalize rural and urban areas, but also to promote the public interest and well-being of millions of people around the world. Mobility advocacy organizations can focus on the essential needs of communities and families by changing and implementing food availability policies (Walker et al, 2010). With no grocery stores nearby, people living in the food desert must travel outside the locations to buy food or rely on corner stores that tend to sell a limited number of healthy food options and fewer quality food items. In most urban areas, residents of low-income areas and minority groups have severely limited access to fresh and healthy food. Low-income areas lack full-service supermarkets and farmers markets. Residents of places with few grocery options also rely more on public transportation than the general population, making it difficult to reach grocery stores outside the neighborhood. Such food access difficulties are evident in many locations throughout the country. Erie PA, for example, has various programs that give access and transportation to

healthy food and grocery markets. This study focuses on three different means of food access: SNAP, EMTA, and Meals on Wheels.

SNAP- Online Purchase Program

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal nutrition help program that benefits millions of low-income people. PA Department of Human Service has approved this program (Snap-online purchasing, 2021). When one or more people in the family are hungry or need to eat less due to a lack of funds, SNAP aids in reducing poverty and food insecurity. SNAP recipients receive an EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) card that functions similarly to a debit card. Every month offers are automatically put into the client's account. Clients can buy groceries using the EBT card at designated supermarkets and merchants (Snap-online purchasing, 2021). On May 18, 2020, USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) authorized a state plan presented by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) to offer SNAP households a shopping online possibility (Snap-online purchasing, 2021). The SNAP Online Purchasing Program (OPP) in Erie, Pa, has allowed its residents to shop for food online through participating stores while taking part in the SNAP -FNS Home Pilot Program. Beginning on June 4, 2020, eligible shops were able to accept SNAP for online purchases. This program has been made available in Erie County with an office added at 1316 Holland Street in Erie and the phone numbers 461-2000 or 1-800-635-1014 (Snap-online purchasing, 2021).

This program is only eligible for low-income people. Sometimes even if the people have their benefits from SNAP, they are not able to go to the store for their groceries due to a lack of transportation. The EBT card online service is acceptable from Amazon, Aldi, Walmart, and ShopRite so that people can access food from these retailers online. Tops is the best shop to get anything very cheap price but they do not accept SNAP- EBT card to purchasing. They can only

use this card to get specific food which is approved by the SNAP program (Snap-Online Purchasing, 2021). With online shopping, low-income people can access food even if they do not have transportation support.

Interview

I interviewed Jackie who lives on Woodland Street. She is a 75-year-old woman who entered the grocery store through her online shopping program with her SNAP-EBT card. She lives alone and gets supplies from Walmart. Every two weeks, she usually buys things at the store. She can't drive any vehicles, so she needs to shop online. The SNAP program offers all of its customers groceries through online shopping. She says it is extremely helpful for her, but sometimes she waits a long time for her deliveries. Since she had to pay extra shipping and tips for them, she tried to get free delivery, then found out that the Meals on Wheels program which is deliver food for free.

Policy Act

According to 49 U.S.C. 5303 and 23 U.S.C. 134, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) jointly oversee the federally mandated transportation planning procedures in metropolitan regions. The legal rules for transportation systems in remote regions and on a regional basis are found in 49 U.S.C. 5304 and 23 U.S.C. 135 (Transportation planning,2021). The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) has all the authority and responsibility to make changes in public transportation. Governor Tom Wolf and Yassmin Gramian, Secretary of PennDOT, have to approve of any policies and regulations in all the counties in Pennsylvania, so they have authority to implement the program for the Erie Metropolitan Transportation Authority (2021). Gov. Wolf has announced a social distance policy

for transportation due to Covid in 2021. Funds for Department of Transportation are collected through gas, vehicle tax, and transit fees.

The Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority (EMTA) was established under the provisions of the Municipal Authorities Act of 1945 (P.L. 382), as modified, and the Ordinance 38-1966 passed on October 10, 1966. The Authority's mission is to obtain, maintain, develop, enhance, manage, and administer all infrastructure required or ancillary to the functioning of a transit services in the City of Erie and its surrounds (City of Erie, PA: Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority,2021). EMTA has a program for disabled persons. The EMTA board of directors and the coordinator of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) have evaluated the program and made changes specially for discrimination of people with disabilities to access transportation (EMTA, 2021). Complaints must be made in writing and acknowledged by the complainant and/or a member of the aggrieved party. The reasons and conditions underlying the claimed prejudice must be detailed as much as feasible in the complaint. The ADA Complaint Policy states that when a person who has made a claim of prejudice to an EMTA authorized officer, the ADA Coordinator will then conduct an interview with the person and follow up with the decision of whether take to fire the offender or warn them (EMTA, 2021).

Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority

Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority (EMTA) provides transportation to all people who live in Erie. It has various kinds of programs to support diverse groups of people such as senior citizens, people with disabilities, paratransit programs and transportation for people who live in rural areas (Erie County Coordinated Transportation Plan 2018-2022). EMTA has different fare options for regular bus fare of \$1.65. Fare prices are: one day, \$3.30; month, \$52.20; days (about 3 weeks), \$28; and a 5-ride ticket \$7.50 (EMTA,2020). Seniors 65 and older people in Erie

County can ride for free the public transportation system with their senior citizens identification cards which is issued by EMTA. EMTA has issued free fare transportation for homeless people in Erie. They only need to have proper proof to access this free transportation. Customers with disabilities are eligible for the Reduced Fare Program. The 49 U.S.C. 5310 distributes grants to states as a way of supporting independent charitable organizations in fulfilling the mobility needs of older individuals and handicapped people when the mobility service offered is inadequate, or unsuitable (Human Services Transportation Plan Update, June 2021). To be eligible for this program, participants must complete a reduced fare application. People who live in Erie County with disabilities under 65 years of age and approved by the Americans with Disability Act (Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority, 2020). To prove their disability, they must present a valid Medicare card or doctor's report for disability when applying directly at the EMTA office. After getting the entitlement, the customer will receive a travel pass at a discounted price. To receive the fare discount, they must show it to the EMTA operator and pay 80 cents one way and 25 cents for a transfer (EMTA,2020). EMTA has paratransit or Lift program for customers with disabilities. A Rural Transportation Program is also available for people with disabilities who live in rural areas. These people can get a discount fare for rides which is \$3.30 to \$6.15 based on distance (EMTA,2020). They are asked to pre-apply for that available program that provides transportation to grocery and food markets. Workers from such places as the Courthouse, Hamot, and Erie Insurance workers, as well as from schools, such as Gannon, Penn State Behrend, or Mercyhurst, are all eligible for free EMTA services with valid identity cards.

Interview

I interviewed some people at the Grandview bus station. They claimed that for daily travelers, a day pass or a month pass is more useful. Passengers with a day pass can ride

anywhere in Erie at any time during the day. They have a problem with ordinary fares which cost \$1.65 since they exact amount for a fare if they do not have a regular pass. If passengers pay \$2 for a standard pass, they will not be able to retrieve the balance. When the bus arrives late at the station, the passengers have some inconvenience because they must wait a bit longer. I discussed about Erie transit with a couple of Indian students, Susheel and Mahesh, who are pursuing a master's degree in Business at Gannon University. With their student ID, they are entitled to complimentary services. They used to go to Walmart once a week for groceries. While they can get a bus from French Street to Walmart, they are not always able to obtain a direct bus there. They also have difficulty returning to Gannon University because they have to wait for the bus from Walmart to Gannon Campus for 20 to 30 minutes.

Meals on Wheels

Erie County has the Meals on Wheels program which delivers groceries and meals to the people who are unable to get transportation. This program has two kinds of services, Home Delivered Meals and Grocery Shopping and Delivery Service (Meals on Wheels, 2021). Meals on Wheels serve the localities of Erie City, Lawrence Park, Harbor creek, Northeast, Millcreek, Fairview, Lake City, Girard, Waterford, and Edinboro. Delivery of Meals on Wheels is supported by a multitude of people and sources (Meals on Wheels, 2021). Funds from the community support more than 70% of its funding. They obtain significant federal funding from the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), and the Older Americans Act and Medicaid money. Individuals are asked to donate whatever they can to the price of the meals, and they have a plan to collect charitable funds and sponsorships (Meals on Wheels, 2021). Their board of directors has to approve any improvements or new plan for the programs. If people don't reside in one of these locations, they might be eligible for Meals on Wheels grocery delivery service. Meals on

Wheels is a non-profit organization that provides meals to people with impairments such as people lives in low-income, disability, and seniors. The Erie program provides grocery delivery and home delivery services as well as meals.

Volunteers obtain grocery lists from the clients then purchase and deliver the groceries. The clients pay a modest charge plus the cost of groceries. To request Meals on Wheels service, an applicant can call the office at (814) 452-6930 or fill out a form to get the service (Meals on Wheels, 2021). The program assistant will contact the consumer for more information and instructions. Once people have signed up, they call on Monday or Tuesday before noon to place their orders over the phone. There is no limit to the number of phone calls that can be issued. Meals on Wheels then calls to schedule delivery on Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday before nightfall through a volunteer. Payment is required when the groceries are delivered. Volunteers are unable to extend credit or postpone payments. They only accept checks as payment (Meals on Wheels, 2021).

Interview

I interviewed Mrs. Wendy Wallace, the executive director of Meals on Wheels. Mrs. Wendy said that they have some clients from the SNAP program who are asking for help to deliver food. The SNAP consumers will sign a debit card for food goods and for non-food items and service fees they have to pay by check. In Erie Country, Giant Eagle and Sander's Market are the only two grocery stores that distribute the Meals on Wheels service. Volunteers may get groceries from these two stores and deliver them to the client's home. They are limited to delivery of 21 items and a weight of or below 50 pounds. Ms. Marilyn, one of the program's clients, was interviewed. She lives in Corry and is 79 years old. She was pleased with the program, but she did mention some of the program's usual flaws. Because meals cannot be adjusted based on specific dietary

concerns and/or culinary preferences, the Meals on Wheels program has several limitations. Local Meals on Wheels programs have a significant waiting list for their services due to a growing demand. To take part in Meals on Wheels services, people must meet certain criteria, such as being homebound, having an income below a certain threshold, or having filled out a lot of paperwork to participate in the program.

Conclusion

Based on my study and conversations, I discovered that SNAP online shopping, Erie Transportation, and Meals on Wheels in the city of Erie and Erie County offer services that make it easier for people to access groceries and foods. Nevertheless, some people have difficulty getting into the programs. Each program has its own set of documents that must be completed in order to receive an offer from the program. Senior adults, low-income individuals, and residents of remote places have difficulty connecting to networks in order to complete the paperwork. If the program enables people to enter their services with ease of processing and makes it possible to complete all the processing over the phone, it will be more realistic for people. The Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority provides additional services for a variety of populations (Erie County Coordinated Transportation Plan 2018-2022). Bus takes a lot of time to come and go to a grocery store and also there are limited bus stations in Erie. Some of bus stations are unsheltered which is a problem during winter months and also in the raining seasons. The college students are getting free fare transportation but low-income people are not getting free fare. They may offer free fare service for low-income people. But they need to be on time in order to meet the needs of the passengers and to automate their payment mechanism to return the balance to be fair to the passengers. My study also showed that only Giant Eagle and Sander's Market participate in the Meals on Wheels program. If Meals on Wheels can expand into new

markets, people would be better served. It may enable individuals to obtain groceries quickly so that they are not placed on a waiting list. These are a few possible and realistic enhancements that will assist people in obtaining as much food and goods as possible today.

Appendix

	Connected Places	Times of trips of the day	Miles of one trip	Hours of travel for one trip
Route 1 Glenwood	Downtown to Millcreek Mall	13	3.8	26 min
Edinboro Express	Edinboro University, Darrow Apar. Walmart, Millcreek Mall	28	11.9	37 min
Route 4	Downtown Erie, Giant Eagle, Millcreek Mall	9	4.4	46 min
Route 11	Downtown Erie, Walmart, K-Mart, Giant Eagle	3	4.4	45 min
Route 12	Downtown Erie, Millcreek Mall, Walmart to Albion	2	29.9	1.30min
Route 14	DT Erie, LECOM, Millcreek Mall, Giant Eagle, Walmart	6	4.4	43 min
Route 15	Penn State, TOPS, LECOM, Millcreek	11	11.1	29 min

Route 16	Mercyhurst Northeast, Harbor creek Walmart	4	8.7	14 min
Route 21	Gladstone court, Giant Eagle, Penn Stat	24	4.0	23 min
Route 22	Lake road, Walmart, downtown	22	11.5	37 min

Interview Question:

1. How does SNAP-EBT card help you to get grocery?
2. Have you ever had any difficulties in accessing groceries?
3. How do you get your groceries or fresh food?
4. What is the program that supports you in getting transportation?
5. How long have you waited for a bus?
6. Have you had difficulties in getting into the EMPT program? What were they?
7. How long have you had to walk to get to the bus station?
8. How much fare do you spend for transit?
9. How do you feel about using the School Transportation ID to travel?
10. How can people get into the Meals on Wheels program? What is the eligibility?
11. Do you have the offer of free grocery delivery for people? Is it limited to a to any particular areas in the city?
12. Are you limited in the numbers of items or the weight of the groceries for your delivery?
13. Are you able to get groceries from any store and have them delivered to you as a customer?

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