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Breaking Travel Boundaries

County coalition examines transportation services for the disabled community.

By Kerry Barger | Email the author | July 10, 2011 | Print

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It's been more than 20 years since the U.S. Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which sought to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.

But one group of community members in Putnam County is still working toward that goal.

The 1990 civil rights law is aimed at providing citizens living with mental or physical impairments equal access to employment, transportation and other public entities. Steve Unger serves as the chairman for the Putnam County Coordinating Council for People with Disabilities, an organization dedicated to going above and beyond the law to ensure that citizens living with disabilities can enjoy every opportunity and lead happy, fulfilling lives.

He wrote a proposal in January to [Easter Seals](#)

[Project Action](#), (ESPA) an organization that provides "services, education, outreach, and advocacy so that people living with autism and other disabilities can live, learn, work and play in our communities," according to its website. The proposal sought a grant that would help the county improve its transportation services to the disabled community.

"It's like the weather — everybody talks about it, but nobody seems to be doing anything about it," Unger said. "We wanted to take a chunk out of the problem and do something about it."

Unger said he thought that ESPA might help him and other organizations achieve some short-term goals that would help improve transportation. Those goals include prioritizing areas in the county where transportation opportunities are subpar, and discovering ways to raise funds in a time of declining budgets and increasing fuel costs.

In March, he received word that Putnam County was selected as one of ten communities in the United States to be presented with support from ESPA's Accessible Transportation Coalitions Initiative (ATC).

Unger said that though the grant is not a monetary award, it does provide one-year technical assistance from Project Action's office in Washington, D.C. The organization also offered their expertise toward a two-day working conference that was held June 14 and 15 at the Emergency

From private businesses and nonprofits to local government agencies, the working conference united groups that could help improve transportation services in the county. Putnam County Commissioner of Planning, Development and Public Transportation John Lynch said the meeting served as a venue to help the county assess its paratransit system.

"Paratransit provides origin to destination service within three-fourths of a mile from our fixed routes," Lynch said. "The coalition can help us define the magnitude of need for this service and raise awareness to people who live within that three-fourths of a mile and need it, but may not know it exists."

Among other government officials and agencies that were represented are Putnam County Executive Paul Eldridge, Deputy County Executive John Tully and Laura Bromfield of the Putnam County Department of Social Services and Mental Health.

Many independent organizations were also in attendance, like the Community Development of United Way of Westchester and Putnam, the Hudson Valley Cerebral Palsy Association and Putnam Independent Services.

"In 25 years of going to things like this, [Project Action] was by far the best facilitator," Tina-Cornish Lauria, executive director for Careers for People with Disabilities, Inc., said. "A coalition like this could not only help our clients get to their jobs, but also assist them with getting to our offices where we teach skills that help them get those jobs."

For now, Unger is focusing on steps to expand the coalition's outreach to organizations and individuals who were unable to attend the two-day working conference.

"We'd also like to see the growth of the coalition," Unger said. "We had some major players at the conference, but we'd like to welcome any other organization or business that feels like they have a role to play here."

With the conference behind them, Unger hopes that he will eventually fulfill the ATC's long-term objective.

"Ultimately, the long-term goal is accessible transportation, so no one is excluded from the resources they need," Unger said.



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