

Transportation and Low Wage Work

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Introduction

Living on a low wage can be extremely difficult, yet the number of low wage jobs in metro Buffalo grew by 17% from 2004 to 2008.ⁱ This means that many more people are struggling to figure out how to survive with less money. It also means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for many people to afford transportation.

As the location of employment has dispersed throughout the region, transportation has become a basic need similar to food, clothing, and shelter.ⁱⁱ A recent report published by the Homeless Alliance of Western New York found that affording public transportation and access to suburban worksites were of great concern to homeless and very low wage workers in Western New York. The purpose of this policy brief is to examine the issue of transportation in the context of low wage work and to propose solutions for our region to address affordability and access.



Low Wage Budgets

Before considering transportation, it is important to understand how tight a low wage budget is. The Homeless Alliance of Western New York conducts an annual Poverty Challenge where members of the community attempt to live for a couple of days at the official federal poverty level.ⁱⁱⁱ The poverty level for an individual in 2009 was only \$903 per month. The Homeless Alliance took this number, subtracted monthly rent and clothing requirements, and divided the remainder by thirty to give a hypothetical daily allotment of \$7.87. The daily allotment is all of the money available to cover transportation, food, health care, entertainment, communications

such as a phone or the internet, and pets. Participants found themselves going beyond their daily allotments as soon as they drove a car, which costs the average person \$8.87 per day. Even those who did not drive a car found it incredibly difficult to manage just one day on such a tight budget.

Transportation: a Major Barrier

The Poverty Challenge shows that transportation can take up a large share of the daily budgets of low wage workers. A person at the federal poverty line simply cannot afford to drive a car every day. Public transportation is much cheaper than driving cars – less than one-third the cost, according to HAWNY – but it presents different problems. The quality of public transportation is not equal everywhere, public transit can take more time than driving, and many jobs require or can only be reached by car.

Transportation is not an issue exclusive to the low wage workers of Western New York, it is a major barrier to employment for people across the country.^{iv} The legacy of land use and development over the past century is that today the majority of employment and residents exist outside the urban core.^v The spread out nature of our metro regions leaves those without cars dependent upon public transportation. However, many employers with entry level positions report that those jobs are inaccessible by public transit.^{vi} Welfare administrators across the country report that transportation is a major barrier to the self sufficiency of welfare recipients.^{vii}

In Western New York, transportation issues cause people with low incomes to miss appointments, job interviews, and forego work altogether.^{viii} Missing appointments is a particularly severe problem for people enrolled in substance abuse or probation programs. Public transit issues in Western New York include limited suburban routes, service in the winter and late at night, safety at bus stops, overcrowding, cleanliness, and affordability.^{ix}



Subsidies and Tax Credits

To address affordability, the Homeless Alliance advocates the development of public transportation subsidies for low income people because it has been successfully done in other places in the country. A policy option at the federal level could be to give a tax credit to compensate workers who commute.^x

Increased Routes and Para-Transit

Our system must provide better access to employment opportunities in the suburbs. There are two ways to achieve better access through public transit. We can enhance the existing fixed route services by increasing the number of routes and frequency of buses, and we can provide para-transit services like those already used to help seniors. The benefit of para-transit service is that it provides door to door transportation. That means that people are picked up where they live and delivered to their destination, which is more convenient than using traditional public transit. But both of these strategies to improve public transportation require more funding. Greater funding for public transportation has been a request of urban planners and environmentalists for decades but generally has been ignored.

Bicycles

There is an alternative solution to transportation that is low cost, environmentally friendly, and appropriate for Western New York. Active transport by bicycle has the potential to provide very low income people increased access to employment and the ability to make appointments. The City of Buffalo and its surrounding suburbs have a comparable climate to Copenhagen, Denmark, where a third of commuters travel to work by bicycle. The heavy use of bike transport in Copenhagen is not an accident; it is the result of half of a century of urban planning.^{xi}



Bicycles give users the convenience of an automobile without any of the negative social and environmental costs. Cars provide people flexibility; the ability to accommodate schedules that may include complicated non work travel and unforeseen requirements.^{xii} Cars allow people to travel

without having to wait for the bus or to make multiple stops.^{xiii} Also, cars can be driven to take a more direct route than public transportation, further reducing travel time.^{xiv} These positive characteristics of car travel are all shared by bike travel. Furthermore, bike transport alleviates traffic congestion, does not contribute to air pollution including climate change, and does not increase our dependence on oil.^{xv}

In order to encourage active transport by bike, bikes must be made available to very low wage people and there must be safe bike routes connecting areas of low wage workers and employment locations. Buffalo Blue Bicycle is a bike sharing organization in the City of Buffalo that seeks to make biking accessible to all city residents. The organization has a number of hub locations from which members can sign out bicycles for a couple of days. One problem that low wage workers would likely face with the program is that it requires the use of the internet.

Land Use Planning

Of course, the ultimate way to reduce transportation costs for all people is for communities to be arranged where people can walk to school, work, and the grocery store. Though we cannot undo the decades of sprawling development since World War II, we can make sure that new development is compatible with transportation options available to low wage workers such as public transportation and bicycling.



ⁱ “Playing an Insecure Hand; Low-Wage Workers in the New Economy.” UB Regional Institute. <http://regionalinstitute.buffalo.edu/>

ⁱⁱ “Left Behind: How Difficulties With Transportation are a Roadblock to Self Sufficiency.” Homeless Alliance of Western New York. www.wnyhomeless.org

ⁱⁱⁱ “2009 Poverty Challenge.” Homeless Alliance of Western New York. www.wnyhomeless.org

^{iv} “The Long Journey to Work: A Federal Transportation Policy for Working Families.” The Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, Brookings Institution. July, 2003.

^v Id.

^{vi} Id.

^{vii} Id.

^{viii} “Left Behind.”

^{ix} Id.

^x “Auto-Mobility.” By Margy Waller. Washington Monthly, 2005.

^{xi} “In Copenhagen Bicycles Overtake Cars.” By April Streeter. TreeHugger.com.

^{xii} “The Long Journey.”

^{xiii} Id.
^{xiv} Id.
^{xv} Id.