

**Northern Lakes Community Mental Health
CONSUMER ADVOCACY COUNCIL**

Bay Area Transportation Authority (BATA) presentation

February 13, 2008

Guest Presenter: Michelle Goetz-Grahl, BATA and Director of the Northwest Michigan Transportation Alliance, which is a collaboration of organizations addressing transportation needs in our community. She noted she focuses on Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties and some in Benzie.

A. Review of Services

Michelle distributed a handout, which outlines the services provided at BATA. She noted that BATA also provides agency runs or contract services which are not listed on the handout. She noted she could answer any questions about that service.

Michelle noted that BATA has the following services:

1) Cherriots (operated in Traverse City) – fixed route and a set schedule. These are predictable running from Monday through Saturday 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

2) Village Connectors are fixed routes coming from Fife Lake/Kingsley, Northport, Empire are on a schedule and have actual stops. They run Monday through Friday roughly 6:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. (depending on the route).

3) Zone Busses (operate outside Traverse City) which is demand response (calling in to make a reservation). Divide the area up into a pie with Traverse City in the middle and collect everyone in that zone, switch to other busses and go back out and do over again. A reservation is needed and the pick up times will be different depending on who is riding. They run Monday through Friday roughly 6:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. (depending on the route).

4) Dial A Ride/City Ride operates within Traverse City, which is a curb-to-curb service. The availability is seven days a week 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with limited after hours availability. Must make an advance reservation.

5) Health Ride is non-emergency medical transportation. Anywhere in Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties. Must make a reservation in advance.

B. Important Information to note:

- 1) All vehicles will accommodate at least one wheelchair a few busses accommodate two or three.
- 2) Only provide service in Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties.
- 3) Dispatch center is next door to the Hall Street Office. The telephones are answered seven days a week from 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. (subject to change)
- 4) Passes are available from the drivers and from the transfer center.
- 5) Drivers don't make change - exact change is required.
- 6) Disability Network administers a program called BATA Buddies, which will help you learn how to use the bus (call 922-0903).

C. Response to CAC Questions:

1) What is the public transportation role and what is the rider's role?

Response – Depends on what service you are using. Obviously if you're using a fixed route service it is the riders responsibility to be at the bus stop before the scheduled time, those drivers are really trying to keep a schedule. If you're talking the demand response system (where you have to call and make a reservation) it is a lot more complicated. First you have to call in and make a reservation. They frequently will have folks at some of the group homes where one person calls and makes the reservation but ten people get on. That is problematic for them because there are times when they are counting the number of people getting on the bus and how many seats are on that bus. If they are only expecting one and ten people get on that causes problems further down the line. Let them know that you are in a wheelchair so the bus has an available wheelchair slot. Let them know if the person is vision or hearing impaired it helps the driver be aware. No-shows and cancellations, if your plans change please cancel. About 10% of their rides set up every day are cancelled and 10% are no shows. The no shows are a disaster for them. That driver is out there looking (which delays everyone) and the dispatcher will send a second or a third bus looking for you. Then invariably if they don't find you and you then call the dispatch office now it is an emergency and they are sending the back up driver. The ripple effect of no shows impacts their entire system. It is very easy for the Dial A Ride system to end up an hour behind schedule. That is not good for anyone.

2) You say that it impacts the system but he has situations where he could drive quicker than he could ride the bus. He will drive and if it takes to or three busses fine. He had situations where he could walk quicker.

Response – BATA is not a taxi service – there are times when it will take longer than driving yourself. Michelle said she is not saying that the bus will serve every purpose of a person's needs. She is saying a no show impacts the system. Michelle noted that a no show is when you had a reservation at 10:00 and the bus shows up at 10:00 and you are not there. They wait for you and look for you and you're not there. Now they are later for the next call. The dispatcher frequently will send a second bus and it ripples through the entire system. If you make a reservation – you should be there to meet the bus. A CAC member noted if that happens early in the day and someone blows one or two reservations that compounds the problem. Michelle noted that means that other people got turned down for a pick up. That is a law of the universe for them that if they get a reservation at the furthest point in the zone that is who will no show. That driver spent an hour getting there. It makes them really cranky. How many people did they say no to because they were traveling the hour to get there?

Michelle noted that brought up a good point about timeliness. There are two aspects to timeliness. The demand response system isn't on a fixed schedule. They are picking up everyone in that area, which means they are making, stops along the way. Which means absolutely it could be quicker to drive yourself. That is the nature of the system. It is not a one to one system. They are trying to get as many people as possible to where they need to go. Every day is different.

3) How can we get the no show policy?

Response – Michelle noted that many systems have a "three strikes you're out rule". They do not have one. Their board doesn't have one and want to give the benefit of

the doubt. Every once in a while a no show is their fault, possibly a computer error. It was asked if it was the BATA board that would determine to have some type of policy and choose not to have when in fact that might help alleviate that. Michelle identified it is a local BATA board policy decision.

4) Do you have a set fee for a client in a wheelchair and do they pay the same amount?

Response – Michelle noted that is a common practice nationwide that there usually is a discounted fare for seniors and folks who are disabled. For most of their services the full fare is \$2.00 and senior/disabled fare is \$1.00. For the Cherriots the fare is \$1.00 and the senior/disabled fare is \$.50.

As of August 1st, 2008 the new fares are Cherriots \$1.50 full fare and 75 cents for seniors/children/and people with disabilities. The other services are \$3.00 full fare and \$1.50 for seniors/children/and people with disabilities.

5) A CAC member said he has called for a bus and they say walk to the BATA stop. He noted he has a health problem and makes it hard to walk far.

Response – Michelle noted if you live near one of these stops they will absolutely encourage you to use it. There are some people who can't. When they tell you that a bus is full it doesn't mean a person in every single seat. It means that they have no chance of getting anyone into the schedule and getting anywhere in a reasonable amount of time. They are over their allotted number of pickups. There are a certain number of pickups they are trying to do in an hour and at certain times of the day in certain areas they are way over that. Which means that bus will always be behind schedule and that has a ripple effect. They try to balance saying no to people with overloading the system that it breaks. That is a real balancing act that they do every day. If it is bad weather it all goes downhill pretty quickly.

A question was asked of a guest present regarding the Benzie county No Show policy. The guest noted that you have two chances for a no show. The first no show you don't have to pay anything. The second chance you have to pay the fare because Benzie was having a lot of no shows. When they did that then everybody found out that they had to pay for a ride they didn't have. She noted you might as well ride the bus or call. Michelle noted that how it would be enforced would be tricky for them partially because of BATA being a larger system.

There was discussion about an accountability factor and it would seem that maybe some of us would want to go to the BATA board meetings and talk about. When you put in an accountability factor it creates a more efficient system for everyone that utilizes the bus system. Especially the Dial A Ride system where persons call up and blow off a ride. It sounds like someone else will get burned by that and multiple people will be effected. Michelle noted the Benzie bus system has existed for a year and BATA has been operating this way for a long time. She suggested that people can go to the BATA board and ask them. She suspected that the public outcry would be huge.

6) Regarding no shows, that will mess up people like she has to be at work at 8:00 but because two people didn't show she is late for work. There is no accountability for those that are following the rules then we suffer because of that. You need to step up.

Response – Michelle noted that she will let the BATA board know that the CAC is interested in having discussion about a no show policy. A member noted that she just got out of a wheelchair and they keep telling her to take the Cherriot. She was an avid promoter of the Cherriot but she can't do that. They will tell her they can't get you at all that day. Michelle noted that is because they can't fit you in the schedule. The member noted that is another reason accountability is important because there are actual physically handicapped people that are being told no. She feels it is illegal for them to not get you a ride. You have to provide as public transportation that is your requirement to do that. You can't tell them that they have to walk to the Cherriot when they have a physical handicap.

7) Are you talking about physical disabilities or cognitive disabilities? Some of our consumers it is very difficult for them to use the bus. Some of them depend on it because it is the only way they can get around town. He wanted to make sure we weren't just talking about physical disabilities.

Response – BATA does not differentiate. People self-select and there are plenty of people who are picking up on that and are taking advantage of the system.

A guest asked for clarity if the bus can't come and pick people up is it because they call that day or the day ahead? Michelle noted obviously the further in advance you plan the better. They are working with a system that at least at certain times it is at or above capacity. That is a reality and a reality that is not going away anytime soon unless someone starts writing big checks. That is a reality they are working with. We all have to work within the system. The only part of the system that is strict is the health ride in that you must call by 12:00 noon the day before. The more notice the better the more resources they have. The other system is a response system and will accommodate you as much as they can with shorter notice. The more notice you give the better chance of getting in. There are a lot of folks out there who have standing calls. They fill up those spots and so there aren't a whole lot of other slots at certain times. That is the reality we work with.

8) What do you feel is a long enough wait for a client? One instance where there was a couple downstairs and she said the couple said they were waiting for a bus for an hour and a half. She called to see if there was a bus coming and they couldn't give her an answer. What is a fair length of time that a client or a person is fair for them to wait?

Response – Michelle noted that is a dangerous question. She would say for the dial a ride system 1.5 hours is too long and that is something they struggle with. If you had a 10:00 o'clock reservation and you panicked too early at 10:05 and you call, well that is too early. If you panicked at 11:00 that is too late. Now they may have a different problem on their hands. It could be that the reservation got dropped. When do you panic? They tell people to be prepared to be picked up ½ hour earlier or later than your reservation. Do I think that is ideal? No. Is that a reality? Yes. Again it will be different every single day because of the nature of the system. Which is one of the reasons why they encourage people to use the fixed routes whenever they can. Again they are on a schedule. They have a stop and are on a schedule. If they have more people using them there would be more room left for the people who needed the other system. That is partly why the dispatchers are strongly urging people to go to the stops.

A member said that the two most frequent things she hears is 1) that the bus got there way before I was ready and left, or 2) I had to be to work and I couldn't wait

any longer because I needed to get to work. A half hour on either side would give people a window and to know their responsibility in being ready a half hour before the pickup. Then you build that into your time when reserving the bus.

Michelle it could be that you would like the bus at 10:00 but there is nothing in your area at 10:00 and means you will be riding at 8:00. The dispatcher will work with you on that. Transportation is all matters of where you are and where and when you're going.

A member noted she has found it works if you call the dispatcher to let her know you have to go to Meijer's today and ask what time do you have open. If you don't have to be somewhere at a certain time they can work with you. Michelle noted the demand response works great in that scenario and that is easy. When you have to be somewhere at a very specific time that gets a lot trickier.

A member noted she had problems at night because she used to work at night. They would really work with you. I have to be here and what time do you have open they would be flexible for you. Michelle noted that she has places she has to be a certain times. She is completely sympathetic. We are dealing with a limited resource. Some people choose to run errands at night. Then that van is tied up all night. If she could force that person to change to do the errands during the day would be better. Instead of three busses on the road there would be 25 busses on the road and there would be more ways of reacting when something goes wrong. She can't force that person not run their errands at night.

9) Is there any hope that Leelanau County will have weekend service for those people who have no other way to get to work?

Response - Michelle said she will never say there is no hope. She noted the budget reality is that a bus costs about \$100,000 she has 40 busses that needed to be replaced a year ago. Busses don't grow on trees. They get access to busses occasionally. To start a new route there would be a cost for a bus and about \$100,000 in operating costs. To add a route is a good \$200,000 and at least \$100,000 per year after that. They would add as many routes as possible although they don't have the funding to do that. State funding is being cut continuously and they have no way of making up those funds and the revenue for property taxes is at best flat and potentially going down. She doesn't see any service increase happening in the next couple of years. Part of her job is work on those kind of solutions and have created a car-pooling website (NMRide.net). It is available to anyone in the area.

It was noted it would seem that people are becoming more energy efficient conscious conserving fuel and that the bus system is an easy way to do. It becomes incumbent to the group that is concerned to find funding. The only routes that she knows that were added were the Lafrainer Road and the three village connections. The Leelanau County village connector runs in the winter. You have to get to that stop. A guest noted they are limited to employment options because of the transportation in Leelanau County. Michelle noted that she was limited in Washington DC for 20 years and organized her life around the bus and the train schedule, including where she worked, lived and the grocery store. She spent 1.5 hours commuting every day each way. It can be done. She would not say it is easy. BATA has the largest rural transit system in Michigan and one of the largest in the country. They are doing the best they can with the resources they have. When that

specific situation comes up let them know and they will work on it. Some of it they don't have solutions for.

10) Some of the bus drivers are not very tactful in saying well you don't look handicapped. For her it is insulting. It has happened a few times.

Response – Michelle noted she needs to know the specifics – who, when and where and we can address that. Michelle noted we all have bad days. Michelle identified that again she needs the specifics and to say that dispatchers are nasty people that doesn't help her. A member noted too many times when you're in a customer service based industry you get people who don't belong who don't like working with people. Michelle said that she was not sure how much of that is true. A lot of their employees have been in this for a long time and a lot of employees are retired (teachers, policeman, fireman who are public service sector folks). She noted that George McBath would tell you that he actually screens people very carefully for folks who have people skills. That is not saying they are all angels and they are all angels every day.

Michelle noted that sitting in the dispatch room it is rough. She comes from a very strong customer services background. She manages health rides and the dynamics are a little different there so she doesn't get yelled at for example the way the dispatchers do. She fights every day to keep that customer service positive and frankly for the client not to be the enemy. She noted it is hard. She is not excusing inappropriate behavior and is asking for a little bit of empathy because they have all kind of clients whose first words out of their mouth are swearing, or yelling and it gets old. As for someone giving you a hard time about using the handicapped rate frankly she wished they had the card system. Again give her specifics. She knows from sitting in the break room that there are drivers who are so frustrated after being scammed every day and they know they are being scammed and are taking it personally. Whether they should that is a whole different issue. They are taking it personally that they are being scammed by the people who get on their bus.

A member noted she previously rode the Cherriot faithfully. She noted it could have been a one-time incident but she was coming from a health appointment at MCHC and was getting on the Cherriot and was carrying bags she didn't have her card out but was getting it out as she got to the final step. The driver said to her that card better be out before you hit that bottom step or don't bother showing up here again. Kristy noted that it was motivating because she walked a little more and bought a car. Michelle said that is the kind of thing that she wants to have documented but wants to hear about it at the time.

A member noted that some of us should go to a BATA board meeting and talk about that riders aren't averse to having some guidelines and some punitive response. If you blow off rides over and over again they aren't going to be real excited to come and pick you up again and what is your responsibility in that. If paying a fee to do that or not being able to ride one time or something that may not be all that bad. Another member identified that may give you more dollars to get another bus. If you are saving on the no shows and busses going to pick those no shows that money could be turned into another bus.

11) Who does the BATA Manager have to answer to?

Response – Michelle noted the BATA board. A member noted that she called one day and her friend she's very handicapped and very overweight. She had to go to

the Sheriff Department and it was 95+ degrees. They were saying nobody should go out walking or exercise. This dispatcher made her walk 7 to 7.5 blocks to the Cherriot stop. Jackie complained to the manager about that and other things that had happened. His answer was it is not our fault your friend is over weight and can't walk. Michelle noted she would not defend that comment. It was inappropriate but again she can't do anything unless it is specific. She is not the one that does it. She would have to turn it over to a supervisor. She needs to know specifics.

Michelle noted that there are the Friends of the Transit group where things get aired. Those comments are taken seriously. Can she have someone fired for making that comment? No. She could write them up and it takes three times to get suspended and if they do it again they get suspended again. There is a process and that is good and bad. As an employee you don't want her to walk in some day and say I heard what you said and fire you. You want there to be a process. Short of something blatantly illegal there is a process fire someone. You may think there is no accountability because you still see the driver driving that next day even if you make that complaint. You have to build a case and without specifics you can't build a case. Michelle identified that they need to know specifics such as calling or writing which would be better - time, date, name and bus numbers if at all possible.

12) Carpooling? Question about the process of identifying interest. Noted concern about getting into a car with people she doesn't know.

Response – Michelle noted that on that website there is a page on carpooling basics and safety is one of those things that is addressed. Meet the person for coffee and get to know the person to determine if you feel comfortable. You don't carpool if you don't feel comfortable. She noted that carpooling is not a new idea. She took from other communities and used the website. Where she moved from in Washington not only do they carpool they use slug lines (line up at Meijer's and they say where they are going and you get in). It is not formal or pre-arranged. You're making a choice. If people do that in big cities all over the place and are scarier than here it is not a new thing.

13) The senior age is what age for your discount?

Response – We don't actually define it. They allow a lot of leeway. If you say you're a senior no one is questioning you. If I show up on a bus now I may have a non-visible handicap but I say I am handicapped or a senior it is human nature that some of those drivers going to at least have some thoughts. They don't define it.

14) With the wheelchair usage are the drivers trained with the tie downs and all the safety concerns.

Response – Michelle noted that the drivers are responsible for the safety of the bus. That is a good point. The drivers will strap down the wheelchair. BATA is in the process of upgrading its restraints and some lap belts. They all have them. There is a growing issue of oversize and overweight wheelchair, e.g. some electric wheelchairs. ADA requires accommodating a wheelchair 30 inches wide, 48 inches in length and weighs less than 600 pounds with the person in it. It is a huge issue in our community. Electric wheelchairs start at 200 pounds and go up from there. We have busses that lift 610 pounds but there is a strict safety cut off.

15) What is your average wheelchair lift cost?

Response – Michelle had no idea. She was looking at putting one in a van recently and it was something like \$10,000. Michelle noted that the van and the busses are

different. There are some intended for heavier usage like the health ride \$7,000 to \$10,000. She noted that scooters were never intended to be transported on the bus. There is no way to tie most of them down. Even if you did the second the driver slams on the brakes the seat will crack and you will go flying. Under ADA you have to transport if it fits within that footprint. Many of the scooters won't fit on the lift and are too long. This is an ongoing nationwide issue. A member noted when she was working she found a lot of wheelchairs and scooters wanted to get on the Cherriot but it backs up the whole schedule. Michelle noted that we have more traffic now and more people in wheelchairs than they can help. They are too tight. However it all fits really nicely together and to change it they have to redesign the whole system. Loading a wheelchair takes a good five minutes even if you're good at it. Five minutes is enough to kill a Cherriot schedule. If you have enough of them it is enough to kill a Dial A Ride schedule.

16) What improvements are being made and it was in the paper about shelters?

Response – Michelle noted that shelters are for Cherriot and Village Connector routes. She noted they love shelters. Shelters are going up as quickly as they can. Like other things it is a little more complicated than you think. For instance, you have to have permission, the right spot, it also costs money. The grant that was approved for the shelters provided no money for installation. If it comes down to keeping busses on the road or putting shelters up they will keep busses going down the road. There are at least two issues 1) the approvals for where the shelters go and that takes time. They have been working on a bunch of them 2) the other is the actual physical building the shelter. Even without the article they would have been seeing a bunch in spring and summer anyhow. A member noted it is a great marketing thing for the bus system. They look nice. Michelle noted they have a big vandalism problem (broken glass). Another member said there are homeless people living in them.

17) Requested that benches be placed outside the Grand Traverse Mall. The property management person said they were willing to put them out there but BATA was sitting on the contract for a year and hadn't got back to them.

Response – Michelle noted she knows nothing about this. Michelle noted Friends of Transit would be a good place to start with this type of concern.

18) Is there any way to make the Cherriot bus signs bigger? He has walked around and couldn't locate because they are so small. Would like to see made bigger because he has a vision problem. Has a problem with walking.

Response – Michelle agreed that they should be bigger.

19) Will there be a Kingsley bus on Saturday and Sunday?

Response – Michelle noted it is a funding issue. Haven't heard any discussion recently of increasing weekend service. Last year she did a coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan looking at unmet need and that certainly is all on there and on the list of things we would love to have. She doesn't see it happening anytime soon. Next millage is in four years and perhaps we can go for an increase.

20) Is the transfer station totally paid for?

Response – Michelle noted that a lot of the funding came from the federal government. It was noted it is a tremendous asset. Michelle noted that because of the tight space bus drivers hate to back out. Encourage everyone to be super careful walking around there. They all live in fear of backing over someone. That is a

horrible fear to be in every day. It was noted that even with cars coming in they inch their way back. A guest noted that we have a problem with the local rebels who come over to the CMH lot and smoke. Michelle noted she would be deeply saddened but would not be surprised if someone gets hit. The guest noted it is dangerous going between buildings and he gets after them to make them go back to the transfer station. Michelle noted they don't want them smoking either. She noted that there is discussion with CMH about the smoking. There have been efforts made but not sure how successful any of this has been

21) Had heard a number of the busses were to be fuel efficient when received grants. Are you looking at that when replacing?

Response – Michelle noted that they have several hybrid busses being built. Have one now as a prototype. Not sure whether it is 4 or 5 being built and will be used as Cherriots. We should see them within the year. It takes a long time to build a specialized bus like that. Almost our entire fleet uses bio-diesel.

22) Works in Traverse House and wanted to know if there was something that he could do to help others? Some consumers have difficulty communicating and some times people wait an hour to be picked up.

Response – Michelle noted in an hour she would recommend a status call. It could be that they are behind schedule but that it is appropriate to ask if the bus is really coming. She noted that the system breaks down, doesn't work, she doesn't have a solution when a person is confused or has poor time management skills. If a person can't remember or tell - It doesn't work. She doesn't have a way of making it work. For example, a person who has mild-dementia. She has one person who calls six different times and gives six different appointment times. She can work with that person's family and doctors within the Healthride system but in the general service that doesn't happen as much. They are dealing in volume and often don't have enough information to take those additional steps.

A guest asked if he has a member and knows the scheduled time he could help double check on the ride. Michelle most of the folks from Traverse House are on the agency run. Which means it is an advance schedule, predictable and stays the same day by day. Those usually aren't behind schedule. If it is an agency run and is 15 minutes late you should call and more likely there is a glitch somewhere. Weather could be a problem and may be the issue. If they were on the demand response they could be an hour behind but hates it when they are. It would be legitimate to call to see if the bus is coming.

A member noted if someone knows that the person has the ability to go to the Cherriot next door and has the ability on the other end to know it is closer to their house that is the most efficient way. It is interesting that would take a lot of the anxiety out of their life. If they had got hooked in to the Dial A Ride system it is more cumbersome. Michelle noted there is resistance to the Cherriot amongst a certain segment of our population. It was identified that maybe we could look more closely at helping people make the best choice. A guest noted that the Cherriots are great and the agency runs are always great. There may be a situation where people might wait. Michelle noted if the individual is a frequent flyer she is amazed at dispatch's ability to decipher something. There is a rider who Michelle has to work really hard to understand. She has enough of a pattern that the dispatchers can help facilitate. It was noted that by and large there is a relationship. Michelle noted on a day-to-day basis they get to know the people pretty quickly.

23) When people say I am at CMH I'll be at the back door. How many times do you miss people when they go to the wrong door? The dispatch may say there is not enough room to identify on the computer to write that.

Response – Michelle noted that is not entirely true. On a good day the drivers will check both doors. 550 Munson is a good example since there are multiple entrances. May have to look for on the computer if it is off in the corner. If the dispatch is having a good day they try to go to both of the entrances. Most of the drivers on a good day will hunt for you. The more they hunt for you the more impact it has on the schedule. A member noted when she is out at the fair she identifies which gate she will be located. Michelle the more links you have in the chain the more room you have for error. Jackie noted she got on and the bus driver suggested they identify the specific gate.

24) Can you tell us how frequently the BATA board meets and the Friends of Transit?

Response – Michelle noted they both meet monthly. Will need to call in advance to arrange rides.

8/11/08