



Commuter ChoiceSM Employers Guaranteed/Emergency Ride Home Programs January 23, 2003

Available exclusively to Commuter Choice[®] Employers, phone forums provide cutting edge information on a range of topics related to commuter benefits. Moderated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), these forums feature experts on key topic areas.

On January 23, 2003, the Commuter Choice[®] Leadership Initiative held a phone forum focusing on guaranteed/emergency ride home (GRH/ERH) programs. Patrice Thornton, EPA forum moderator, provided opening remarks and introduced the featured participants. For the purpose of this summary, the GRH term is used to describe all GRH/ERH programs, unless a program is specifically defined as an ERH service. Please note that more detailed information on GRH programs can be found in the Commuter Choice[®] Leadership Initiative's Guaranteed Ride Home Programs (EPA420-S-01-002) brief, which is available at <www.commuterchoice.gov/resource/benefits.htm> or by calling 800 490-9198.

Featured Participant Presentations

Ian Todreas, ERG, Inc.

Ian Todreas headed a research effort, conducted by ERG, Inc. for EPA, to examine how GRH programs are defined, structured, and operated across the country. EPA requested the research because organizations must offer GRH service to qualify as Commuter Choice[®] Employers, limited recent data on GRH programs exists, and several regional markets do not offer GRH services. ERG conducted the research by surveying 46 transit-related organizations and individual employers that manage

GRH programs. ERG also contacted four organizations that do not offer GRH to get a sense of the obstacles to GRH implementation. The surveys solicited information on the logistics of program startup and implementation, data on program performance, and feedback on best practices and lessons learned.

ERG's research found that there is no single definition of what constitutes a GRH program. Rather, most programs can be grouped according to the type of organization administering the program (i.e., regional planning organization, transit agency, rideshare organization or transit management association, local government, or individual employer). Most programs also share a similar definition of what constitutes legitimate program use—personal/family illness or emergency, disrupted commute method (e.g., vanpool driver leaving early), and unscheduled overtime. Other common features include mandatory pre-registration, limits on usage, and the use of vouchers for vendors. Variable elements of GRH programs include the type of service provided (e.g., taxi, rental car, company fleet), the cost to commuters, employee eligibility rules, and the geographic range of service.

ERG was not able to assess start-up funding costs for many programs since many of the administrators surveyed had not been employed by the provider organization when the GRH program began. Those that were familiar with program implementation cited low start-up costs in general, with estimates ranging from zero to several thousand dollars, depending upon the level of initial promotion and the availability of external funding. Respondents cited CMAQ, state department of transportation grants, and

existing commuter services budgets as main funding sources for program implementation. Start-up costs were frequently co-mingled with other costs, so it was difficult to break out what was GRH-related and what was a cost for some other related expense. Respondents cited low incidences of abuse of the program. The few examples of misuse cited were often a result of misunderstanding and easily corrected quickly once the misunderstanding was clarified with the rider or administrator. Table 1 lists some of the estimated ongoing costs.

Table 1. Ongoing GRH Costs

	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Administration (minutes per week per 100 eligible commuters)	10	15	15
Rides per year per 100 eligible commuters	3	6	6
Cost per commuter per year	\$1.50	\$4.50	\$4.85

ERG found that the perceived value of GRH programs is high, especially with program administrators, but little hard data is available to support that perception. ERG identified surveys that found that 12 to 25 percent of alternative commuters would commute by single occupancy vehicle (SOV) if a GRH service was not available. Anecdotal evidence also suggested strong commuter appreciation, with respondents describing their GRH program as “wonderful,” and “a life saver”. Overall, the evidence suggests that GRH programs help “lock in” the participation of non-SOV commuters, and might facilitate mode shift. Respondents also indicated that it might be more difficult for other commuter services to “drive” mode shift from SOV to non-SOV without a GRH service.

Respondents suggested several best practices for administering a GRH program:

- 1) serve the commuter’s needs by ensuring quick and reliable service, low costs, and minimal paperwork;
- 2) ensure that program administrators and users understand the policies and procedures for requesting and granting rides;
- 3) foster cooperative relationships with vendors to promote efficient administration; and
- 4) look for innovative ways to inform people of the service without spending a lot of time and money.

For more information, see the survey overview posted at www.commuterchoice.gov/employ/ph-forumindex.htm or contact Mr. Todreas at ian.todreas@erg.com.

Laura Ellsworth, Atlanta Regional Commission’s Commute Connections

Laura Ellsworth is the Rideshare Operations Manager of the Atlanta Regional Commission’s (ARC’s) regional ride matching service, Commute Connections. Commute Connections provides an employer-administered GRH program, which pays for up to five free rides per year for commuters who have used an alternative to driving alone to work and who have an emergency or mandatory unplanned overtime at work that day. The program is funded entirely by CMAQ grants, and ARC does not need to apply for funds annually.

Local Transportation Management Agencies (TMAs) and the commission’s Clean Air Campaign handle employer outreach, marketing, and enrollment. To participate, employers must establish an internal system for reviewing and approving ride requests and designate an onsite Employee Transportation Coordinator (ETC) to administer the service. Employers are also asked to promote GRH by distributing materials in employee handbooks, hanging up promotional posters, and placing GRH information on their Intranet Web sites. In some cases, TMAs serve as the program administrators.

The GRH program is free to the employer and all riders, but is not available to students. Service is provided primarily through taxi

service, which can be a challenge because Atlanta is a large area and some providers are not willing to make long trips. Taxi service providers are also required to offer insurance coverage. Commute Connections provides a 10 percent tip to taxi providers to encourage good service. Commute Connections also uses Enterprise Rent-A-Car as a back-up provider to the taxi services. Enterprise picks up commuters at their worksite and transports them to an Enterprise location to fill out the necessary paperwork. Commuters are required to have clean driving history (no DWI/DUI), and are allowed a 24-hour rental. They must provide a credit card, and are responsible for all fuel charges, along with any additional time or cleaning costs. In an average year, the rental service is used less than 10 times.

ETCs administer the program using a voucher system. The ETC and the commuter keep a carbon copy of the voucher, and the taxi company retains one copy for their records and submits one to Commute Connections for reimbursement. Riders are given participation cards, which include an ID number, ETC contact information, and the GRH policy. In cases of abuse, the employer or local TMA through which the employer signed up are required to pay for any expenses. Commute Connections or the TMA re-educates the ETC, if appropriate. Most abuse is due to employees arbitrarily deciding to work late to take advantage of the GRH service.

Out of 13,805 GRH registrants, there were approximately 700 uses in the past year (2002). Commute Connections' annual budget for the program, including outreach materials, is approximately \$100,000—of which approximately \$30,000 is for the cost of the actual ride usage. Externally, an average ETC spends only 10 minutes administering the program when the need arises. The biggest challenge is the high turnover rate of ETCs, which can create communication problems. Overall the program is a great benefit for commuters and employers, since it is free and does not take much time to admin-

ister or use.

For more information on the Commute Connections program, please e-mail <187Ridefind@AtlantaRegional.com>.

Virginia Gonzalez, Kaiser Permanente
Virginia Gonzalez is the senior TSM specialist for Kaiser Permanente in Southern California. Kaiser's ERH program, which began in 1988, provides rides home for commuters who have used an alternative to driving alone to work and who have an emergency or mandatory unplanned overtime at work that day. Kaiser created the program internally because no other resources were available at the time. Kaiser originally called the program a GRH service, but to clarify the purpose of the program to employees, Kaiser instead began calling it an ERH service.

The ERH service is provided through taxis and, for trips greater than 20 miles, Enterprise rental cars. Employees are allowed to use the program eight times in a 12-month period. To use the service, employees complete and provide vouchers to either the taxi or rental company. Employees must also obtain a supervisor's signature to ensure that program use falls under the approved guidelines.

In 2002, the service was used for 161 trips, and the cost of the program was approximately \$5,900. There have been cases of program misuse, but they were generally due to misunderstanding—usually regarding voluntary versus unplanned, forced overtime. Kaiser now distributes a program guide to each employee administrator that provides instructions for handling ERH requests and cutting back on program abuse.

The program has faced some challenges. Dealing with taxi providers across three different counties can be difficult, particularly when trying to process invoices. Kaiser also has a huge medical center and on one occasion they had difficulty finding a rental car that had been returned to the medical center. As a result, Kaiser had to pay for several days of rental service until they found the

car. Finally, during a recent transit strike some employees tried to use ERH to get to work, and Kaiser had to implement a new rule barring ERH service for major system shutdowns.

Overall, the program is not heavily used, but it works well. To monitor quality and identify opportunities to improve service, Kaiser sends out confirmation letters to ERH users that solicit feedback on how the ride went. Kaiser also asks for feedback from providers.

For more information on Kaiser's program, please e-mail <Virginia.C.Gonzalez@kp.org>.

Open Discussion

Following the featured speakers' presentations, other forum participants asked questions and provided additional information on some of the points discussed.

- Edgar Abuor of Yahoo!, Inc. in Sunnyvale, California, asked if any of the organizations surveyed by ERG or any employers in the forum audience provide employer-owned car fleets to employees as a GRH option. Mr. Todreas said that ERG encountered some organizations that did, but he did not have information available. Kevin Nye of the Ada County Highway District said that his organization provides staff vehicles for GRH.
- Mr. Abuor also explained that Yahoo! delegates management of their GRH program to their 24-hour security service. Yahoo! also has a contract with the taxi providers that makes service free if the taxi does not arrive in 10 minutes. Yahoo! has a limitation on rides, but does not have a mileage limitation.
- Mr. Abuor also asked how employees who are sick but have driven alone that day are handled. Ms. Gonzalez said that Kaiser asks the employee to make his or her own arrangements, and reminds the employee that GRH would be available if he or she was an alternative transportation user.
- Stacy Bartels of the Delaware Valley

Regional Planning Commission asked how abuse is determined in GRH programs. Mr. Todreas said that his research found several different mechanisms. Frequently, supervisors determine if the employee is eligible as part of the voucher approval process. Other programs have onsite ETCs that ensure adherence to program guidelines. Some organizations also work with service providers to verify rider eligibility. Other mechanisms include capping the number of rides an individual can take over the course of a year and auditing vouchers. Ms. Gonzalez noted that Kaiser does not allow rental cars on Fridays to discourage abuse.

- Kevin Nye asked if Kaiser's agreement with Enterprise requires employees to charge the rental car to their credit cards or if payment is worked out in advance. Ms. Gonzalez explained that Enterprise bills directly to Kaiser, which guarantees payment. Ms. Ellsworth said that Commute Connections requires credit cards to cover improper weekend use and vehicle damage.
- The group discussed different aspects of program tracking. Ms. Ellsworth said that, although Commute Connections does not have statistics on usage, she believes most GRH users are carpoolers. Ms. Gonzalez said that Kaiser's data suggests most users of its ERH program are carpoolers. She also explained that Kaiser tracks rides by user, facility, and dollar value, and reviews the accounts each year to ensure the program is meeting its targets.

Closing

Patrice Thornton closed by thanking the featured participants for their enlightening presentations and thanking all Commuter Choice[®] Employers for participating in the forum. She invited employers to provide suggestions and ideas for future forums and reminded them that the Commuter Choice[®] Leadership Initiative is available for assistance by contacting <commuter-choice@epa.gov> or calling the hotline at 888 856-3131.