

Taxi service for seniors scrutinized

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

The subsidized transportation program for elderly and handicapped people is a service that hasn't been given a lot of public or governmental scrutiny.

But that practice is about to change. An analysis of the seven-community transportation program — conducted by Farmington Hills Special Services Director Dan Potter — has brought new attention to the program.

Requested by the Farmington and Farmington Hills city councils, and the Farmington Area Commission on Aging, the study shows that some problems exist with the program's operation, Potter said.

As a result of the study, the seven participating communities — Farmington, Farmington Hills, Livonia, Northville, Plymouth and Plymouth Township — expect to establish goals designating how the program should work. At the same time, community officials will seek information on alternative services should no progress be made in solving the system's current problems.

"I think there is a 100 percent backing toward straightening this out," Potter told council members.

In the past few years, questions and complaints have been offered — primarily by users — that the system has not been operating as originally intended, Potter said.

Since its birth in 1981, the program has suffered a decrease in use, primarily due to poor service, as

well as attempts to encourage shared rides, which cause delays, Potter said.

Communications between the seven communities and the taxi company providing the service — Livonia-based Northwest Transport — are poor, as is public promotion of the program. Also considered a problem is the taxi company's apparent difficulty in providing enough cabs and drivers to meet the needs of elderly and handicapped users' needs, Potter said.

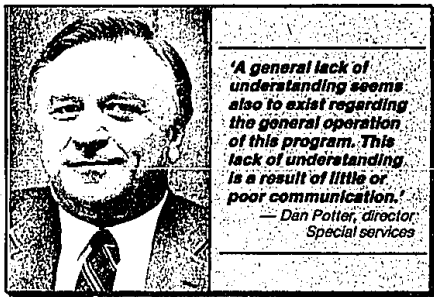
Northwest Transport manager Tom Peterson was unavailable for comment. According to Potter's study, the subsidized program accounts for 40 percent of the company's business. The company employs 40 drivers, who lease the cabs, Potter said.

The Northwest Wayne User-Side Subsidy Program was formed to meet the transportation needs of elderly and handicapped residents in Northwest Wayne and southwest Oakland counties.

POTTER'S STUDY shows complaints made by both users, cab drivers and company representatives. While users complained of delays and insensitive treatment, drivers' complained of users' insensitivity, Potter said.

"A general lack of understanding seems also to exist regarding the general operation of this program. This lack of understanding is a result of little or poor communication," Potter added.

"There is no real communication between the participating communities regarding program performance and/or problems. There are also no



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— Dan Potter, director
Special services

clear lines of responsibility regarding the reporting and follow-up on problems within the program. No formal system for evaluating the reporting and follow-up on problems within the program."

In his report, Potter outlined five major recommendations that should

be followed by officials in the seven participating communities. Though Potter said he is certain the recommendations will be followed, the final decision rests with representatives of each of the seven communities.

The first recommendation is es-

establishment of a formal governing structure to supervise and monitor the transportation program. A governing structure would help create an improved relationship between the communities, as well as a better link for addressing problems and concerns, Potter said.

CREATING A performance evaluation system for the taxi cab company is the second recommendation. "The cab company needs to participate in the development of such a system, and the system should be reviewed at specific time intervals by participating communities," Potter wrote.

He also suggested development of a report and follow-up system to provide closer communications with the cab company to address problems and complaints.

Because of outdated publicity materials and information, Potter recommended creation of a new promotion program. Program information would then be distributed to potential users. This could reduce some of the complaints that occur simply because of misinformation, Potter said.

The final recommendation suggests the development of an orientation program for cab drivers and users. The program would involve discussing the needs of users and cab drivers, Potter said.

The subsidized taxi service is operated by Livonia, which receives operating money from each of the participating communities. The individual communities transfer their share of Act 51 car registration money from SEMTA (Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority) to Livonia.

In 1986, the system had a total allocation from SEMTA of \$112,000. Farmington's contribution to the system was \$6,446 and \$28,690 from Farmington Hills.

PROBLEMS WITH the service also stem from SEMTA officials not always knowing how much money can be allocated for the program. And not all of the money is spent. For example, this year, \$80,000-\$85,000 will be carried over to the following year to either expand the total transportation service or im-

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