Towards a more inclusive and barrier-free city: accommodating mobility-disadvantaged older adults on Montréal public transit

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Research Aims:

As Canada’s “baby boom” generation ages, decision-makers are facing an increasing demand for responsive and accessible community services, and one key service is transportation.

Public transit is an indispensable component of urban life for many older adults, particularly for those who are unwilling or unable to drive a private car to access various facilities in the city such as hospitals, banks, etc., as well as to maintain social networks. Despite good intentions in the provision of public transit, access to and use of this service still poses challenges to seniors, particularly those who experience different mobility impairments.

Via preliminary results from a focus group with seniors, I will be conducting a population wide survey to identify barriers and opportunities for improving mass transit accessibility in the Montreal mass transit network. This one pager presents preliminary results from the focus group.

Focus Group:

A first step has been to explore travel behavior and experiences of older adults in accessing public transit in Montreal, via a focus group held at the Contactivity Seniors Centre in Westmount last February 2012. This activity aims to generate preliminary information from seniors regarding their experiences in accessing public transit as well as to validate a number of variables identified in the literature. Eight seniors participated in the discussion that lasted for one hour.

Key results to date:

The focus group created a lively and interactive discussion among seniors and generated interesting and useful information for the project.

Most participants agreed that although Montréal’s public transit is an affordable way to reach their desired destinations and activities, they still find accessing buses and the Métro quite challenging.

Key barriers and challenges include:

- using stairs inside the stations;
- malfunctioning escalators;
- lack of clarity of announcements in the Métro; and
- jerky driving of buses.

In addition, seniors identified that courtesy of bus drivers, particularly in recognizing that they have to lower the bus to allow seniors to board the vehicle, and crowding inside the bus/Métro are two of the pressing issues that they felt would affect their decision to access and use public transit (see Figure 1). Reducing the gap between the bus and the sidewalk and lowering the ramp to accommodate those with assistive devices (e.g. walkers, wheelchairs, etc.) will allow senior passengers to access public transit with relative ease. According to one senior, “for someone with a walker, getting in or out of the bus is similar with a wheelchair…it’s very hard!”

Figure 1. Factors affecting access to public transit are validated during seniors focus group