February 2019 King County Snow Event After Action Report

Regional Alliance for Resilient and Equitable Transportation (RARET) Workgroup

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Regional Alliance for Resilient and Equitable Transportation (RARET) workgroup aims to increase the critical transportation services available to older adults, people with disabilities, low income, and other vulnerable populations in the event of an emergency in the Puget Sound region. The RARET workgroup features representation from emergency managers, transportation providers, human services, and government partners across King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties.

In anticipation of the February 2019 snow storm, RARET staff support was asked by Public Health – Seattle & King County to participate in the King County Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce to coordinate life-sustaining medical transportation.

“Life-sustaining medical transportation” was defined by medical need, including kidney dialysis, cancer treatment, wound care, opioid substitution treatment (OST)/methadone, urgent care needs, or any condition in which medical providers would otherwise be calling EMS to transport the client.

For the purposes of this report, “life sustaining medical transportation” will be referred to as “critical medical transportation” to further delineate RARET’s transportation coordination activities from the advanced level of life support services provided by 911 and emergency medical services (EMS).

The Taskforce activated the King County Winter Weather Medical Transportation Procedures with adaptations to mobilize the RARET workgroup staff support and Hopelink Mobility Management staff. This formed the Hopelink Mobility Triage Team, which served as a centralized access point to process and triage transportation requests from medical facilities in King County. Medical facilities requested transportation on behalf of patients, using a temporary adverse weather phone line, shared email inbox, and online intake form.

The Taskforce chose not to publicize the phone line to the public, because medical clinics and providers were expected to provide the initial screening of a client’s medical needs and determine whether their request qualified as critical or life-sustaining. It was determined that members of the Hopelink Mobility Triage Team were not equipped to judge whether a client’s request was critical or non-critical.

To communicate this temporary service, the Northwest Healthcare Response Network (NWHRN) distributed information about the activation to 438 King County-based healthcare providers across approximately 146 facilities. RARET partners across Snohomish, King, and Pierce counties were also informed of the centralized access point via consistent
communications before and during the snow event from RARET staff support, which led to a transportation request for a client in Snohomish County.

The Hopelink Mobility Triage Team remained operational between February 11th-18th, from 7:00am-7:00pm daily. Six critical medical transportation requests were received for five individuals.

**EVENT OVERVIEW**

A major snow storm hit the Puget Sound region on February 8th, with a second wave of snowfall on February 11th – 12th. Sea-Tac airport reported 14.1” of snow in February, making it the snowiest February on record. East King County was the hardest hit, with communities such as North Bend receiving over 32” of snow in one week.

In anticipation of the advancing snow event, state and local officials undertook emergency measures to prepare for the advancing storm. Governor Jay Inslee declared a state of emergency on February 8th. The King County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activated on February 8th. Following the activation, the Winter Weather Medical Transportation Taskforce convened on February 9th to implement the King County Winter Weather Medical Transportation Procedures.

The snow event had an adverse impact on the region’s transportation system. Transit agencies, including King County Metro and Sound Transit reduced their services. King County Metro activated its Emergency Snow Network (ESN) for the first time and operated just 60 core bus routes and six Demand Area Response Transit (DART) routes, prioritizing key arterials, transit centers, and routes with high ridership.

Paratransit providers including Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage program and King County Metro Access Transportation transitioned into providing critical medical transportation only. Many community transportation providers and volunteer driver programs stopped operating due to unsafe road conditions and staff availability.

**SCOPE**

The goal of this After-Action Report (AAR) is to document the efforts of the Regional Alliance for Resilient and Equitable Transportation (RARET) Workgroup, Hopelink Mobility Management staff, and partner agencies when implementing the King County Winter Weather Medical
Transportation Procedures during the February 2019 snow event. This report will supplement the AAR to be published by King County that will include additional information about county-wide emergency coordination efforts.

**KING COUNTY WINTER WEATHER MEDICAL TRANSPORTATION PROCEDURES**

The Winter Weather Medical Transport Procedures were developed by the King County Office of Emergency Management, Public Health – Seattle & King County, EMS, and NWHRN, in partnership with several jurisdictions in King County (see Participating Organizations below). The purpose of the procedures is to facilitate the transportation of medically vulnerable members of the community to critical medical appointments during snowstorms and other emergencies when traditional transportation services are unavailable.

While the scope of the procedures include assistance for transportation to healthcare, pharmacy, or additional services throughout King County, these procedures were adapted to focus on transportation to critical medical appointments, and include participation from RARET, King County Metro Access Transportation, and Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage.

**PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS**

- Hopelink Medicaid Brokerage
- Hopelink Mobility Management
- King County Emergency Medical Services (EMS)
- King County Metro
- King County Metro Access Transportation (Access)
- King County Mobility Coalition (KCMC)
- King County Office of Emergency Management
- King County Search and Rescue (SAR)
- North Sound 211
- Northwest Healthcare Response Network (NWHRN)
- Public Health – Seattle & King County
- Regional Alliance for Resilient and Equitable Transportation (RARET)
- Snohomish County Office of Emergency Management

**EVENT TIMELINE**

2/6/19 (Wednesday)

- RARET staff support forwards emergency notifications to RARET Workgroup partners and transportation providers that serve King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties
2/7/19 (Thursday)
- RARET staff support disseminates emergency preparedness resources to prepare for advancing winter storm
- RARET staff support continues to disseminate emergency notifications to RARET Workgroup partners and transportation providers that serve King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties

2/8/19 (Friday)
- Governor Jay Inslee proclaims State of Emergency
- Public Health – Seattle & King County contacts RARET/Hopelink Mobility staff to update contact information for RARET staff support, KCMC staff support, and Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage contacts
- RARET staff support disseminates emergency preparedness resources, transportation updates from King County Metro, and additional updates from RARET partners, such as information on warm weather shelters

2/9/2019 (Saturday)
- Public Health – Seattle & King County contacts RARET staff support to participate in Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce
- RARET staff support disseminates emergency preparedness resources, transportation updates from King County Metro, and additional updates from RARET partners, such as information on warm weather shelters

2/10/19 (Sunday)
- Taskforce determines viability of Hopelink Mobility serving as centralized contact point
- Taskforce determines communication channels with NWHRN
- Taskforce drafts communication to healthcare partners
- Taskforce establishes Hopelink Mobility Triage Team launch plan
- RARET staff support shares King County Adverse Weather Transport Plan announcement with RARET partners in King, Pierce, and Snohomish County

2/11/19 (Monday)
- Hopelink Mobility Management staff trained on Winter Weather Medical Transportation Procedures
- Hopelink Mobility Triage Team launched
- NWHRN Healthcare Emergency Coordination Center (HECC) s notice to King County medical providers
- Triage team booked a return trip for a client
2/12/19 (Tuesday)
- Triage team accepts Snohomish County referral from RARET partner
- Triage team booked three additional rides for two clients
- At Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce Check In, it was reported that King County Search and Rescue may have limited capacity due to avalanche dangers

2/13/19 (Wednesday)
- Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce Check In
- Triage team re-booked three rides with Access Transportation due to unexpected trip cancellations

2/14/19 (Thursday)
- RARET Workgroup Partner check-in
- Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce Check In

2/15/19 (Friday)
- Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce debriefing meeting
- Demobilization notice sent to medical providers that the triage team resources would demobilize on 2/18/2019

2/18/19 (Monday)
- Triage team demobilizes

WINTER WEATHER MOBILITY TASKFORCE

The Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce convened remotely on Saturday, February 9th to discuss the Winter Weather Medical Transportation Procedures, in anticipation of the Winter Storm forecasted in the King County region. The purpose of this meeting was to review objectives, responsibilities, and available resources to coordinate critical medical transportation in King County.

Resources identified by the Taskforce included:
- Hopelink Medicaid Brokerage
- Hopelink Mobility Staff
- King County Metro Access Transportation
- King County Search and Rescue
- Community Medical Technicians
- Evergreen Nurse Line
- King County Taxi Scrip
Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage and King County Metro Access Transportation both transitioned to prioritizing critical medical transportation during the snow event.

**Hopelink Medicaid Brokerage**

Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage operated in code red (only performing critical medical trips and cancelling pre-scheduled non-life sustaining trips) from Monday, February 4th until midday Wednesday, February 6th, wherein it operated in code yellow (limiting same-day requests to life sustaining trips and performing all prescheduled trips).

The Medicaid Brokerage returned to Code Red on the afternoon of Friday, February 8th, and remained there until Tuesday, February 12th, performing a staggered return to normal operations through Friday, February 15th.

Throughout the weather event, Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage only fulfilled requests for Medicaid-eligible patients. It was reported that Hopelink’s Medicaid Program experienced challenges when scheduling critical medical trips and processing trip cancellations. During the event, most ambulatory trips from the Medicaid Brokerage were provided by taxi/for-hire partners, including Far West Taxi and Yellow Cab.

Despite experiencing challenges of fulfilling all ride requests for critical medical transportation, Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage provided more than 20,000 trips, including: more than 450 cancer-related appointments, nearly 5,600 dialysis appointments, approximately 2,600 mental health appointments, and more than 7,000 general urgent appointments. The call center also answered more than 18,000 phone calls, 300 web chats and 945 MyRide inquiries from February 4th through February 16th.

**King County Metro Access Transportation (Access)**

King County Metro Access Transportation activated its adverse weather plan on February 4th, when snow was anticipated in the forecast. Access transitioned into providing critical medical transportation and cancelling all non-essential trips. In addition to serving existing ADA-eligible clients, Access was available to fulfill limited requests from non-ADA eligible individuals for critical medical transportation, and First Transit management team provided additional support for Access ride requests if issues occurred.

During this time, Access provided an average of 1,200 hours of critical transportation services in King County. There were 162 same-day trips for emergency service provided, and Access was able to accommodate for 125 non-ADA eligible trips to critical destinations.

If Access was unable to fulfill a request and alternative transportation options were unavailable, callers would be referred to EMS. Access returned to normal operations on Wednesday,
February 13th. Rides for non-ADA riders with critical medical appointments continued until Friday, February 15th.

**King County Search and Rescue**

King County Search and Rescue was available to assist with 4x4 vehicle capabilities when Medicaid and Access vehicles were unable to access an individual, however it was reported that staff and vehicles were at limited capacity to assist with transportation requests due to ongoing rescue requests.

In addition to Medicaid, Access, and Search and Rescue resources, RARET staff support collected information from transportation providers who previously participated in RARET emergency preparedness and business continuity trainings in 2016 and 2018. Information was collected on operating status and service limitations, fleet inventory, service area, winter weather preparedness, estimated cost, contact information, and interest in assisting.

**HOPELINK MOBILITY TRIAGE TEAM**

The Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce chose to mobilize a Winter Weather Transportation Triage Team, led by the Regional Alliance for Resilient and Equitable Transportation (RARET) and staffed by members of Hopelink’s Mobility Management team. The Triage Team would process intake requests from medical facilities and engage in resource matching to facilitate ride fulfillment. A communication plan was drafted on Sunday, February 10th, wherein the NWHRN would disseminate information about the Triage Team to health care facilities in King County.

The Triage Team was staffed by five Hopelink Mobility Management staff who were trained on the Winter Weather Medical Transport Procedures on the morning of Monday, February 11th.

- David Lynch, Program Manager, RARET Staff Support
- Staci Haber, Senior Manager, KCMC Staff Support
- Ben Tibbetts, Program Specialist
- Melissa Brown Rotholtz, Mobility Coordinator, RARET Staff Support
- Sara Sisco, Program Manager

The Triage Team operated between 7:00am-7:00pm daily until Monday, February 18th. The Taskforce engaged in daily check-ins between February 11th-15th.

The Triage Team launched on February 11th at 1:00pm. Prior to the launch, the NWHRN Healthcare Emergency Coordination Center (HECC) emailed a notice to select King County Healthcare providers (Attachment 1). After the launch, the NWHRN followed up with a notice.
that included the contact information and hours of operation for the Triage Team (Attachment 2).

A temporary adverse weather phone line, online intake form and centralized email inbox were leveraged to serve as a triage point for requests from medical providers needing transportation for patients with critical medical appointments.

The adverse weather phone line was a temporary phone number intended specifically for the Triage Team and was deactivated following the demobilization of the Triage Team. The Taskforce chose not to publicize the adverse weather phone line to the public, because medical clinics were expected to provide the initial screening of a client’s medical needs and determine whether their request was critical.

In addition to the temporary adverse weather phone line, staff monitored an existing Remote Options Counseling (ROC) phone line, which is used when fielding incoming requests from clients calling with specialized transportation needs. This ROC line is an ongoing service within Hopelink’s Mobility Management program but was not intended to serve as an intake point for medical transportation during the adverse weather event; however, one referral was taken after a request was made during a ROC call.

The online Winter Weather Transport Intake Form (Attachment 3) was created on Microsoft Forms, an online survey tool that allows for shared use among the Triage Team staff.

Information was collected on the following:
- Requesting medical facility (phone, email, address)
- Client appointment information (date, time, address)
- Medicaid eligibility
- Client mobility needs (medical equipment, assistance requirements)

For HIPAA compliance, the intake form did not request sensitive information (i.e. name, birthdate, or address) for any individual. If a medical facility submitted a request using the intake form, a representative from the Triage Team would follow up to collect more information about the client.

The centralized email inbox was a shared email account used by members of Hopelink’s Mobility Management team. This inbox is normally used for general King County Mobility inquiries from clients and stakeholders. All team members were provided with access to the shared account which allowed for continuity of services when the team Triage transitioned shifts.
Each shift consisted of a lead and a backup. Using PureCloud, a cloud-based phone system, phone calls would be programmed to forward to the lead’s desk or cell phone. All these tools allowed for any member of the Triage team to work remotely and view all incoming requests and communications from medical facilities.

**Staffing considerations:**

- All staff were able to work remotely using laptops, cell phones, and a cloud-based phone system (PureCloud).
- Staff have flexible schedules which allowed for consistent daily operation of the Triage Team between 7:00am-7:00pm.
- Staff regularly monitor a shared phone line for remote options counselling to refer individuals with specialized transportation needs to regional transportation resources.
- Staff are familiar with transportation resources in King County and mobility challenges faced by individuals with access and functional needs.

**WINTER WEATHER TRIAGE ALGORITHM**

See Attachment 4 for flow chart diagram.

- **If client is Medicaid Eligible,** Complete Winter Weather Medicaid Trip Request Form (Attachment 5), fax to Hopelink Medicaid Brokerage management.
  - **If client requested Medicaid trip but denied or cancelled,** initiate investigation by contacting Medicaid Brokerage supervisors.
  - **If client was dropped off by Medicaid Transportation but wasn’t picked up,** initiate investigation by contacting Medicaid Brokerage supervisors.
- **If client is not Medicaid eligible,** complete Winter Weather Non-Medicaid Trip Request Form (Attachment 6) and fax to Access operations management at First Transit.
- **If Access cannot fulfill ride request due to impassable road conditions,** escalate request to Search and Rescue (SAR) by contacting SAR staff.

*If facility reports that patient is presenting medical symptoms, ask provider to escalate to EMS via 911. Having the patient call 911 would efficiently route calls to local jurisdictions.

**SUMMARY OF WINTER WEATHER TRIAGE REQUESTS**

The Hopelink Mobility Triage Team received five requests for critical medical transportation during the activation. Requests came via the adverse weather phone line, Remote Options Counseling (ROC) call, and referrals from Public Health – Seattle & King County and Snohomish County Emergency Management.
1. A hospital staff member called the adverse weather phone line to report that a patient’s Medicaid return ride did not arrive, and the clinic was about to close. Mobility staff forwarded the request to the Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage management team, who scheduled and fulfilled the return ride.

2. Snohomish County Emergency Management staff contacted the triage team to report a Medicaid-eligible patient needing transportation to a kidney dialysis appointment. Triage Team staff referred the request to Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage, but the ride was cancelled due to impassable road conditions. The request was escalated to Snohomish County Search and Rescue, who fulfilled the ride.

3. A skilled nursing facility in King County called the ROC line needing transportation for a client to get to two separate cancer treatment appointments. The patient was not Medicaid-eligible. An initial trip was booked using the Access call center, but the facility was informed that the trip was cancelled because rider did not have a valid ID (non-ADA eligible) and the triage team contacted First Transit Management. The rides were re-booked, and one ride was fulfilled by Access. Since road conditions began to improve, the facility cancelled the second trip.

4. Public Health – Seattle & King County staff notified the triage team that a patient’s Medicaid trip was denied. The triage team initiated an investigation by contacting Hopelink’s Medicaid Brokerage Management team, and the ride was re-scheduled and fulfilled.

5. A dialysis clinic staff member called the adverse weather phone line to report a patient who had not received dialysis treatment in over seven days, due to transportation challenges. The patient was able to walk to main road for pickup due to impassable roads. Triage staff contacted both Access and Snoqualmie Valley Transit Demand-Response. The trip was booked and fulfilled by Access.

**WHAT WORKED WELL**

- **Hopelink Mobility Management staff flexibility and expertise:** Hopelink Mobility staff were trained quickly, had the ability to work remotely with flexible schedules, and were familiar with remote options counselling, King County transportation resources, and mobility challenges for access and functional needs populations.

- **Streamlined Communication Channels with Medicaid Brokerage:** The triage was given direct access to Medicaid Brokerage management staff via backend email, bypassing the call center queue.

- **Standardized intake form:** Used Medicaid trip booking form to ensure all required data was collected, which was then modified to use for Access requests.
• **Opportunity for Process Improvement:** This event served as an opportunity to test the King County Winter Weather Medical Transportation Procedures during a relatively low-risk emergency with a small pool of clients. This allowed for troubleshooting when coordinating with transportation providers and reducing redundancies in tracking information.

**AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

• **Coordination channels:** Need a more streamlined coordination channel for all transportation resources. When coordinating with King County Metro Access, Triage Team staff initially used Access call center. It took several days to establish an expedited communications pathway. RARET staff should be trained on WebEOC and seek read-only access.

• **Dissemination of information:** Unsure where phone number, email, and form were distributed [to healthcare providers]. Most channels (forms, adverse weather phone number) were minimally used. Most coordination was done outside of system in place. Requests came from ROC calls, offline conversations and emergency management partners. In follow up conversations, additional stakeholders wished they had known about this opportunity, including human service agency staff at 211.

• **Explore how 211 can support screening and referral process**

• **Coordinate with community transportation providers about messaging:** Many providers who ceased operations during the snowstorm referred clients to call 911 if they needed critical medical transportation. There is potential to align communications so that clients can be referred to alternative resources before escalating to 911.

• **Identifying adequate resources:** Identifying providers who have appropriate resources to assist in emergency. Many providers contacted had taxis, but RARET staff did not inquire about availability of 4x4 vehicles.

• **Efficient escalation process:** Conduct initial investigation about ride cancellations due to road conditions prior to escalating request to ensure next provider is made aware of situation and can adequately identify if ride can be fulfilled.

• **Situational awareness gaps:** Need for precise, real time information about road conditions in localized areas so providers can make informed decisions before fulfilling a ride.

• **Insufficient Staff for Scalability:** Staff took shifts, but still had to work on own work when clients were not calling. Were this to scale upwards, there would need to be far more staff on-call to handle sheer volume, and to work overtime to resolve cases where
partnership communication, ride completion, or other measures of success break down/are not met.

CONCLUSION

This event provided the Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce and the RARET Workgroup a valuable opportunity to support the implementation of the King County Winter Weather Medical Transportation Procedures. This was the first time that the RARET was involved in an activation, and the event generated several insights into the potential role of RARET in future regional adverse weather emergencies.

While many procedures for triaging requests were created or adapted during the event due to available resources, the activation highlighted the adaptability of partnering organizations to mobilize in an uncertain situation.

The RARET Workgroup forged new partnerships and strengthened existing connections with participating stakeholders. RARET will continue its involvement with the Winter Weather Mobility Taskforce and will identify opportunities to strengthen transportation coordination efforts in the Puget Sound region.

For information regarding this report or any activities, please contact RARET Program Manager David Lynch at dlynch@hopelink.org.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Initial Notice to King County Medical Providers
2. Triage Team Launch Notice to King County Medical Providers
3. Online Intake Form
4. Winter Weather Triage Algorithm
5. Winter Weather Trip Request Forms: Medicaid
6. Winter Weather Trip Request Forms: Non-Medicaid