

## **Testimony at Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail Commission Meeting March 21, 2023**

Thank you to the Commission and Chairs Straus and Crighton for the opportunity to speak. My name is Jen Healy, I work for the Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation in Ware, Massachusetts as the Program Manager for the Quaboag Connector, which is a demand-response community transportation service covering 10 towns in the rural Quaboag Valley. We are so excited about the development of passenger rail in Western and Central Massachusetts and we believe that there is enormous opportunity in connecting residents across the Commonwealth, especially in areas historically not served or underserved by the Regional Transit Authorities.

Our service is a public-private partnership between the Town of Ware and the Quaboag Valley CDC. It began in 2017 as a solution to the lack of public transportation in Quaboag Valley and was awarded a Synergy Initiative grant by The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts in 2020 which has resulted in a multi-year philanthropic investment in the amount of approximately \$1.5 million thus far. Our region is rural, meaning that distances between destinations are long and there are few sidewalks, bike lanes, or traffic lights that would make non-vehicle travel practical and safe. Many of our residents lack regular access to a reliable personal vehicle to get to work, medical appointments, go grocery shopping, or see friends and family. Since our start in 2017, the Quaboag Connector has provided over 55,000 rides and become a lifeline service for our residents.

*A senior community member from Warren noted, “The Quaboag Connector is life saving for someone who can’t drive. It is a blessing to have it.”*

*Another, from Palmer stated that they “are so happy that I have [the Connector] to lean on. I wouldn’t be able to get out of the house.”*

*And lastly, when asked what they would do without the Quaboag Connector, a community member from Palmer replied that they would have to cancel their physical therapy appointments, leaving them in a lot of pain.*

In 2022, we provided just under 14,000 rides—60% of those rides took people to work which benefits both the individuals and the community as a whole, 17% took them grocery shopping or to the pharmacy, and 10% were rides for medical purposes. About 42% of our rides were for people over 60 years old, and 25% of rides were for people with disabilities. Since our start we have collaborated with many community partners to launch additional transportation services specifically for seniors, for providing rides to work for low income Palmer residents, for transportation to Baystate health services in the region, for operating the PVRTA B79 Intercity route that connects Amherst to Worcester along Route 9, and we have been able to offer free rides to veterans.

In addition to the Health Foundation of Central MA, our community partners include healthcare providers like Baystate, the towns of Ware, Monson, and Palmer, the Quaboag Hills Substance Use Alliance, local school systems and Councils on Aging, local employers like Quabbin Wire, and community members. Our services were developed and continue to be guided by direct feedback from the communities that we serve.

I mention these statistics for two reasons. The first, is to demonstrate the appetite and need for accessible and affordable public transportation in the rural areas of the Commonwealth, both to connect residents to community resources locally and to connect to local RTAs so that they travel across Massachusetts. The second reason is to demonstrate the kind of impact that comes with building a service based on community input. As mentioned, the Connector operates based on stated community need and feedback, much of our success can be attributed to this direct community input.

As passenger rail moves forward, the Connector is excited about the prospect of providing last-mile service to a rail stop in Palmer within the Quaboag Connector service area, further increasing our residents' access to transportation and thus to health care, social services, employment, and more. We hope that as this Commission makes its decisions, it will consider the opportunity and need for transportation in more rural areas of the Commonwealth and will bring rural representation to the decision-making table.

Thank you.

Jen Healy  
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