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Smartphone Transit Apps

Arming Older Adults with Navigation Skills

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The author is the founder of BeMobileSmart and has been a pioneer in transportation and telecommunications studies since the 1990s.

Strong smartphone and transit app skills can help older adults—like this man on a city street—get from one destination to the next. However, for older people unfamiliar with smartphone use, a program in Brookline, Massachusetts, has produced a video series to assist them in learning smartphone features, navigating the rideshare apps, and overcoming travel safety concerns.

There are a growing number of transportation alternatives for older people when they need to cut back on driving trips. However, many of these options require familiarity with using apps and smartphones. Nearly 17 percent of the U.S. population that is 65 or older comes from a generation that was not raised with smartphones (1), and only 61 percent of adults over age 65 own smartphones (2). Many lack experience and smartphone tech savvy. Consequently, older people unfamiliar with smartphones are at risk of being left behind as transportation and telecommunications technology continue to merge.

That said, some older people want to explore new technology that they trust, especially when they see the need for it. Often, these older adults reach out to digital classes in a library or community center for help with technology. In an attempt to tailor such resources to fill transportation needs, the Brookline Council on Aging in Massachusetts

created the Transportation Resources, Information, Planning, and Partnership for Seniors (TRIPPS) Program in 2016. TRIPPS started a three-part, in-person class for older people who wanted to cut back on driving and use rideshare services. In this class, participants learned how to request a ride from a third-party provider using a smartphone application. They gained knowledge about ridehailing, explored its capabilities, and even took a test-ride. But, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—when the need to learn about alternatives was most acute—libraries and centers for older adults were closed. A Community Transit Grant awarded by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation helped bridge the gap.¹ A specific goal of this annual grant is to assist special populations—such as older adults and people with disabilities—with

¹ Learn more about the Community Transit Grant Program at <https://www.mass.gov/community-transit-grant-program>.

mobility management. During the worst period of the pandemic, the grant was used to bring people up to speed with the digital skills they need to access transportation and other services.

In 2021, the grant enabled the development of a three-part video series on travel navigation (see *Navigating by Smartphone: Video Help Is in Hand*, Page 27, for this and other useful information). The series, plus an introductory video, was specifically designed to help older people—and others anxious about new technology—gain familiarity and confidence with smartphone use. The videos stand out from other training materials because they are aimed at people unfamiliar with some smartphone features. Each video is deliberate in showing how telecommunications can provide assistance to users who are new to technology and need to use their smartphones for travel. The material is straightforward and motivational to new users.

The videos, offered by the TRIPPS Program, are posted on YouTube and can also be accessed from the Town of Brookline's website.² However, one of the paradoxes of putting these videos online is that the people who would benefit most from the training are also the least likely to browse the Internet. Social isolation during the pandemic lockdown motivated more people to get online and use videoconferencing. But for those needing to build their digital skills using smartphones, the Internet is still not a familiar choice for help and instruction.

With help from the Massachusetts Councils on Aging, the TRIPPS Program recently augmented the series with how-to videos for beginners, including one on smartphone gestures—those taps

² Watch the TRIPPS video series via the Brookline website at <https://www.brooklinema.gov/2372/Transportation-Resources-Guides>.



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Passengers on the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's Green Line trolley along Beacon Street in Brookline get a glimpse of the Tudor-style S. S. Pierce Building. Training videos featuring local landmarks provide viewers with a sense of familiarity.

and swipes for navigating screens. These videos are also used in free, in-person, train-the-trainer classes. The intention is to engender critical thinking about transportation needs and—as a result of the videos—have a serious discussion about the opportunities and barriers the trainers see for older people. The videos, which feature familiar transit vehicles and Brookline landmarks, are intended to create an atmosphere in which the challenges of teaching this material are openly discussed and shared. For example, there are considerable exchanges about how to help students gain the confidence needed to try out new transportation options and how the experience can be personalized. Individual safety while in transit is also one of the key issues covered in these sessions.

Significantly, the four videos and accompanying study materials will reduce the need for instructors to develop their own coursework. Class materials are used in urban and rural areas of the state, as

well as packaged in libraries. The TRIPPS Program recommends that instructors also encourage students to play back the videos at home, trying out features such as using “Start” and “Pause” on their own smartphones at their own pace and convenience.

The goal of these efforts is to encourage older adults and those without a vehicle to develop new smartphone skills and provide low-cost but efficient solutions that can help older people age in place.

REFERENCES

1. Caplan, Z. U.S. Older Population Grew from 2010 to 2020 at Fastest Rate Since 1880 to 1890. U.S. Census Bureau, May 25, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/05/2020-census-united-states-older-population-grew.html>.
2. Pew Charitable Trusts. More Screen Time for Seniors: Americans Over 65 Are Increasingly Embracing Technology—and Some Have Mixed Feelings. April 12, 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2019/04/12/more-screen-time-for-seniors>.

Navigating by Smartphone Video Help Is in Hand

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For older adults and others who may have limited transportation choices, learning how to use smartphone apps and technology is spotlighted in the introductory video and throughout the four informational videos that make up the series produced by the Brookline Council on Aging's Transportation Resources, Information, Planning, and Partnership for Seniors (TRIPPS) Program in Brookline, Massachusetts.

All of the videos were filmed outdoors over a five-month period and edited by the Brookline Interactive Group, a nonprofit community media hub. The videos are somewhat simplified for the benefit of viewers with limited smartphone experience. For this target audience, the pace is deliberately slow, screen cuts are limited, and accessibility features and closed captions are incorporated.

Message from Former Governor Michael Dukakis

In the introductory video, former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis speaks directly to other older adults about using technology. Widely known as a transit advocate who regularly took public transit to get to the State House, Governor Dukakis delivers a message about the importance of keeping current with technology, regardless of age. He goes on to endorse the video classes that marry the smartphone to new transportation options.

Listen to the governor's message at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4Nw9flw6lc>.

Rideshare Apps

The ridehailing video features Eileen Baker, a rideshare driver who is well into her 70s and encourages new riders to "try it! It's not brain surgery." To show how safe, friendly, and easy it is to use this transportation mode, the video provides a step-by-step tutorial from a trip's start to finish. It also includes an overview of a ridehailing app's features, how to request a vehicle, and how to overcome and address travel safety concerns.

Watch the rideshare app video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNw9yDas6so>.

The Transit App

Recommended by many transit agencies, the *Transit* app provides real-time vehicle location, a trip planner, step-by-step navigation, the exact time the vehicle will arrive, and more. In the video, a TRIPPS volunteer boards one of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's trolleys on Boston's Green Line and explains how the *Transit* app makes this local trip easy. This video includes informative testimonials from older adults who use the app to plan trips on any type of mass transit.

Learn more about the *Transit* app in this video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yW8SMeqNd5U>.

Wayfaring Apps

Users of Google and Apple maps frequently plug in directions when traveling by car. This video expands their opportunities with other types of wayfaring. It includes a TRIPPS volunteer who explains how to use a smartphone to navigate the local neighborhood and get to know what's nearby. Noting how a smartphone can help older people stay safe and explore new things on foot, this volunteer points out that they also get fresh air and a healthy walk. The balance of the video provides details for taking walking trips with Google Maps and information on how and when the app can be useful.

Explore the wayfaring app in this video at <https://youtu.be/ES1rvfARbVD>.

Smartphone Gestures

This video introduces new users to gestures, the so-called language of smartphones. The taps and swipes used to navigate screens are second nature for most people. However, when gestures are unfamiliar, new users can't navigate to the information they want and access the trips they seek. This video provides them with an opportunity to see and practice gestures.

See a demo of gestures in this video at <https://youtu.be/r5up7x59Cv4>.