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What Makes Universal Basic Mobility Programs Work?

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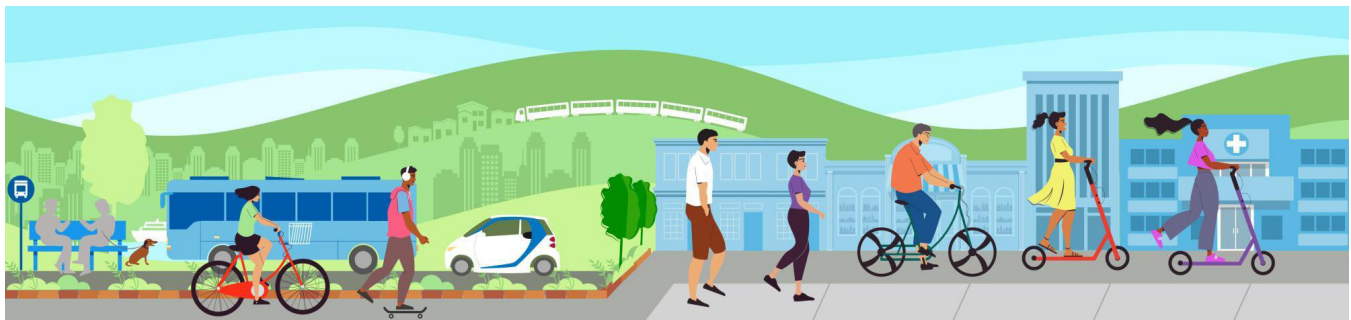
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Issue

Many Californians face “transportation poverty”—a lack of reliable, efficient, safe, and affordable ways to get to jobs, school, shopping, and medical appointments. Universal Basic Mobility (UBM) programs aim to close this gap. One approach is providing income-qualified individuals with mobility wallets (e.g., prepaid debit cards) used to cover costs for a range of transportation services and options, such as shared mobility and transit services. The range of transportation choices available to mobility wallet participants often helps reduce reliance on personal vehicles while supporting cleaner, lower-carbon travel.

To understand how these programs work in practice, we evaluated UBM pilots in four California cities— Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Oakland, and Stockton—and reviewed similar efforts across the country. Our research highlights design features, challenges, outcomes that matter most for agencies and policymakers considering this new tool for addressing transportation barriers

Key Research Findings

UBMs are most effective when tailored to community needs and goals. Designing a UBM program involves many decisions about structure, delivery, and monitoring. Programs are more likely to be successful if they are aligned with community needs, resources, and goals. For example, selecting participant eligibility criteria that include factors beyond income, such as vehicle ownership, participation in a local transit fare program, or high priority residence location can help programs serve participants who will actively use mobility wallet funds. In addition, defining eligible transportation expenses—such as transit fare, ridehailing services, or even toll payment—should be based on the options available in the community. Balancing community needs with broader regional or statewide climate and environmental goals (e.g., reduce vehicle travel) are also important considerations. Establishing data sharing agreements among administrators, service providers, card vendors, and researchers early in the process ensures all parties have access to the information needed to monitor

participation and evaluate outcomes relative to program goals.

Strong administration and communication is crucial for building trust and participation. Successful UBM programs leverage relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs) for program outreach and recruitment. Additionally, providing optional or required initial training sessions to help participants understand the range of available services and how to use mobility wallets can support better outcomes. Finally, since UBM programs often undergo changes during pilot periods, maintaining clear lines of communication with participants through consistent branding, dedicated help lines, a responsive mobility wallet card vendor, and informed CBOs help minimize participant issues and related administrative burdens.

UBM program evaluations should reflect the range of goals and broad impacts. UBM programs have delivered a variety of benefits to ranging from improved access to destination and improved well-being to positive economic outcomes. To better capture these benefits and improve future programs, evaluators should consider program goals in the data collection and analysis process and seek to build on preliminary UBM research. At minimum, evaluations should characterize transportation mode use, mobility wallet spending, and other available participant activity such as spending by demographic characteristics over time. Additional useful measures include:

- Transportation security: how well can participants travel where, how and when they need.
- Mode shifts: whether participants transportation choices change.
- Health outcomes: access to medical care and reductions in stress or isolation.
- Environmental benefits: reduction in vehicle miles traveled or adoption of lower-carbon travel.

- Economic outcomes: changes in employment levels, student status, income, and ability to afford different types of expenses.

UBM pilot programs provide learning opportunities and pave the way for longer-term initiatives. Because UBM programs are still experimental, each pilot demonstration has provided valuable insights into both effective design and implementation challenges. Starting small with a pilot demonstration allows administrators to explore the feasibility of a UBM approach and gathering lessons learned to inform expanded initiatives or applications. At this phase in UBM experimentation, securing longer-term funding to support a permanent program is a challenge. Though administrators can use results from the pilot period to develop and justify ongoing funding strategies that may involve external grants, taxes or congestion pricing proceeds, or partnerships with organizations who are interested in supporting the health, economic, or accessibility benefits to the community. Additionally, even limited UBM pilot programs can offer critical insights on participant eligibility and screening, service areas, mode eligibility, payment tools, organizational partnerships, potential benefits and outcomes, costs, and research needs, all of which can inform the scalability and expansion of these programs.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the study “Going Places: A Study of Universal Basic Mobility Programs” prepared by Angela Sanguinetti, Caroline Rodier, Mollie C. D’Agostino, and Brian Harold of the University of California, Davis. This project involved the development of the Universal Basic Mobility dashboard at the website ubmpilots.ucdavis.edu. The study summary can be found at <https://www.ucits.org/research-project/2024-24>. For more information, contact Mollie C. D’Agostino at mdagostino@ucdavis.edu.

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