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Universal Basic Mobility May Spark New Shared Mobility Markets in Underserved Communities

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Issue

A lack of reliable and affordable transportation options exacerbates socioeconomic inequities for low-income individuals, especially people of color. Universal basic mobility (UBM) programs are a new approach to alleviating financial barriers to travel. These programs provide individuals with funds to pay for a variety of mobility options such as transit and shared modes (e.g., scooter share, bike share, ridehail). Early results suggest that UBM programs can have a range of positive impacts.

Our research chronicles the emergence of eight UBM programs in the US. Portland, Oregon, was the first to launch a UBM program in 2017 and has hosted two additional UBM programs over the years. There are, or have been, UBM pilots and/or programs in the California cities of Sacramento, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Stockton as well as in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To compare these programs, our research team conducted interviews with city representatives and stakeholders and reviewed reports and other published materials.

Key Research Findings

UBM programs are generally successful at enrolling low-income people of color, increasing the use of transit and shared mobility modes, and decreasing personal vehicle travel. While more research is needed, early results suggest that UBM programs can improve access to essential services and opportunities. Low-income households require

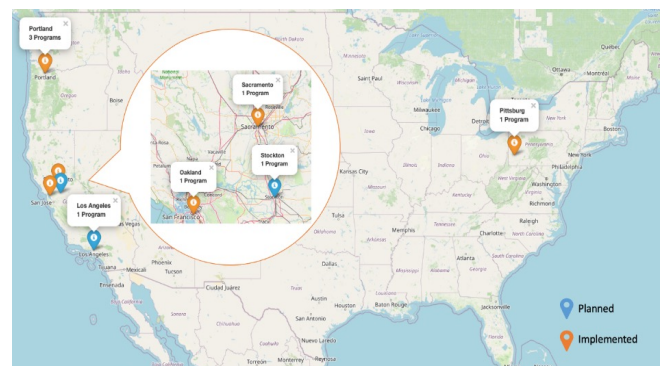


Figure 1. Map of implemented and planned Universal Basic Mobility programs in the US.

robust alternatives to personal auto ownership, and UBM programs can provide individuals with the flexibility to fill transportation gaps that cannot be addressed with existing transit alone. It could be possible to avoid many of the administrative burdens of implementing UBM programs described in this study by simply adding funds to debit cards that are currently used by existing benefits programs such as California's Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Program.

While many UBM programs share the goals of meeting participant travel needs and supporting alternatives to personal vehicles, there are important nuances that differentiate them. The Los Angeles pilot program and pilot programs offered to affordable housing residents in Portland and Sacramento target areas with a shortage of high-quality transit by paying for ride hailing and taxi services. Some programs seek to leverage the introduction

of new services, such as introducing UBM concurrently with a bus rapid transit line in Oakland, electric carsharing hubs in Los Angeles, or electric carsharing and bikesharing services in Stockton. Finally, UBM pilot programs may test new ways to disseminate funds on traditional or new payment methods, such as stored value in Pittsburg’s Mobility as a Service (MaaS) app and a Los Angeles transit card that can be used to pay for both public and private shared mobility services.

The chosen UBM payment option can affect payment flexibility, program administration, and shared mobility provider participation. We evaluated three payment categories: (1) prepaid debit/credit cards, (2) stored value on a public transit card or smartphone payment application, and (3) physical fare media (e.g., transit cards, passes, codes, or credits). Each has different implications for users, administrators, and mobility providers:

- **Users:** Prepaid debit/credit cards provide users with the flexibility to expend funds on modes as needed over the accrual periods allowed by the program (e.g., monthly, quarterly, or biannually). Physical fare media fix UBM benefits by modes. Stored value approaches can be fixed or non-transferable based on the program design.

- **Administrators:** Prepaid debit/credit cards enable administrators to include any number of transportation services, while stored value cards and physical fare media require specific contracting terms with transportation service providers. On the other hand, familiar and provider-specific fare media may be more readily recognized and, even better, already in participants’ hands. We observed low activation rates for mailed prepaid cards with cards commonly being mistaken for junk mail. Agencies have included identifiers on the printed mail and sent reminder notifications in order to improve activation rates and reduce administrative costs related to replacing cards and fielding complaints. Agencies with smaller pilot programs (e.g., Sacramento, Stockton, and Portland) have favored distributing cards in-person in conjunction with travel training.

- **Shared Mobility Providers:** Debit card systems have the fewest barriers for participation, while stored value approaches may require custom modifications to backend payment systems. Some private transportation service providers may have concerns about competition with other providers on the same platform, making it difficult to implement a stored value or physical fare program that offers the full range of available private mobility services in a region.

To reach their full potential, UBM programs need reliable funding sources. Instead, some combination of local, state, and foundation funding support these programs. For example, three of the four pilot programs in California rely on cap-and-trade funds earmarked for equity and greenhouse gas reduction but do not guarantee long-term funding beyond a specified program period. All pilot programs require that participants have low incomes or live or work in a marginalized community. Portland’s approach is likely the most fiscally sustainable. It employs fee-based UBM programs, which generate a revenue source to partially offset program costs. Funding arrangements vary widely in terms of the funds per participant, fund distribution method, accrual schedule, and program duration. These factors can affect administrative costs and resources as well as the potential impacts of a UBM program on transportation.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “A Survey of Universal Basic Mobility Programs and Pilots in the US,” authored by Caroline Rodier, Angelly J. Tovar, Sam Fuller, Mollie C. D’Agostino, and Brian S. Harold of the University of California, Davis. The full report can be found at <https://www.ucits.org/research-project/2022-06/>.

For more information about the findings presented in this brief, contact Caroline Rodier at cjrodier@ucdavis.edu.

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