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16. Abstract The primary goal of this van project is to increase the access of <i>colonia</i> residents to the education, workforce, health, human services, youth and elderly programs available at community resource centers established within <i>colonias</i> by the TAMU Colonias Program and at locations elsewhere in the surrounding areas.					
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Texas Colonias Van Project: An Aspect of Transportation in Underserved Communities

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Executive Summary

The Colonias Van Project has produced some significant insights into developing solutions for transportation issues in Texas's border *colonias*.

Operational highlights.

Unscheduled, non-routine trips are a persistent and enduring need of families, groups, and individuals in these isolated, rural neighborhoods.

The van program fills a gap in the availability of publicly supplied transportation services to the residents isolated in the various *colonia* communities along the Texas-Mexico border.

Medical, household/food, educational, community, and business-related needs of *colonia* residents have all been supported by those CHUD Centers that have acquired one of the vans.

Administrative highlight.

Sustainability of vehicles bought with state funds was achieved by securing commitments from responsible local agencies to provide for the maintenance, housing, operation, and dispatch of the vehicles.

Sustainability highlights.

The maintenance and operation of the vehicles are crucial to extending the use of the vans, but a 5-year horizon per vehicle is probably near the economic life of the vans. Funding for replacement of vehicles at retirement will be required for a sustained program.

New and improved roads/streets coupled with improved, regularly scheduled transit and school bus services remain high priority items in the menu of solutions to *colonias* accessibility.

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The Southwest Region University Transportation Center is a three-member university consortium headquartered at TTI and includes Texas A&M, Texas Southern University and the University of Texas at Austin. We have a charter that says we are to look at the Southwest region of the United States, identify unique problems and find opportunities for transportation solutions. In our assessments, it became clear that we had a string of communities that had a whole raft of opportunities, especially for transportation. So it seemed to be a natural fit to link our views of the *colonias* with CHUD's broader responsibilities. It was a confluence of opportunities and interests.

The Colonias Program in CHUD has been a showpiece initiative for Texas A&M University and deserves mention every time Texas A&M is cited for service to Texas. It's an iconic example of the service aspect of a land grant institution. The Colonias Program takes the best of applicable research and academically supported resources and puts them together in a unique way to enhance the third element -- service -- of the land grant mission. That is a full statement of what Texas A&M does best.

Project oversight, administrative guidance, and support from SECO were provided by Mr. Robert Otto and by Ms. Mary-Jo Rowan, who contributed greatly to the success of this project.

Ms. Debbie Jasek and Dr. Beverly Kuhn (both of TTI) conducted workshops on *colonias* issues; Ms. Patricia Bass Ellis (TTI) conducted the initial pilot study; Honorable Mercurio Martinez (Webb County Judge) provided leadership and political solutions. Key persons from the TAMU Colonias Program were Mr. Hilario Rincones (CHUD—McAllen); Mr. Oscar Munoz (CHUD—Laredo); and Ms. Susan Gandara and Ms. Pema Garcia (CHUD—El Paso).

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the dedicated support of the residents in the *colonias* who serve their fellow citizens by operating the van program based in the various neighborhoods.

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March 2005

Introduction: Texas Colonias Van Project

The Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) in partnership with the Texas A&M Center for Housing and Urban Development (CHUD) Colonias Program and the Texas State Energy Conservation Office (SECO) initiated a **Colonias Van Project** in 1996. The Van Project has been administered through the office of the Southwest Region University Transportation Center headquartered at TTI.

The primary goal of this van project is to increase the access of *colonia* residents to the education, workforce, health, human services, youth and elderly programs available at community resource centers established within *colonias* by the TAMU Colonias Program and available elsewhere in the surrounding areas.

Summary of Findings

The Colonias Van Project has produced some significant insights into developing solutions for transportation issues in Texas's border *colonias*.

Operational highlights.

Unscheduled, non-routine trips are a persistent and enduring need of families, groups, and individuals in these isolated, rural neighborhoods.

The van program fills a gap in the availability of publicly supplied transportation services to the residents isolated in the various *colonia* communities along the Texas-Mexico border.

Medical, household/food, educational, community, and business-related needs of *colonia* residents have all been supported by those CHUD Centers that have acquired one of the vans.

Administrative highlight.

Sustainability of vehicles bought with state funds was achieved by securing commitments from responsible local agencies to provide for the maintenance, housing, operation, and dispatch of the vehicles.

Sustainability highlights.

The maintenance and operation of the vehicles are crucial to extending the use of the vans, but a 5-year horizon per vehicle is probably near the economic life of the vans. Funding for replacement of vehicles at retirement will be required for a sustained program.

New and improved roads/streets coupled with improved, regularly scheduled transit and school bus services remain high priority items in the menu of solutions to *colonias* accessibility.

Lessons Learned for Future Use

There are some findings that need to be emphasized for future reference and use in implementing van service programs in *colonias* neighborhoods. These fall into three categories: (1) management of the project; (2) vehicle type/use; and (3) funding.

Management of the project. The key to successful management of this Colonias Van Project has been the coordinated cooperation of these involved agencies: SECO; TTI; TAMU Colonias Program; local sponsors; and *colonia* residents. To improve on this model, it is suggested that subcontracts for future vehicle acquisitions be clearly specific with respect to the dedicated use of the vehicle exclusively for *colonias* purposes and that there be a reasonable service life for the vehicles (5 years) established in the subcontract. The TAMU Colonias Program has been the linchpin for the successes of the Colonias Van Project, and future efforts to extend the project should include the TAMU Colonias Program or similar entities (hospital district, church, government agency) that serve affected *colonia* neighborhoods. The essential point is that there MUST be a reliable local partner that can identify the needs, along with individuals and others who are committed to the Colonias Van Project for that area.

Vehicle type and use. The 15-passenger van was the vehicle of choice used in the Colonias Van Project. This limitation in vehicle choice needs to be modified for future possible inclusions of passenger cars, other van/bus/wagons, and small cargo (pickup) vehicles. The variety of trips needed to support the lives and activities of the individuals in *colonia* neighborhoods includes passenger movement and light hauling of goods, supplies, food, drinking water, and other items. To accommodate this continuing need, a future van project should include a separate assessment of use of small cargo vehicles for specialized hauling within the *colonias* and for the community service centers located there. Additionally, acquisition of minivans, passenger cars, and larger vans /buses should be on a case-by-case basis in each *colonia*, since communities will have individual needs that can be better served than by using only the 15-passenger van.

Funding. A separate analysis needs to be undertaken to document the full extent of the needs and opportunities for extending a vehicle program to all *colonias* on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. Some of these areas are likely not to be candidates (due to small size and or absence of in-place entities for partnering). Other *colonias* will likely entail the development of new administrative mechanisms to identify and deliver the requisite services. Still, other *colonias* will be fairly easy to serve, principally by extending the current model to new areas that already have operating community service centers at which to base the vehicles. Clearly the magnitude of the resulting program will far exceed the capacity of the oil-overcharge funds administered by SECO. Appropriations of general revenue or dedicated funding will need legislative and agency champions to make the case for a broader funding. The results reported here of the SECO-sponsored

Colonias Van Project will contribute to the much-needed information base for future discussions regarding replication and expansion of the project into a sustained program.

Background Highlights of Colonias

Colonia residents on the Texas side of the Rio Grande are some of the economically “poorest of the poor” in the U.S., with average annual incomes of \$10,000-\$14,000 for a family of five. A typical *colonia* has no water or sewer service, only unpaved roads, self-built housing, and poor surface drainage. The State of Texas is addressing these needs through active programs. Approximately 500,000 people live in over 1,800 *colonia* communities in Texas along the 1,200-mile border with Mexico.

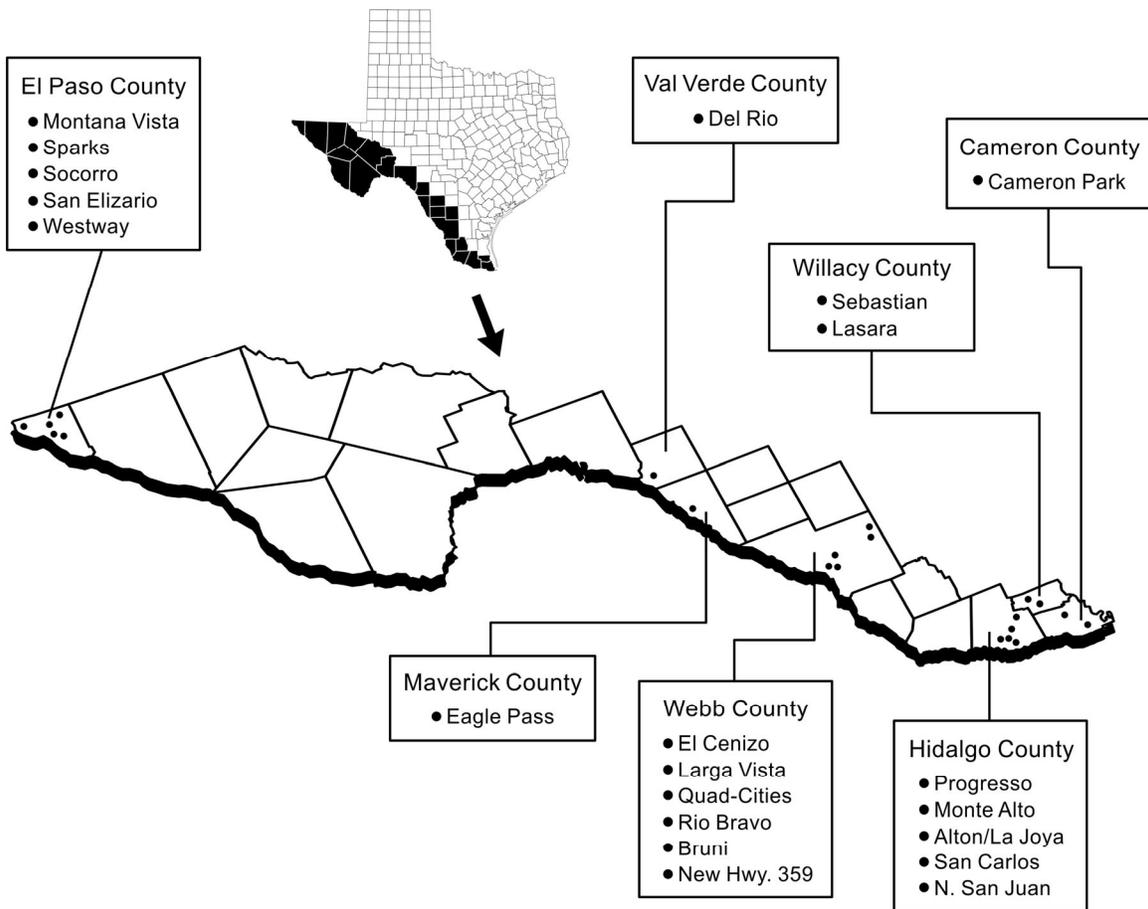


Figure 1. Locations of Colonias Program Community Resource Centers

According to information provided by the Texas A&M Colonias Program, rapid population growth in the *colonia* neighborhoods has been a primary socio-economic characteristic of this border subculture. (For a more complete picture of the Texas *colonias* region see materials on the Texas A&M Colonias Program website (<http://chud.tamu.edu/>)). During 1990—2000, the population growth in the border

counties of Texas which contain the *colonias* grew faster than the general population in the state and twice as fast as the rate of increase in the U.S. population:

Texas <i>colonia</i> counties	26%
State of Texas	23%
United States	13%

Reliable census data for *colonia* areas is not collected separately from other nearby areas.

Some salient facts about these neighborhoods are:

- Most *colonia* residents live very close to the border.
 - Two-thirds of the Texas *colonia* population lives within 10 miles of the Mexico border; 86 percent within 25 miles.
- Most *colonia* residents live close to cities.
 - 88 percent live within 5 miles of a city boundary.
 - Two-thirds of *colonia* residents live within 15 miles of the center of a city of 25,000 or more.
 - More than 70 percent live in metropolitan areas.
 - Approximately 90% of *colonia* residents work in non-agricultural jobs in nearby metropolitan areas.
 - Work and income are irregular and undependable for *colonia* residents.
- A majority of *colonia* residents are U.S. citizens.
 - In the 1990 Census, 76.6% of residents of Texas *colonias* were U.S. citizens and 62.6% were born in the U.S.
 - A 1997 study done at the University of Texas found that 85% of *colonia* residents are “legal” by birth, naturalization, or “green card” status.
 - Education levels are low for *colonia* residents with well over half reporting they read or write English only poorly or not at all.
- Few new *colonias* are being established.
 - New model subdivision rules require developers to provide infrastructure for any new developments.
 - There is substantial room within existing *colonias*, however, for population growth.

Isolation is a daily reality for people living in *colonias*. *Colonia* residents are isolated by at least four factors: transportation problems, limited understanding of local programs, limited literacy and embarrassment. The problems associated with the lack of transportation, lack of water service, lack of paved roads, lack of communication and the physical distance of 5 to 35 miles from most jobs and services add to the difficulty of daily life in the *colonias*.



Figure 2. Home in Webb County, Tx *Colonia* Neighborhood

Homes are more spread out in some *colonia* areas than in others and, unfortunately, there are not sufficient numbers of people living in most *colonias* to justify the provision of sufficient regular scheduled transit routes. Access to services of any kind is extremely difficult for residents who either own no vehicle or one vehicle, which operates undependably and is driven to town by the family wage earner. When the vehicle develops problems, the family is often left without transportation – in areas that are far beyond walking distance. Appointments cannot be kept in nearby towns or in community resource centers established by the TAMU Colonias Program, and no groceries or water can be purchased. In such situations, it is common for *colonia* residents to have to pay someone \$10-20 for a ride to town – a large sum for people with such low incomes.

Initial Case Study: Webb County Highway 359 *Colonias*

The Texas Transportation Institute, working with the Center for Housing and Urban Development (CHUD), developed a demonstration project designed to document the transportation needs of a typical Texas border *colonia*; to acquire needed vehicles and provide improved transportation service to *colonias*; and to perform an evaluation of the service and make recommendations for improvements based on that evaluation. The primary objective of this demonstration project was to improve the access of the Highway 359 *colonia* residents near Laredo to essential social service and employment

opportunities by coordinating with existing transportation services and providing additional rural public transportation service that could be replicated in other *colonias* along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The *colonias* targeted by CHUD included Larga Vista, Old Milwaukee, Tanquecitos South Acres I and II, Los Altos, D-5 Acres, San Carlos I (also known as San Enrique), San Carlos II, Ranchitos 359 East, Laredo Ranchettes, and Pueblo Nuevo. These *colonias* are located along a ten-mile stretch of Highway 359 east of the City of Laredo and encompass approximately 934 homes and just under 3,500 residents. These communities have limited access to needed social service providers, shopping, medical providers, educational facilities and employment opportunities located within the City of Laredo. Residents of the Highway 359 *colonias* can use either the Webb County public transportation system known as El Aguilar or the bus operated by Mercy Hospital, which provides transportation only to medical services at the Gateway Clinic in south Laredo. However, most residents must rely on privately owned vehicles for transportation due to the infrequency of bus service. As a result, it is difficult for the residents of these *colonias* to access health care, jobs, educational facilities, social service providers or even the grocery stores.

Existing Transportation Service in Webb County

El Aguilar, operated by the Laredo Webb County Community Action Agency, provides fixed route and demand responsive rural public transportation to unincorporated areas within Webb County. It is a small transit operation with a limited number of vehicles and seating capacity. *El Aguilar* currently operates a total of five fixed routes. These five routes provide service to the *colonia* communities of Mirando City, Oilton, Bruni and the *colonias* of Larga Vista, Tanquecitos, D-5, San Carlos, Ranchitos, Laredo Ranchettes, and Pueblo Nuevo located east of Laredo along Highway 359. Also served are the city of Encinal, located off IH 35 just north of the Webb County line in LaSalle County, and the *colonias* towns of El Cenizo and Rio Bravo located along Highway 83 in southeastern Webb County. In general, each of these routes is designed to transport passengers only to Jarvis Plaza, the central transfer point for El Metro, Laredo's municipal bus service.

Service to the Highway 359 *colonias* is provided via the Pueblo Nuevo route on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays via one round trip run during the morning and one round trip run during the afternoon. Both runs begin and end at Jarvis Plaza with the morning run beginning at 7:15 am and the afternoon run beginning at 3:45 pm. The Pueblo Nuevo route runs along Highway 359 stopping at the entrance to each of these *colonias* to pick up/drop off passengers.

The cost for a one-way trip on *El Aguilar* is 75 cents. Tickets must be purchased in advance because cash is not accepted on board the bus. Additionally, due to the limited seating capacity, passengers are limited to three carry-on items on any one trip, e.g., a purse and two bags of groceries.

A bus operated by Mercy Hospital also provided service to the Highway 359 *colonias*. This service was designed to transport residents solely to the Gateway Clinic. This service included one run in the morning to pick up passengers destined to the Clinic and one return run in the afternoon. Mercy Hospital had designated bus stops marked with painted signs inside each of the ten Highway 359 *colonias*. The general bus route operated by Mercy Hospital began at designated stop number 1 in Pueblo Nuevo and picked up passengers at each stop in sequential order. Passengers were dropped off at each stop in reverse order. The Colonias Van Program subsequently provided for this medical route when Mercy Hospital suspended its bus service.

Transportation to the county public schools in and near Laredo is provided by the United Independent School District. Buses pick up and drop off children daily at the entrance to each of the Highway 359 *colonias*.

Assessment of Transportation Needs in Webb County Colonias (Hwy 359)

Community meetings and survey questions on residents travel patterns and needs were used to assess the current transportation needs of the residents in the Highway 359 *colonias*. To assist in determining the transportation needs of the Highway 359 *colonias*, meetings were held with residents of the *colonias* located along Highway 359 and with residents of a separate *colonia*, El Cenizo, located along State Highway 83 south of Laredo. These meetings provided an indication of the transportation problems and typical destinations of *colonia* residents within the Laredo area, and provided input as to how residents believed current transportation service could be improved. Findings from these meetings are highlighted below.

Perceived Transportation Problems

Most of the transportation problems cited by residents are due to the rural location of the *colonias*, limited household income and infrequent existing public transportation service. Specific needs cited by residents include:

- More frequent bus service.
- Evening and night bus service.
- Larger vehicles to accommodate peak travel.
- Additional locations for bus ticket sales.
- Provisions of transfers between the county bus system and the Laredo municipal bus system.

Typical Destinations of *Colonia* Residents

In general, the destinations of *colonia* residents are similar to those of the average rural or urban resident and include:

- Local Medical Clinics (specifically the Gateway Clinic, which is the Federal Qualified Health Clinic for low-income patients).
- Pharmacy
- Grocery Store
- Post Office
- El Metro (Laredo municipal bus system) Transfer Center
- Public Schools
- Work Locations

Household Survey Results

Questions designed to gather additional information relevant to travel habits and transportation needs were prepared for inclusion in the comprehensive survey of the Highway 359 *colonia* residents administered by the Center for Housing and Urban Development. A total of 163 households were surveyed, although not all households responded to all questions. Travel information from the survey is highlighted below.

Ninety-eight percent of the households have a vehicle. More specifically, the breakdown of vehicle availability by households is:

0 Vehicles -	2%
1 Vehicle -	52%
2 Vehicles -	37%
3 Vehicles -	9%
4 Vehicles -	0

Overall, the average number of vehicles available for each household is 1.48. This is slightly less than the statewide average of 1.77 vehicles per household. However, more than half of the households have only one vehicle available for use. Additionally, privately operated vehicles are used to travel to work by 85 percent of the households. This indicates that many of the households do not have a vehicle available for use during the day. As a result, trips for other purposes must be made via a different mode or postponed until a time when a vehicle is available.

Respondents were asked the distance they generally travel for six trip purposes and the mode of travel used for each type of trip. The responses are given in Table 1. With the exception of school trips, the majority of households use private vehicles for travel.

These responses were supported by answers to a separate question in which 70 percent of respondents indicated that their households' principal mode of travel to the City of Laredo was via a personal vehicle.

Household members were asked several questions concerning public transportation. More than 96 percent indicated that public transit is available to them. However, approximately 82 percent said that the current public transit service is inconvenient due to either the distance to the bus stops, infrequent service or inadequate service to a range of destinations. Additionally, respondents indicated that public transportation service could be most improved by increasing the frequency of service and making the stop locations closer to areas of residence.

Initial Van Use Plan for Case Study

A 15-passenger van was purchased with funding provided by a grant from the State's Oil Overcharge fund and a contribution from Webb County. The van is owned and operated by Webb County. Use of the van is limited to service for the Highway 359 *colonias*. Because only one van could be purchased for this case study, it was determined that the focus of the initial service plan and schedule should be on providing transportation to and from the recently completed Community Center, with additional limited service to the HEB grocery store located on Guadalupe Street. At the time the service plan was developed, only two classes were in operation at the Community Center. As a result, an initial van usage plan was developed for a "maximum" amount of service that might reasonably be provided with one vehicle.

Operation of the van service was initiated the last week in October 1996 with two daily runs to/from the Community Center to correspond to scheduled classes and the operation of several social service providers within the Center. Since that time, service has been increased to two daily routes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and three daily routes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The van is also operated to provide transportation to special events or meetings held at the Center, for individual medical emergencies, and for service to the HEB grocery store.

Extension of Van Service

Initial feedback on the van service from residents of the Highway 359 *colonias* and staff of the Community Center was extremely positive. The dispatch of the van by the director of the community center provided on-site and real-time capability to adjust the service to fit the needs of the *colonias* residents being served. Since the residents also are active members of the advisory board for the Community Center, they provided needed information to supplement the survey data regarding the need for, use of and evaluation of the overall contribution to the transportation solution for the neighborhood. The positive assessment of the contribution made by the acquisition and operation of the 15-passenger van was one of the factors leading to the expansion of the concept of van operations in *colonias*. Subsequent implementation of the broader based Colonias Van

Project was undertaken to find local partners who would work with CHUD and TTI to maintain and operate other vans in other *colonias* in a manner similar to the highly successful case study results in Webb County.

Colonias Van Project Partnerships

Texas A&M's (CHUD) Colonias Program has established community resource centers that house numerous providers of medical, educational, social, and family services (see listing further below) in numerous border *colonia* neighborhoods. Residents of these neighborhoods are active in the operation and conduct of the programs at the center, and a Center Director is an on-site employee who works for CHUD and the local partnering agency to implement the guidance furnished by the residents of the community.

The Colonias Van Project involves partnerships among Texas A&M's (CHUD) Colonias Program, State Energy Conservation Office (SECO), TTI, and local partners to operate and maintain the vehicles. Oil-overcharge funds from the State of Texas, through SECO, are provided for the acquisition of capital equipment (vans) and program implementation.

Local/Regional Partners -- including city and county governments, hospital districts, school districts, junior colleges, etc -- have provided support for operating and driver related expenditures. Funding from the State of Texas Energy Conservation Office is used to purchase vans that were assigned to serve the Community Centers built by Texas A&M's Colonias Program in communities along the Rio Grande from Brownsville to El Paso.

CHUD Regional Divisions

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Cameron Park, San Carlos, Progreso, La Sara, Sebastian, Rio Hondo, Monte Alto, Alton/LaJoya, and North San Juan

In the Laredo area: Rio Bravo, El Cenizo, Largo Vista, Quad Cities, Oilton-Bruni, Eagle Pass, Del Rio, Highway 359

In the El Paso area: Montana Vista, Sparks, San Elizario, Socorro, and Westway.

The following table shows the specific locations where the CHUD-operated community centers also serve as headquarters for the home station and dispatch of the vans, which serve the needs of the residents.

Table 1. *Colonia* Neighborhoods served by the Van Program.

Local Agency Partner	Place	# of Vans
Monte Alto ISD	Hidalgo County/Monte Alto Center	1
City of Socorro	El Paso County/Rio Vista Farms Center	2
NINOS	Cameron County/Cameron Park Center	2
Lyford ISD	Willacy County/Martin Cavazos Center	1
Rio Hondo	Cameron County/Parent Resource Center	1
Webb County	El Cenizo, Rio Bravo, 359 Communities, Quad-City, and Hwy 359 Centers	Vans 10 Bus 1
El Paso Community College	El Paso County/Sparks Center El Paso County/Montana Vista Center	4
El Centro di Salud Familia Le Fe	El Paso County/San Elizario/Fabens Center El Paso County/Westway Center	1 1
Progreso ISD	Hidalgo County/Progreso Center	2
NINOS	Cameron County/Los Fresnos Center	1
Maverick County	Eagle Pass Center	3
Boys & Girls Club of Edinburg	Hidalgo County/San Carlos Center	2
Lasara ISD	Willacy County/Lasaro Center	1
Val Verde County	Del Rio Center	2



Figure 3. Community Resource Center and Van at Progresso, Tx

Van Usage Summary

Presently, vehicles in the locations listed in the above table provide for 2.3 million passenger miles of travel annually to support medical and dental care, adult education, infant services, geriatric services, recreation, employment, and economic development initiatives for residents in these *colonia* neighborhoods.

More than 75,000 passengers are transported monthly to and from the Community Resource Centers and a variety of activities supported by the TAMU Colonias Program. Trips for these residents are vital outcomes for the van project's overall long run goal of creating opportunities for *colonia* residents to have better education, acquire steady jobs, earn better incomes and lead a better quality of life.



Figure 4. Women/Infant/Children (WIC) Program Participants in Sebastian Tx Community Resource Center.

Trip Purposes and Van Usage Characteristics

Monthly van usage data from the *colonias* show the variety of trip purposes traveled by the vans dispatched from TAMU's *Colonias* Community Resource Centers. These daily trips support both group and individual needs present in each *colonia* community and are presented in overall functional categories as below:

Food and Household Trips

- Transporting outreach workers to worksites to stock groceries for distribution at food banks
- Delivering groceries to disabled residents and residents to Senior Meals Program
- Distribution of clothing, blankets, and fans to residents

Medical Trips

- Transporting residents to doctor appointments, health clinics, hospitals, pharmacy, lab work, mental health clinic
- Picking up medications for elderly
- Taking ill students home from school
- Taking residents to community centers for eye examinations
- Attending physical therapy

Education Trips

- Transporting students to school
- Obtaining drivers license
- Attending citizenship classes
- Attending Women-Infants-Children (WIC) classes and other parenting classes
- Attending English and Spanish literacy classes
- Acquiring speech therapy lessons
- Job training and training sessions for Vista volunteers
- Attending classes to obtain General Educational Degree (GED)
- Acquiring school supplies for students preparing for kindergarten
- Taking students/parents to Even Start Programs

Community/Social Trips

- Attending community Social/Vocational activities
- Transporting volunteers to community centers
- Transporting residents to meetings
- Meetings for Boys Club, Girls Club, and Girl Scouts
- Attending 4-H retreat and other youth conferences
- Participating in arts and crafts classes
- Attending aerobics classes and sewing classes
- Providing Childcare Services
- *Loteria*/Bingo for Seniors and local *Cinco de Mayo* parade
- Participating in various Mother's Day activities
- Conducting Children/Mothers trip to zoos and museums

Business

- Transporting residents to pay bills and go to bank
- Visiting the local Social Security office
- Acquiring food stamps
- Filing Income Tax
- Attending sessions at Texas Department of Human Services
- Attending to courthouse and legal appointments

Fuel Savings Aspects

Vehicle fuel savings are a programmatic interest of the State Energy Conservation Office (SECO), which funded the Colonias Van Program. While specific fuel usage data were not entered on the vehicle logs and usage reports, some conservative estimates can be obtained using the following methodology.

The monthly average of passengers usage is about 3000 resident trips for each of the Vans. The usage and log reports show that the average trip length for the vans is about two miles, which creates 6000 passenger miles of travel on each van each month. This represents the amount of travel that is not being generated by other vehicular trips, principally by personal vehicles.

Since most vehicles owned by *colonias* residents are old and not tuned up, fuel economy per vehicle is assumed to be 15 miles per gallon, which produces an estimated maximum savings of 400 gallons of fuel per van per month. Allowing for “downtime” of 10% for the vans’ maintenance/repairs during the year, fuel savings per van would be 4320 gallons (estimated) per year.

For the “fleet” of vans currently in the Colonias Van Program, fuel savings are approximately 130,000 gallons per year.

***Colonias* Transportation Revisited: A Recent Workshop**

Rural counties are diligently working to resolve the infrastructure problem, but they are still faced with providing basic transportation services for these citizens. Innovative, affordable, and cost effective methods of providing transportation services for these citizens are critical to their basic survival and necessary for the future prosperity of Texas and her people. Service providers, decision-makers and *colonias* residents attended a workshop (August 24, 2004) in Laredo to discuss transportation problems in *colonias* along the Texas-Mexico border. Held on the campus of Texas A&M International University, the workshop was sponsored by the Southwest Region University Transportation Center headquartered at TTI. The goal of this workshop was to gather advocates for the *coloinas* and other individuals that work with these communities to work with the research team to assess and document innovative, affordable, and cost-effective methods for meeting some of the unique transportation challenges facing residents of the *colonias*. The research team led the workshop with the intent to identify critical needs of these communities, discuss potential short- and long-term solutions to their transportation-related problems, and examine successful endeavors to meet these needs.

The discussion included several mentions of the importance of the SECO/TTI/CHUD Colonias Van Project in providing vital transportation service to these underserved populations. Although transportation was one of the top issue areas (water availability remains the principal problem in many of the *colonias*), the discussion revealed that there were very limited expectations about a public program to provide the needed accessibility for these neighborhoods.

The current street and road building program being supervised by TxDOT has projects underway in many *colonia* areas, and the residents are eagerly awaiting the completion of these hard-surfaced, paved roads for their neighborhoods. However, the construction funding for this program is a one-time, bond-financed budget item in TxDOT that will likely not be continued once the bond financing is depleted. The resulting improved roads will become part of the county road network, and eligible for routine maintenance support by the county.

Other transportation issues and problems remain unsolved, including:

1. Lack of adequate scheduled bus transit service in and to the *colonias*,

2. Urban and rural bus systems that are not coordinated to serve *colonia* residents,
3. Residents lack of knowledge about related transportation service possibilities from medical, health service, and related non-profit agencies.

“Need more vans for resolving the lack of transportation ...” was one of the recommended transportation solutions for which funding is needed.

Conclusion

In this concluding section, a project evaluation analysis is presented. A selection of comments from neighborhood residents, Community Resource Center personnel, and local agency partners are presented to convey the variety and significance of the impacts of the Colonias Van Project in the neighborhoods being served.

Colonias Van Project Evaluation

The Colonias Van Project has produced some significant insights into developing solutions for transportation issues in Texas’s border *colonias*. Operational, administrative, and sustainability characteristics provide useful categories for summarizing the results of the study.

Operational.

The van program has created numerous opportunities to respond to a variety of transportation needs of the *colonia* residents. The ubiquitous variation of transportation needs is reflected in the monthly usage data reports and the individual comments of the residents. Medical, household/food, educational, community, and business-related activities have all been supported by those CHUD Centers that have acquired one of the vans. The van program was initiated to fill a gap in the availability of publicly supplied transportation services to the residents isolated in the various *colonia* communities along the Texas-Mexico border. Scheduled bus service by rural transit operators, city transit providers, school districts, hospitals, etc. remain important to all the residents of the communities, but they are not adequate to supply the needed level and types of day-to-day transportation support to these families. Unscheduled, non-routine trips are a persistent and enduring need in any group of families such as those in neighborhoods served by the Community Resource Centers built and operated by TAMU’s *Colonias* Program.

Administrative.

A key administrative relationship exists between the CHUD Colonias Program and the various local partners it has developed to operate the Community Resource Centers. In the van program, acquisition of vehicles bought with state funds must be coupled with a commitment from a responsible local agency partner to provide for the maintenance, housing, operation, and dispatch of the vehicles. This relationship creates shared-ownership of the service and joint incentives to utilize the vehicles to support the activities of the Resource Centers, which are responsible to resident/citizen oversight and guidance. The residents see the vans as “our vans,” which reinforces their incentive to

care for and use the vans for resident-based programs and initiatives. Without a responsible, dedicated local partner, a different model of ownership/control of the vehicles would be required.

Sustainability.

The maintenance and operation of the vehicles are crucial to extending the lives of the vans, but a 5-year horizon per vehicle is probably near the economic life of the van as the repair cycle quickens and the costs per unit of time increase as the age of the vehicle increases. Typically, the vehicles in this program have been the initial units; consequently an assessment of vehicle conditions needs to be conducted with the focus upon the decision to replace or repair the vehicles at the various locations. Of course, a large part of the issue involves the sources of funding for the maintenance/service and the sources of funding for new/replacement vehicles. These are likely to be non-complementary; hence the decisions will be skewed by the availabilities of different types of funding.

Coordination with traditional transit service providers continues to be a desirable objective for broader solutions to *colonia* transportation issues. By no means can the van program alone be the long-term solution to the pressing issues of accessibility to the transportation network for residents in the *colonias*. New and improved roads/streets coupled with improved scheduled transit and school bus services remain high priority items in the menu of solutions to *colonia* accessibility. The van program, though, is a *bona fide* element that should be sustained as a part of an overall, comprehensive plan or approach to providing transportation for the residents in the *colonias*.

Anecdotal Highlights

(Excerpts from CHUD community resource center van usage reports and commentaries)

...van transportation is provided to a family whose mobile home burned down, the children are picked up from a house loaned to the family in San Benito and they are taken home every day....

...the van was used to transport parents to an Income Generation Workshop, which was provided by the Texas A&M Extension Services. There were 15 that traveled in the van and an additional 4 went with one of our parent educators in her car....

...van transportation was provided for Head Start, clothing distribution, family literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL), medical doctor appointments, and immunizations, parenting skills, speech therapy and appointments for T.D.H.S.

...the community van was used to provide transportation for residents to attend ESL classes. If transportation had not been available it would be very difficult for the residents to attend.

...using the van, *Promotoras* (residents who learn and then transfer skills to other residents) were able to attend training at local agencies and bring back a wealth of information to be distributed to the community at large.

...the van was also used to bring in clothes to distribute for the use of the needy in the community.

...aside from transporting students from Montana Vista to El Paso Community College, our vans have also been used to take youth ages 16-21 for GED testing for the new Jobs for Texas Graduates Program at the college. By providing transportation to area youth to the college, the van program delivered 12 students into the program.

“April is the cruelest month...” said T.S. Eliot. In Socorro it proved to be the windiest and the dustiest but the Rio Vista Community Center and its vans endured. Although outdoor activities were limited, the Boys & Girls Club used the vans to take kids to Western Playland and for the Graffiti Wipe Out throughout the City of Socorro. The Girl Scouts utilized the van to transport their girls to a Daisy Day Event at Fort Bliss, and then treated them with pizza at Cici’s Pizza. As May comes in with its cornucopia of colors and fragrances, our vans will be in greater demand as service providers look towards taking their clients out of the Community Resource Center for field trips and learning experiences.

...these vehicles transported residents to our community centers for appointments with service providers, classes and meetings. Transportation was also provided to take residents to Laredo for appointments with doctors, dentists, and human care services, Department of Human Services and to transport *Promotoras* and VISTA workers to their work sites. Some *colonia* children were picked up and transported to summer lunch and recreation programs at three centers in Webb County.

...one of our vans transported Rio Bravo and El Cenizo residents to medical routes, picking up prescriptions, and also transported free food for distribution.

... we used the vans to take a group of community leaders and members to the El Paso County Court House to talk to Judge Briones about the problems that occurred after a summer storm resulted in major flooding and devastation. Donations of water and food were also distributed to families within the community of Sparks. We were grateful to have the vans available to help out the community in this time of need.

...one van was mainly at the shop and was only used in Mirando City for several trips to transport the elderly to health services; also it was used to transport prescriptions filled by Gateway Health Clinic.

...in the community of Sparks, the vans were instrumental in getting residents to doctor's appointments, pay utility bills, and buy groceries. The most significant transportation was for a little girl to get to the clinic due to problems breathing. After examining the child, the doctor advised the mother to take her to the hospital emergency because she could stop breathing at any time. The doctor suggested that she be transported to the hospital because an ambulance would take 45 minutes and the child could stop breathing at any time.

... we had our Senior Dance here at Rio Vista Community Center where about 150 people attended and had the time of their lives because they really know how to swing. This is one of the best times that they have because we invite seniors from other centers to attend.

...of course we like to thank the Texas A&M Colonias Program for supplying us with the van to transport our seniors to and from the center to their homes and also to other events. Again we are saying to you "Thank You Very Much and Muchas Gracias" from the bottom of our hearts.

Concluding Commentary

In these anecdotes, excerpted from reports from the various Community Resource Centers, residents repeatedly state that the services provided by the Colonias Van Project continue to produce important contributions to the quality of life for a significant number of *colonia* residents. These comments were recently reinforced in the discussions at the workshop held at TAMU on August 24, 2004.

Finally, as stated by one of the Center directors in the Lower Rio Grande Region: "The transportation provided by [our] vans is very relevant to the lives of many of our residents. The residents who rely on the vans are able to receive the same medical, educational and social opportunities as those residents who are fortunate enough to have their own transportation. Without the van services, though, these same residents would be almost totally cut off from similar opportunities."

The Texas Colonias Van Project, implemented by the partnership of TTI with SECO and Texas A&M's Colonias Program, has been a part of improving lives and living standards of individuals in these selected Texas border *colonias* with a total population of approximately 81,000 people.

Lessons: A Repetition

Management of the project. The key to successful management of this Colonias Van Project has been the coordinated cooperation of these involved agencies: SECO, TTI, TAMU Colonias Program, local sponsors, and *colonia* residents.

To improve on this model, it is suggested that subcontracts for future vehicle acquisitions be clearly specific with respect to the dedicated use of the vehicle exclusively for *colonia* purposes and that there be a reasonable service life for the vehicles (5 years) established in the subcontract.

The TAMU Colonias Program has been the linchpin for the successes of the Colonias Van Project, and future efforts to extend the project should include the TAMU Colonias Program or similar entities (hospital district, church, government agency) that serve affected *colonia* neighborhoods.

The essential point is that there MUST be a local partner that can identify the needs, along with individuals and others who can be engaged in the Colonias Van Project for that area.

Vehicle type and use. The 15-passenger van was the preferred vehicle of choice used in the Colonias Van Project. This limitation in vehicle choice needs to be modified for possible future inclusions of passenger cars, other van/bus/wagons, and small cargo (pickup) vehicles.

The variety of trips needed to support the lives and activities of the individuals in *colonia* neighborhoods includes passenger movement and light hauling of goods, supplies, food, and other items. To accommodate this continuing need, a future van project should include a separate assessment of use of small cargo vehicles for specialized hauling within the *colonias* and for the community service centers located there.

Additionally, acquisition of minivans, passenger cars, and larger vans /buses should be decided on a case-by-case basis in each *colonia*, since there are obvious needs in some *colonias* that can be better served than by using only the 15-passenger van.

Funding. A separate analysis needs to be undertaken to document the full extent of the needs and opportunities for extending a colonias van program to all *colonias* on the Texas side of the Rio Grande.

Some *colonias* will be fairly easy to serve, principally by extending the current model to new areas that already have operating community service centers at which to base the vehicles. Some of the other *colonia* areas are likely not to be candidates (due to small size and or absence of in-place entities for partnering).

Still other *colonias* will likely entail the development of new administrative mechanisms to identify and deliver the requisite services.

Clearly the magnitude of the resulting program will far exceed the capacity of the oil-overcharge funds administered by SECO. Appropriations of general revenue or dedicated funding will need legislative and agency champions to make the case for a broader funding. The results reported here for the SECO-funded project will be valuable to provide the much-needed information required for the ensuing debate.