



February 21, 2018

Governor's Cabinet Meeting
Bloomsburg University (Monty's)
Bloomsburg, PA 17815

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honor to be here today and we welcome you to our small rural community. I am Eileen Chapman, Executive Director of AGAPE, a faith-based non-denominational human services ministry whose mission is to serve those in need in Columbia and Montour counties and in special circumstances others in need outside our immediate vicinity.

I want to begin by giving you my perspective as I've seen our mission unfold for the last nine years at AGAPE. The goal of our mission is to provide help that will lead our clients to self-sufficiency. That goal is also the goal of our local communities. We have failed. I want to tell you why I think we have failed. And it's not for lack of trying.

I want to tell you, almost ashamedly, had I not worked at AGAPE these last nine years, I would never have imagined let alone understood how a majority of our residents struggle daily to meet their basic needs. Oh, how I took so much for granted.

We live in a community whose residents have lots of pride and only ask for help when they have hit bottom—and sometimes they wait so long we unfortunately cannot help. When we do help they are very grateful. I will also say we have abusers of the system and we all try to vet them and hold them responsible, if regulations permit that vetting. AGAPE uses discretion and flexibility.

Allow me to give you a couple of statistics. In Columbia County 48-52% of our school children are eligible for the reduced lunch or free lunch programs. For 2017 AGAPE served 1261 clients. Our clients' average net income was \$15,343.10 and their average expenses were \$15,297.81 for a total of \$45.29 for flexible expenses. The median income was \$13,512.00 and median expenses were \$13,459.50 for a total of \$52.50 for flexible expenses. Their average weekly net pay check is \$295.06 and the median weekly net pay check is \$259.85. Now on the first of the month their average rent of \$650-700 is due and, if it's not paid within five days of the first, an extra \$25 per day is added to the rent due. Yes, some have HUD housing assistance but the waiting list varies on when it is available. Therefore, it would take the average resident two plus pay checks to pay the rent.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe I'm safe in saying that you joined me today by jumping in your car and transported yourself to wherever you needed to get at the time that was convenient for you. You didn't think about the gas you were having to use, the fact that your car is registered, insured, well maintained and ready to use whenever you need it (need not want). Many of our clients (about half) have cars (generally needing repairs) and the other half do not have the

luxury of even having a car. Without a car or some kind of reliable available transportation, they struggle to provide for their basic needs: get to work, get to medical appointments or the provide opportunities for their families. As I just explained, they have too much pride to constantly ask others for transportation except in times of emergencies. Transportation is one of, if not, the largest barrier our low income residents have to overcome to become self-sufficient.

A reliable car now costs about \$5000.00 plus registration, maintenance and insurance. No longer can you get a "junker" go to the junk yard, find the part you need and fix it up because repairs have become so technological that even a client with auto repair abilities cannot do it. So now what does an unemployed client do to get to and from work when that work is not within the small towns in which he/she lives. We provide bicycles but the distance every day in all kinds of weather takes a toll and is dangerous particularly at night. We are also getting into a program to help individuals who have the opportunity to be hired but without a car cannot accept to purchase a car. Out of the generosity of Columbia-Montour United Way, the Central Susquehanna Community Foundation and individual donors, an initial fund of \$20,000 has been established to help about four to five individuals purchase a car. As wonderful as that is, it's a drop in the bucket for solving the problem.

We have Rabbittransit, but if you are not disabled and not a senior citizen you can't afford it. We had a client who lives in Bloomsburg and had a wife dying in Danville at Geisinger Medical Center. The husband and son wanted to visit her daily. They had no car so they took K-Kab (the predecessor of Rabbittransit) and their ride of 10 miles one way was \$34 for a total roundtrip cost of \$68. The one-way took all they had. An AGAPE volunteer picked them up when they wanted to come home. The next day the father and son walked for four hours in 95 degree heat to visit. They couldn't walk back and asked AGAPE for help and we did. It's not that AGAPE can't help because our mission is to help those in need but this is just an example of what our residents face in rural areas lacking reasonable public transportation. In addition, Rabbittransit will not even take our veterans, who lack transportation, to their medical appointments at the VA hospital in Wilkes-Barre (@ 50 miles) because it is outside their regulated area. Based on the above flexible income, how would you maintain a reliable car or for that matter, buy a car?

Our local communities are working the best they can without the proper resources to solve our transportation problem. Small communities like to take care of their own and do a great job of trying to do that but they become frustrated and overwhelmed with rules, regulations and the lack of understanding of our issues because we don't have the population numbers. We have had transportation task forces, surveys completed, and major concerns expressed about this issue including working with a Rabbittransit "task force". We have tried to negotiate a voucher system without success. We got churches to donate their church vans to use for taking clients to work but it became a ~~scheduling (dispatching) problem with the meeting the schedules for the~~ various work shifts and getting volunteer drivers, particularly the late shifts. We tried a RideShare program but until you know who you are transporting or who is transporting you, it is impossible to put your faith in the driver and the rider who don't know each other. We had an owner of three older but usable for short trip buses who was getting out of the business. But there were so many Penn DOT rules and regulations, and fees to overcome we could not do that. The rural communities do not have the large populations that the large and smaller cities have. Our residents' taxes help pay for those larger transportation systems. With transportation costs increasing to the point that rural residents can't afford the vehicles they once had, they too deserve consideration in using their taxpayer dollars to provide them public transportation service just like the residents of those large and smaller cities. We have been talking and talking

and surveying and surveying and studying and studying now for the 10 years or so and where are we today—talking, talking and surveying and studying and getting nowhere. In the meantime people who could be working, providing well for their families instead of just skimping by praying for no emergencies, adding to the economy and their community, we talk and don't act.

What disturbs us greatly is seeing large and small buses traveling our roads and streets virtually empty every day and almost every hour. We've tried to negotiate vouchered service and failed, understandably due to liability issues and regulations. But these transportation resources are being wasted and clients in need are being denied valuable resources that are being wasted. We are in a constant recycling mode to help with environmental issues as well as prevent waste and abuse. Here we are with need that could be filled, at least to a greater extent than now.

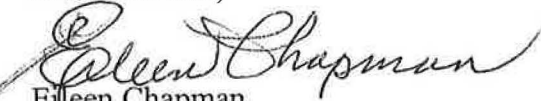
Regulations and liability issues that create the present major barriers need to be overcome. Let us look at the resources we have, figure out how to implement their use more efficiently and effectively. This can only be done by eliminating or modifying the barriers that prevent the use of those resources. It is time to act and act sooner not ten years from now.

I also understand reality, the use of public transportation were it to come to our area, will not be significantly used overnight. It will take time for our residents to use the system because of unfamiliarity—and lack of trust and change of lifestyle. But a good public relations program and marketing can help a lot. Also it will not be just low income it will be our general public. It will also result in more businesses and industry coming to our area because of the availability of transportation. It will also assist in solving town parking problems. It is a win win for our entire community.

In conclusion, I am now going to put on my cynical and very bold voice. I suspect you will agree with me and want to help. I also suspect when you leave this meeting, we will continue to talk, survey and study, and our clients will continue to need public transportation.

Thank you for your attention. May God bless all of you.

In His Service,


Eileen Chapman
Executive Director