



14420 Lakeshore Drive, Suite C
PO Box 3001
Clearlake, CA 95422

March 10, 2022

RE: Medi-Links Program Request for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds

Dear Supervisor Sabatier,

This letter is written as an official request for a portion of the County's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to sustain an important non-emergency medical transportation program for the region's seniors and low-income residents. The service, known as Medi-Links, is currently used for out-of-county trips to medical appointments for a targeted population which otherwise lacks transportation resources. Regular funding for the Medi-Links is nearing exhaustion, and short-term assistance is needed to sustain the program. The situation is described in detail below:

Background

Lake Links, Inc. is a 501(c)3 non-profit and is also the designated Consolidated Transportation Service Agency (CTSA) for Lake County. Incorporated in 2017, we began providing transportation services for Lake's senior, disabled and low-income residents in 2019. We operate the Pay-Your-Pal volunteer driver program and partner with Lake Transit to operate Medi-Links, a service that transports eligible riders to out-of-county medical appointments. Our office is located at 14420 Lakeshore Dr., Clearlake. Website: www.lakelinks.org

Mission Statement

The mission of the Lake Links CTSA is to coordinate, facilitate, develop and provide mobility options for those residents of Lake County who cannot use or are unaware of existing public transportation resources.

Intended Use of Funds

The Situation: Lake Links and Lake Transit operate two transportation programs that provide rides to medical appointments for Lake County residents. Both of these programs have been in operation for several years.

Lake Links provides the **Pay-Your-Pal (PYP) Program** in which eligible riders provide their own drivers in their personal vehicles and Lake Links provides a mileage reimbursement to help cover the costs of the rides. Pay-Your-Pal rides are primarily to medical appointments in Lake County, although some go to out-of-county medical facilities.

Lake Links and Lake Transit jointly operate the **Medi-Links** out-of-county Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) program. Lake Links provides the rider eligibility and ride scheduling while Lake Transit provides the rides on Lake Transit vehicles.



The Problem: Both of these critical programs have base funding from Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5310 grants for senior and disabled transportation through Caltrans. These funding programs are limited and have not been able to keep up with the growth in demand for these health care access rides. In fact, both programs are expected to run out of their current 5310 grant funding before the grant projects terminate in February 2023. While both agencies have applied for grant funding through the newest cycle of Section 5310, the new grants will not become available until early next year.

The Pay-Your-Pal program will be receiving additional funds through the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which will allow operations to continue until March of 2023 (when the current 5310 cycle terminates). However, the Medi-Links program will continue to have a gap in funding that, if not filled, will result in major service cut-backs or program termination.

Part of the reason for the large Medi-Links funding deficit stems from its operating as a bus program rather than a volunteer driver program. This has resulted in significantly higher costs per trip than those of the PYP program. The newest application for 5310 funding is designed to alleviate this problem in the future. Through a closer partnership between Lake Links and Lake Transit, a second volunteer driver program would be introduced. The proposed program will supplement Pay-Your-Pal for those riders who cannot find their own drivers. It will feature a pool of screened and trained drivers, driving either Lake Transit vehicles, or their own vehicles, as a means of providing the rides for the Medi-Links program, and eliminating costs that would typically be billed by Lake Transit. The Lake Links volunteer driver program would expand NEMT trips to include both out-of-county and in-county trips. In addition, Lake Transit is considering moving riders who are able to ride in a sedan to either the Pay-Your-Pal program or the future volunteer driver program for their Non-Emergency Medical Transportation appointments.

Given the imminent funding shortfalls, Lake Links and Lake Transit do not expect the above proposed program changes to have a significant impact on the funding gaps. As a result, outside sources are currently being pursued to maintain this important service. For example, \$5,000 was recently provided through Rotary Club, while further requests were also made of the Lake County Women's Civic Club, and the Redbud Health Care District. In this same context, Lake Links is now requesting \$100,000 from the County's available ARPA funds to help maintain current Medi-Links transportation services as gap funding, until new 5310 funds can be obtained to implement the proposed volunteer driver program. If this request is approved by the County, Lake Links will receive and manage the funds so as to maximize their impact in solving the health care access needs of its residents.

Detailed Basis for Funds Requested

As currently operated, Medi-Links has not been proven to be sustainable. While this may be for a variety of unforeseen reasons, the primary cause is the inconsistency of scheduling needs and destinations of the program's clients. Funded by grant revenues in the 2020-2022 cycle of the Federal Transit Administration 5310 program, the existing model relies on Lake Transit drivers and vehicles, and the limited flexibility of the model has been costlier than anticipated. Lake Transit had budgeted \$16,500 per month for the first year of the two-year program, which ended up costing \$18,670 per month on average. This was on top of the allotted amount from the successful FTA 5310 grant being 25% less than requested in 2020. Lake Transit and Lake Links are presently designing a new model, which would rely on a pool of volunteer drivers and a mix of Lake Transit vehicles and privately owned vehicles. However,



until the model can be fully developed and operational, the current model will require additional funds to sustain the Medi-Links service. Funds may also be used to initiate the volunteer driver program to facilitate the transition to the new model.

Medi-Links service is estimated to cost roughly \$600 per round trip. This request for assistance (\$100,000) would equate to approximately 167 trips, making an important contribution to the region's transportation services assisting seniors and persons of low income within the County.

Overall, the funds would assist the Medi-Links program in bridging a pending funding (and service) gap, while a new, more sustainable model (volunteer driver program) can be developed which increases long term efficiency and avoids potential service disruptions in the future. Your consideration of our request during this transition period is greatly appreciated.

Letters of support can be made available upon request.

Respectfully,

Paul Branson
Interim CEO