
Connecting Older Adults and People with Disabilities to Food

The Shopper Links Pilot | *A Case Study*



About this Report

This case study was prepared by staff of the
Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG):

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National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC).

The report is available online at www.gpcog.org.

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Background

The Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) is the regional planning agency for 25 member municipalities in Cumberland County, Maine. GPCOG serves its members and the region by helping communities achieve things together that they cannot do by themselves. The focus of GPCOG's work is greater prosperity for everyone through stronger economies, more sustainable environments, and more equitable treatment of every person in the Greater Portland region. GPCOG houses the federally mandated Metropolitan Planning Organization for the region – the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System (PACTS). Each year, GPCOG supports PACTS member municipalities to make decisions on how to invest the region's millions of dollars in federal transportation funding.

In 2017, GPCOG set out to better integrate the needs of people who can't or don't drive into transportation planning and decision-making. The effort began by engaging a broad range of stakeholders in assessing priorities. Engagement of older adults, people with disabilities, people of color and other

underrepresented communities has been a core component of this work. The Shopper Links pilot project grew out of this process, responding to the need for free and low-cost door-to-door transportation to food shopping strongly expressed by older adults, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes.

Planning

In the Summer of 2018, GPCOG launched the Inclusive Transportation Planning Project. With funding from both the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) and the Transit Planning 4 All Initiative, this project enabled GPCOG to conduct outreach to people who rely on public transportation or rides from friends, family and volunteers (as well as their caregivers).

This outreach generated input from a broad range of key stakeholders and helped GPCOG develop relationships. GPCOG staff gathered information about mobility gaps and ideas for possible solutions, while also gauging interest from potential partners and community leaders.



GPCOG conducted six focus groups. Each session was hosted at a community location in partnership with a stakeholder organization and attended by transit agency staff.

Project Goals

The NADTC-funded portion of the work had two goals:

1. Improve mobility for older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color by designing and launching a transportation solution that responds to unmet needs.
2. Empower older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color to craft mobility solutions for themselves and their communities directly.

Steering Committee

The Transportation & Community Well-Being Network – a multi-sector coalition focused on access and mobility convened by GPCOG – served as the project’s Steering Committee. In addition to transportation, aging, and disability organizations, the Network includes members from health care, housing, economic development, bicycle-pedestrian and trails advocacy groups, and social services.

Focus Groups

GPCOG conducted six focus groups. Each session was hosted at a community location

in partnership with a stakeholder organization and attended by transit agency staff. The focus groups were held in Portland, Raymond, Saco, and South Portland and included 70 older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color. Most participants in the focus groups reported using public transportation (including demand response) or rides from friends/family to access medical care, social services, shopping, recreation and social activities, and jobs. Participants also reported driving themselves but worried how much longer they would be able to.

Lack of access to grocery stores and shopping centers was a major theme in the focus groups. Those with access to the bus described challenges such as only being able to carry two bags (since grocery carts must be folded and stashed), the lack of service to less expensive stores, and challenging walks between bus stops and stores. Those without access to transit expressed frustration at not being able to do shopping for themselves and experience the social benefits of being out. Others said they go weeks between shopping trips because they are dependent upon friends and family and do not want to ask for rides too often.

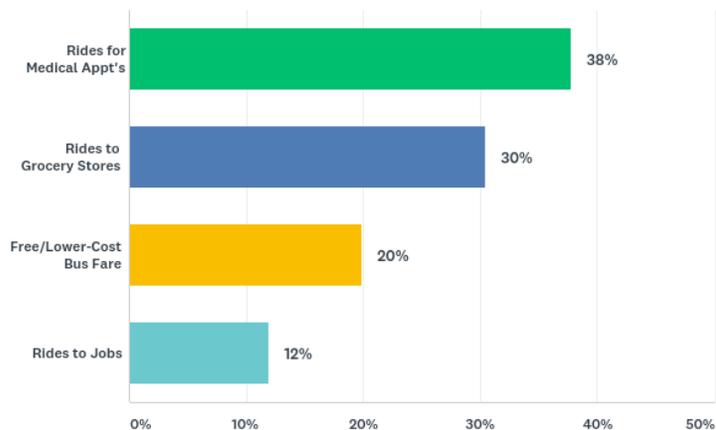
“Groceries are essential.”

“I have to do without food and be very low on food because of this issue.”

“Carrying groceries on a bus is limited to what a person can carry.”

“Have a van or bus that takes residents to grocery stores once a week.”

Which option would you most like to see turned into a project?



GPCOG's Mobility Solutions Survey received 287 responses from a diverse cross-section of the population. Of the four mobility solutions presented in the survey, "Rides for medical appointments for those without MaineCare" and "Rides to grocery stores for people with transportation needs" generated the most support.

Survey

GPCOG conducted the Mobility Solutions Survey over a four-week period, collecting responses on paper and online. The survey asked respondents to both rank mobility solutions and provide feedback and ideas. GPCOG used interpreters to collect responses from older adults and people with disabilities who do not speak English as their native language.

Out of the total 287 survey responses, 155 (57%) came from people age 65 and older, including 48 (32%) with a disability and 19 who are non-white. The survey received 40 (14%) responses from people age 64 and under with a disability including 11 who are non-white.

In the survey, respondents were presented with four options and asked to select the option they would most like to see turned into a project. The four options were:

1. Rides to medical appointments for those without Maine Care.
2. Rides to grocery stores for people with transportation needs..
3. Better access to free/lower-cost bus fare.

4. Rides to jobs in locations that lack transit access.

Of the total 155 respondents age 65 and older, 31% picked "Rides to grocery stores for people with transportation needs" as their first choice. Of the 88 responses from people with disabilities, 25% picked grocery rides as their first choice. Overall, only "Rides for Medical Appointments for Those Without MaineCare (Medicaid)" received more votes (38% and 36% respectively). As discussed in the Next Steps, GPCOG and partners continue to explore solutions to assist people without Medicaid in getting rides to medical appointments.

Below are some of the comments respondents made regarding rides to grocery stores:

- "Groceries are essential."
- "This is a true need for many people and one that we may be able to impact the most."
- "I chose this as a need because it happens more often than medical appointments and it is harder to ask for assistance every week."
- "I have had to do without food and be very



The Mobility Solutions Workshop was attended by 27 stakeholders, many of whom were not previously involved with the project. Attendees spent time brainstorming solutions to transportation barriers.

low on food because of this issue.”

- “Carrying groceries on a bus is limited to what a person can carry.”
- “Consider helping people shop and carry groceries to their kitchens.”
- “Have a van or bus that takes residents to the grocery store once a week.”

Mobility Solutions Workshop

This two-hour workshop was attended by 27 stakeholders, many of whom were not previously involved with the project, including several town managers, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and adult education representatives. Attendees spent time brainstorming solutions to the transportation barriers.

Developing the Innovation

With the goal of developing a ready-to-launch solution for implementation funding, GPCOG staff evaluated the input collected and assessed the best focus for a pilot. Consideration was given to the needs in different communities and populations, as well as the level of readiness and feasibility of mobilizing action in a short timeframe.

South Portland became an obvious candidate for the implementation phase. The South Portland Bus Service director introduced GPCOG to the South Portland Senior Advisory Committee, which was in the process of facilitating its own series of focus groups and developing a report based on a survey conducted in the summer. The Committee’s survey, which received 1,099 responses, included many comments on the need for better transportation options, including bus routes that come closer to senior housing and the desire for a shuttle to assist seniors who need transportation. Both the Bus Service and the Committee were excited for GPCOG to become a partner in addressing the City’s transportation issues.

GPCOG joined with the South Portland Bus Service, the Committee, and South Portland Housing Authority to conduct a well-attended South Portland focus group. Social isolation, lack of access to grocery shopping, and difficulty in reaching bus stops were key themes in the discussion. GPCOG held follow-up conversations with all partners

to review possible solutions. The Regional Transportation Program (RTP) was brought into the conversations because it is the demand response provider serving South Portland and already operates shopper shuttles in the City. Stakeholders agreed that expanding what RTP already provides to include a door-to-door shuttle has strong potential to address identified gaps in the service.

Shopper Links Pilot

Shopper Links emerged from the planning phase of GPCOG's proposed "ready-to-launch solution." In March 2019, GPCOG received a second phase of funding from NADTC to conduct a pilot from April through September. The funding period was later extended through October 2019.

Shopper Links Concept

The Shopper Links pilot tested two ways to offer door-to-door rides for older adults and people with disabilities in South Portland. The City currently has fixed route bus service, but its coverage is limited both in geography and number of runs. The goal of Shopper Links was to address the gaps using a shuttle and on-demand rides that were able to pick residents up wherever they live and bring them to food stores. Shopper Links also served the food pantry, which is currently not on any transit route. The pilot also sought to test strategies for increasing awareness among harder to reach communities.

Project Management

The pilot project was managed by GPCOG's Director of Community Engagement Zoe Miller, and Senior Planner Rick Harbison. Additional project support was provided by GPCOG's Public Information Officer Tom Bell, and Program Associates Sarah Baker and Jasmine Olins.



SHOPPER LINKS

Connecting People to Food

Need Help Getting to the Grocery Store?

Shopper Links is a pilot program testing two ways to help South Portland residents get rides to local grocery stores and the Food Cupboard. This program is open to people age 55 and up or adults (18+) who have a disability. Read on to learn more about each service and how to sign up.

City-Wide Shopper Shuttle



What is it? The Shopper Shuttle is a lift-equipped van operated by the Regional Transportation Program (RTP) that provides door-to-door service to local grocery stores (ex. Hannaford, Shaws, Walmart) or the Food Cupboard.

How does it work? The Shuttle runs on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 9 AM - 12 PM. The Shuttle goes to a different location each day with rides to grocery stores on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and the Food Cupboard on Thursdays. Riders are eligible to use the Shuttle at least twice a month during the pilot (June-October).

What does it cost? Suggested donation of \$3.

The Shuttle has room for 10 riders and their groceries. It has space for up to two wheelchair users.

On-Demand Rides



What is it? During this pilot, Shopper Links is testing a way to use Uber or Lyft without a smartphone to get discounted rides to local grocery stores. A limited number of people will be able to use the service during the pilot (June-October).

How does it work? Shopper Links is partnering with a company called GoGoGrandparent. Once you've signed up with Shopper Links you can call GoGoGrandparent at any time from your home phone to schedule rides with Uber and Lyft.

What does it cost? Shopper Links will pay for your first four one-way trips each month to approved local food outlets.

These rides are for individual use. Wheelchair users must be able to get in and out of their wheelchair on their own.

Flip this card over for step by step instructions on how to sign up. 

Or visit www.shopperlinks.org

A Shopper Links mailer that was distributed widely throughout the community.

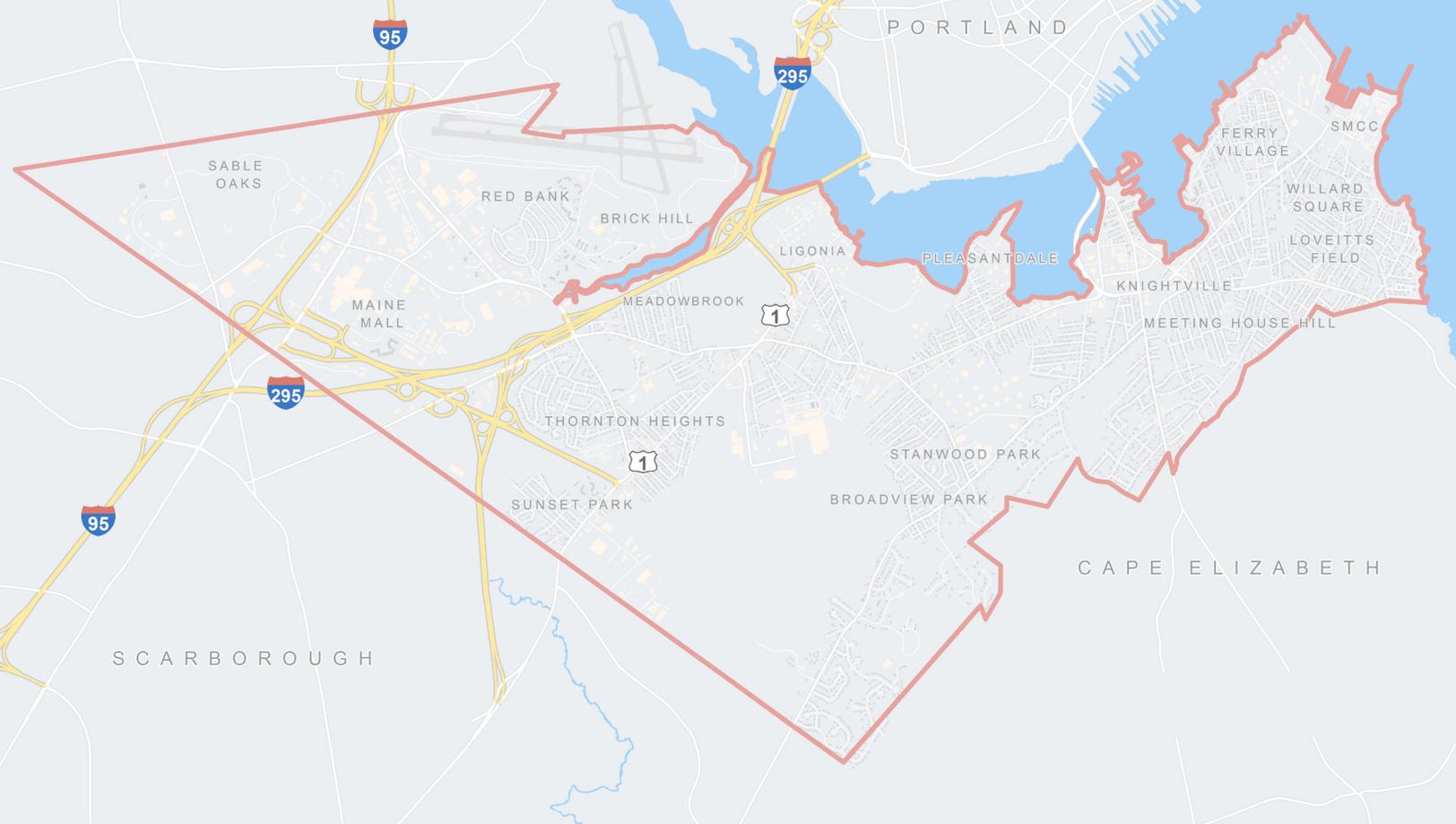
Work Group

To develop the service and monitor the project, GPCOG convened a Work Group comprised of South Portland residents, stakeholders, and decision-makers.

Throughout implementation, GPCOG continued to obtain feedback from the project Work Group and engage them in individual conversations about sustainability.

Partner organizations included:

- Southern Maine Area Agency on Aging
- Alpha One (the state's center for independent living)



The Shopper Links Pilot Project provided rides to grocery stores and the local food pantry three days a week throughout the summer and fall of 2019 to eligible residents in the City of South Portland, Maine.

- South Portland Senior Advisory Committee
- South Portland Bus Service
- South Portland City Council
- South Portland Housing Authority
- Avesta Housing
- The Opportunity Alliance
- RTP

Service Delivery

GPCOG worked with RTP and the Work Group to develop a user-centered application process and service design. Rides were offered from mid-June through October 2019.

- **Registration** was accessible by phone, in-person at two locations, or online through the Shopper Links webpage. During registration, people were asked to indicate whether they wanted to use the shuttle, the on-demand rides or both. GPCOG staff followed up with each registrant by mail and phone or email to confirm and address additional questions.

- **Shuttle Rides** were provided three mornings each week by RTP. Tuesday and Wednesday trips took people to grocery stores. Thursday trips took people to the South Portland Food Cupboard. Riders were directed to call and book their ride with the shuttle two days in advance.
- **On-Demand Rides** were managed through a third party organization called Go Go Grandparent. This required an additional sign-up that GPCOG staff completed after the initial Shopper Links registration was received.
- **Customer Service** was provided through a combination of GPCOG and RTP staff.

Promotion

Together with the project partners, GPCOG promoted the service widely in the community and conducted culturally tailored outreach, including using interpreters. Promotion included the following:

- **Advertising:** Four weeks of boosted Facebook posts; six weekly ads in the South Portland Sentry.
- **In-Person Outreach:** GPCOG staff and cultural brokers conducted outreach at community locations to French, Somali, and Arabic speakers.
- **Word-of-Mouth:** All Work Group participants shared the information with their networks including individual clients, program participants, and congregations.
- **Organizational Outreach:** Agencies serving older adults and people with disabilities who shared information in their newsletters or through bulletins included Catholic Charities of Maine, Gateway Community Services, Strive.
- **Promotion at Community Sites:** Staff delivered flyers to more than 300 community locations including medical practices, churches, restaurants, food stores, beauty shops, and senior centers.

Registrants

In total, 43 adults and people with disabilities registered to use Shopper Links.

Rides

Shopper Links provided 41 rides to 17 older adults and people with disabilities over 14 weeks. In many cases, these were rides home from the food pantry to carless households.

Sustainability

Research was conducted on how shuttles are funded in other places and several possible local funders were identified. However, because ridership was much lower than anticipated, GPCOG and partners opted not to pursue additional funding. GPCOG worked with



RTP's Shopper Shuttle provided door-to-door service to local grocery stores and the food pantry for South Portland residents who participated in the program.

RTP to carefully monitor and track all revenue and costs associated with the project and that information is available by request.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the project, GPCOG gathered feedback from the community and held discussions with partners. To better understand why registration and ridership numbers were not as high as anticipated, GPCOG conducted a survey of registrants, collected input from Work Group members, and held a Community Conversation with 20 South Portland senior residents who had not used the service. Key takeaways from these are summarized below.

- **More time is needed for piloting transportation services to older adults and people with disabilities.** A top conclusion of the pilot is that 4 months was not enough time to get the word out and build ridership. The South Portland Senior Center reported that it took two years before participants started using the bus they offer. Additionally, because of the limited time, some commented, people would be hesitant to make the switch from their



The South Portland Food Cupboard was a key partner in the Shopper Links Pilot Project. The Shopper Shuttle provided door-to-door service to the pantry, which is not on a transit route, every Thursday throughout the course of the pilot.

current solution (even if not ideal) to trying something new and unknown. On a related note, 211 Maine (the statewide information and referral service) was unwilling to list the service because it was still in its pilot phase.

- **Promotion is best through word-of-mouth and trusted sources.** While the pilot did use partner agencies and staff as ambassadors for the service, this should have been used even more. Most riders found the service through a case worker or friend rather than from an ad or flyer. Participants in the Community Conversation said that they worry about things being a scam unless a trusted person refers them. “You want to be able to feel comfortable and not be afraid,” said one person. “Trust is important.” Several people suggested promoting through doctors and churches. “If your doctor recommended it, maybe people would be more likely to use it,” said one person. GPCOG shared the information with churches and medical practices but did

not develop explicit partnerships.

- **Outreach materials should be short and simple.** Despite creating and testing outreach materials with the Work Group (which included older adults and people with disabilities), GPCOG concluded that materials should have been even simpler. Participants in the Community Conversation reported seeing the flyer but not understanding that they could register for it in person or by phone. The conclusion is to provide minimal information and a phone number for more details.
- **On demand rides are intimidating – even when accessed by phone.** Participants in the Community Conversation reported feeling fearful of trying rides through Uber and Lyft. One person commented: “We all grew up being told ‘don’t get in a car with a stranger.’” Many registrants chose only the shuttle and when surveyed, explained they had no interest in the on-demand rides for the same reason.

- **Flexible scheduling is critical.** Many people who registered for the shuttle did not end up using it because they had conflicts with the times it was available. Though the population being targeted tend to be retired or not working, they still have scheduling constraints and needed more options. Unfortunately, because RTP provides many other ride programs, it was not possible to provide more flexible hours during this pilot.
- **Expanding fixed route transit may be a more viable solution.** A final takeaway is that many are hopeful that South Portland Bus Service will expand its hours, frequency, and service area. The neighborhood with the highest poverty level has the least access to transit.

Next Steps

GPCOG is committed to continuing its efforts to improve transportation access for underrepresented communities. Given the underwhelming response to the pilot, GPCOG will not be pursuing continued service in South Portland. However, the regional conversation will continue.

This case study will be shared with decision-makers as an opportunity to learn from what worked and to make adjustments to future efforts. GPCOG will continue to partner with South Portland's Senior Advisory Committee to address gaps. More frequent bus service and door-to-door solutions will continue to be focus areas. As a result of this project, one South Portland resident participated in GPCOG's Community Transportation Leaders training program. She is passionate about improving transportation access for her neighborhood - which has the highest poverty level and the least transit frequency.

Several of the solutions discussed in this project's planning phase have continued to



A large supply of grocery bags and luggage tags with the Shopper Links logo were purchased as an incentive to get people to sign up for the program, and as a way to organize people's groceries on the Shopper Shuttle.

move along. While they were not ready to be pursued in early 2019, planning continued and they are now advancing with other funding sources. They include:

- Pilots of both a travel training program and a one-call one-click service for the region funded by an Access & Mobility Grant from the Federal Transit Administration. This project is coordinated by GPCOG.
- Scoping of a low-income bus fare pilot program for the region funded by 5303 formula funds. GPCOG is coordinating and will pursue additional grants from local philanthropies.
- Pilot of an on-demand rides program for oncology patients in the region with funding through the Maine Cancer Foundation. Maine Medical Center is coordinating.