



nadtc

NCMM

# Thrive Allen County

## *Planning to Implementation*

### *A Tale of Two Funders*

Allen County, in Southeastern Kansas is a rural county comprising 505 square miles with a population of 12,519 residents. Iola, the county's largest city and county seat with a population of 5,354, is more than 100 miles from any major city like Kansas City or Joplin, Missouri, Wichita, Kansas, or Tulsa, Oklahoma. Iola sits at the intersection of US Route 169 and US Route 54. Agriculture, primarily corn, soybean, and cattle, drives the county's industry, as well as manufacturing, with facilities in and around Iola.

Transportation options in Allen County were limited and had no transportation services that traveled out of the county. The only transportation available was a senior bus, Medicaid reimbursable service, and a free bike-share program. Twenty percent (20%) of Allen County residents did not have reliable transportation options. Thrive Allen County, a rural health advocacy organization, found that 40% of outpatient surgery cancellations were due to transportation issues making transportation a critical health issue

In 2019, the Allen County Rural Health Initiative, through its series of monthly stakeholder meetings identified transportation as a critical issue to low-income residents in the community being able to access health care services.



A Transportation Task Force was formed through the initiative. Two transportation providers served on the Allen County Transportation Taskforce, including Southeast Kansas Mental Health Center, funded through the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Formula Program (Section 5310), and the Allen County Government, which operates the Allen County Senior Bus service. The task force began to search for funding opportunities to explore transportation access.



## NCMM Design Challenge Grant and Subsequent NCMM Grants

In 2019, the task force applied for, and was awarded, a Community Mobility Design Challenge Grant from the [National Center for Mobility Management](#) (NCMM). These grants are the first of three phases of grants offered by NCMM. The grant process uses human-centered design strategies to engage with community stakeholders about root issues and to design and test potential long-term solutions.

“How might we address the transportation needs of patients with chronic physical and mental health conditions in Allen County?”

The team’s focus question for the Design Challenge Grant was, “How might we address the transportation needs of patients with chronic physical and mental health conditions in Allen County?” Prior to applying for the grant, the task force conducted interviews in Allen County with community members and health care providers. Ninety percent of the interviews were with older adults and people with disabilities living within Allen County. The results of the interviews were reflected in the task force’s application to NCMM’s phase one grants.

From the Design Challenge Grant process, two distinct transportation solutions emerged: **(1)** a “non-emergent” medical and social safety net service for long-distance and out of county trips, and **(2)** a general-public transportation service, operating as a demand-response service, within Allen County and the county seat of Iola.

Following the Design Challenge Grant, the Allen County Transportation Taskforce was transitioned into a second NCMM grant, called a Learning Launch Grant (or Proof of Concept). With support from NCMM staff, the team developed an operations plan that prepared them to launch both a non-emergent service and a general-public transportation service. The Learning Launch grant also assisted the team in surfacing remaining untested assumptions. The “wheels on the ground” aspect of the service was tested through Allen County Wellness Rides – in which riders were transported through a demand-responsive wheelchair accessible van to medical and health and well-being appointments within and outside of Allen County.

The task force then determined it needed to split its efforts on the two solutions – out-of-county and in-county service. They subsequently applied for and received the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) [Innovations in Accessible Mobility Grant](#) for the non-emergency medical and social long-distance and out of county trips, Thrive Allen County (Thrive). The general public transportation service was pursued through the third phase of NCMM grants, known as the Ready to Launch or demonstration grants.

For the phase 3 NCMM grant (the “pilot” grant), the county became more involved and contracted with Thrive to help manage the Allen County Public Transportation



Service. The service provided standing and on-demand rides to health care and well-being destinations for individuals residing in the county. It operated Monday through Friday from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm. Eventually the county commissioners signaled their approval for continued funding for the service on a yearly basis and submission of an application to the Kansas DOT for long-term funding. Currently the Allen County public transportation system is up and running with those KDOT funds.

## Outcomes of NCMM Grant:

- Establishment of a public transportation system in a rural county where none had existed before.
- Securement of county support and state DOT funding for long-term continuation.
- Application of additional Formula Grants for Rural Areas (Section 5311) funds from Kansas DOT by Thrive Allen County to provide late night/early morning service not covered by Allen County's general public transportation service.
- Provided rides to a consistent number of community residents—an average 150 riders taking around 300 rides per month.
- Improved access to physical and mental health care for community residents who previously had few options for their continuing care.
- Design of the new transportation service with input from potential riders, community organizations, and health care providers, and county officials.



## **NADTC Innovations in Accessible Mobility Grant**

Every year, the [National Aging and Disability Transportation Center](#) (NADTC) invests in community solutions focused on increasing accessible transportation options in communities across the country. The Innovations in Accessible Mobility Grants were awarded to implement innovative projects that remove barriers to transportation and expand mobility options for older adults and people with disabilities. Thrive Allen County applied for and was awarded the Innovations in Accessible Mobility Grant in May 2020. Thrive proposed working with community partners to coordinate and provide services to residents needing transportation assistance for health care appointments and social safety-net services in and out of Allen County. The desired outcome was to create a service for older adults and people with disabilities to reduce the number of missed appointments and increase their general well-being. Due to the number of individuals with low incomes, including those on Medicaid, Thrive also set out to become a Medicaid provider with the state to receive reimbursement for those trips. To maximize efficiency, Thrive decided to coordinate both Medicaid and non-Medicaid rides within the transportation program.

The NADTC innovations in Accessible Mobility Grant began on October 1, 2020. Initially, the goal set was to see an overall increase in the number of

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rides provided over the length of the project by 15%. Prior to receiving the grant, the average number of rides was 20 per month. Once the service started, the demand for rides far exceeded projections and by the end of the grant period, Thrive averaged 93 rides per month, well over the 50 rides originally predicted. From October 2020 to May 2021, the transportation program realized a 465% increase in ridership. By the end of the grant, the program was exceeding their capacity. Because work was being done by Thrive and their partners to create the public transportation system around the same time as the NADTC grant period, it was anticipated that, once launched, the transit system could absorb some of this demand, particularly for in-county trips and therefore reducing the strain on the Thrive program.



Due to high demand, within the first 2 months of the grant period, Thrive pivoted from providing rides with in-house staff, which was the initial plan, to contracting with a full-time driver and renting a wheelchair accessible vehicle. Thrive knew they would need a wheelchair accessible vehicle at the conclusion of the grant to sustain the service. Throughout the grant, Thrive had discussions with Allen County Regional Hospital, Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas, and Kansas Department of Transportation. Ultimately these interactions

resulted in Thrive receiving Allen County Regional Hospital's used wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) for Thrive's transportation service. Acquiring the WAV occurred outside the timeframe of the NADTC grant but was initiated during the grant period.

## Outcomes of NADTC Grant:

- Establishment of a gap filling service operated by Thrive Allen County enabled people to get to appointments out of the county and at times and places the public transit system does not operate.
- Reduction in missed appointments by 15% as reported by local medical providers.
- Conversations with the state about state and Federal funding for sustainability including 5310 and 5311 funding and state funds through the Access, Innovation, and Collaboration Grant.
- Applied for Section 5310 funding to support the transportation program.
- Approval to be a Medicaid vendor for the state, and therefore eligible for reimbursement for Medicaid transportation.
- Applied for two Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) grants, both of which included transportation as an element, allowing for successful implementation of their ongoing projects. Focused areas include:
  - Rural Outreach
  - Opioid Implementation



## How the Grants Worked Together

- Person-center planning processes were used to identify needs in both projects.
- Public transit service was started to meet the needs identified in the planning process through NCMM's Community Mobility Design Challenge Grant.
- The non-emergent transportation service established as a result of the NADTC grant was designed to meet the need for service outside the county or that which would not be covered by the public transit system.
- Pilot programs allowed time for community buy-in to continue services after these grants ended.
- Both the NEMT and the public transit services allowed for some level of redundancy; a back-up system for certain trips, ensuring residents get to critical and life-sustaining appointments.

The creation of a comprehensive transportation system in a rural county in Kansas demonstrates how coalition work, coordination of efforts, and effective planning with public input, can have a powerful impact on a community. Thrive Allen County became the champion for this work in their community. They collaborated locally and statewide to use the grant funds and resources of two national technical assistance centers to provide transportation to people who had few, if any options to get to destinations they needed to go.

Loren, an 83-year-old dialysis patient, used to rely on his daughter to drive him to out-of-town treatment appointments. Busy schedules often made that impossible, and began driving himself, he said “... *after I get done with treatment, a lot of the time, I’m weak and I’ll fall.*”

Because of Thrive, Loren can return home safely and worry-free following treatment.