

# 2021 Trends Report



Photo: ButterFLi, Los Angeles, California

nadtc

## The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC)

NADTC is a national program funded by the Federal Transit Administration and administered by Easterseals Inc. and USAging, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.

### Our Mission:

To promote the availability and accessibility of transportation options that meet the needs of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers.

The mission of NADTC is to:

- **Serve** professionals in the fields of transportation, aging, disability, human services and caregiving.
- **Provide** resources and training through an information and referral hotline, website, as well as both distance and online training.
- **Empower** communities across the country to implement or improve innovative transportation programs at the local level.
- **Support** older adults, people with disabilities of all ages, and their families to help them find the best mobility options in their communities to reach their destination of choice.

For more information about NADTC and the services we provide, please visit [www.nadtc.org/](http://www.nadtc.org/)

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# Rural Volunteer Transportation Programs

## Background

Volunteer transportation programs are an important option in meeting the needs of older adults and people with disabilities. More than 800 volunteer drivers [programs](#) operate across the country. These programs are especially important for older adults and people with disabilities who are unable to use public transportation or live in rural communities where public transportation may not be available and other options are cost-prohibitive. For many older adults and people with disabilities in rural communities, volunteer transportation programs are their only option for accessing health care services, food, social activities, and other essential services.

## What are Volunteer Transportation Programs

Volunteer driver programs provide an alternative to driving or public transportation for many individuals unable to access such options. Most volunteer transportation programs predominantly serve older adults, people with disabilities and veterans. The [National Volunteer Transportation Center](#) defines volunteer transportation as a program of service that includes volunteer drivers and/or volunteer escorts in providing transportation. These



programs and services may also include volunteer vehicles as well as paid drivers and vehicles that are owned or leased by the organization providing volunteer transportation. Volunteer transportation programs vary based on their size, type of trip destination covered, level of services offered, target population, and funding. Volunteer transportation programs operate out of faith-based organizations, non-profits, human service and transit agencies.

## Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Communities

As the United States population ages, many Americans 65 and older reside in rural communities. According to 2012 to 2016 [American Community Survey \(ACS\) data](#), there were 46.2 million older people in the United States, with 10.6 million living in areas designated as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau. As this demographic grows in rural areas, the demand for transportation will increase for older adults [who give up the keys](#), they may need to rely on alternative transportation options that exist in urban settings but that might not be provided, might be less accessible, or might be available in a different form in their communities.

In rural communities, the private automobile is the primary mode of transportation for more than [90%](#) of trips. Several factors, such as the health effects of aging, can restrict or eliminate someone's ability to independently meet transportation needs with their automobile. This in turn makes it difficult for older adults in rural areas to access essential services that most likely are cross county lines that enable older adults and people with disabilities to live independently. For this reason, volunteer transportation programs serving rural areas are a viable option to meet the needs unique needs of this population.

In the Grantmakers in Aging article [Volunteer Driver Programs](#), Helen Kerschner notes that although volunteer driver programs often are created because services are not available (especially in rural America) or because they can be inexpensive to operate, a more compelling reason appears to be that they can meet the transportation needs of older adults.

Volunteer transportation programs offer time and assistance which is critical to residents living in rural areas. Older adults and people with disabilities often have to travel long distances to access health care services. Volunteer drivers have the ability to travel to another city, county and sometimes state boundaries and provide assistance such as door-to-door or door-through-door during the trip. Traditional transportation services usually cannot provide these types of assistance and services because they weren't designed to provide them.

While volunteer transportation programs provide a vital service, they are not without their challenges. Recruiting volunteer drivers is a consistent challenge as well as retaining volunteers. Rural volunteer transportation programs need volunteers to meet the demands of their community as the population of older adults and people with disabilities continues to grow in rural areas. Some examples of recruitment challenges include:

- Increased demand for transportation services
- Conflict with personal and work schedules
- Reluctance to use personal vehicle
- Lack of information about the program
- Safety concerns during COVID-19

## Local Examples

The following are examples of volunteer driver programs that have continued to meet the needs of their rural community and the strategies they use to recruit volunteer drivers.

**Volunteer driver programs have the ability to cross county lines.** Older adults and people with disabilities living in rural areas typically travel long distances to medical appointments.

*Blind Spot: Mobility and Aging in Rural America – Insights for Philanthropy, 2020*

## Drive a Senior Northwest, Faith in Action Program, Austin, Texas

[Drive a Senior Northwest](#) is a non-profit organization serving older adults in Northwest Austin, Cedar Park and Leander since 1986. Volunteers (20 and over) provide free rides to medical appointments, grocery stores and essential services to clients aged 60 years and older. All clients are mobile (using a cane or walker is fine but volunteer drivers can't transport wheelchairs). Clients arrange all their ride requests through the Northwest office. Volunteers choose rides based on the time, day and location that best fits them using Assisted Rides online scheduler. Drive a Senior Northwest has provided 5,070 rides as of 10/31/21 and has driven 71,784 miles to date in 2021. Drive a Senior Northwest receives support through fundraising and grants.

## Senior Miles (SMiles), Blount County, Tennessee

[SMiles](#) transportation program was developed by the Blount County Office on Aging. As a membership program, SMiles provide door-through-door transportation to Blount County residents over age 60, ambulatory, and in need of rides for essential trips like medical visits or picking up groceries. Individuals that cannot be accommodated (e.g., require a wheelchair) through the SMiles transportation program are referred to the East Tennessee Human Resource Agency (ETHRA), which provides services for persons over the age of 60, family caregivers, or adults with disabilities.

The annual membership fee is \$25.00 In addition to the cost of membership, the advance purchase of four \$6 round trip rides is required. Drivers must be at least 21 years of age, pass a criminal background check, hold a valid driver's license and have a safe driving record. Volunteers



receive four hours of training, which includes information on program policies and procedures as well as senior sensitivity training. SMiles received funding from the Federal Transit Administration and the Tennessee Department of Transportation. Additional funding comes from the local United Way, memberships, rider fees, annual fundraisers, and donations.

## Foothills Caring Corps, Carefree, Arizona

[Foothills Caring Corps](#) is a non-profit that provides a wide variety of services to older adults throughout the community through volunteers. The program offers services such as friendly visiting, van transportation for social outings, mobile meals and medical transportation. Foothills Caring Corps volunteers provide door-to-door transportation for older adults or “Neighbors,” the term commonly used in the program. The transportation program provides free round-trip rides for social outings and medical appointments. Medical transportation is most often provided in the volunteer’s personal vehicle and includes door-to-door service. However, Foothills Caring Corps also use their wheelchair-accessible vans to transport people with disabilities to medical appointments.

Older adults or caregivers in the community that want to register for the transportation program can sign up by phone or submit an online application. A staff member will then visit the individual’s home and provide an overview of all the services offered and what best fits their needs. Between 2019-2020, Foothills Caring Corps provided 6,040 medical trips and 4,795 trips through their van program. Foothill Caring Corps’ operational costs are fully covered through fundraising events, individual donations, corporate gifts, and grants. Foothills Caring Corps’ vans for their van transportation program are funded through the section 5310 program.

## Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

### Drive a Senior Northwest

Volunteers are recruited through their Faith in Action network, different community events, newsletters, social media and traditional media. Volunteer drivers also spread the word about volunteer opportunities. Volunteer orientations are currently held on ZOOM twice weekly on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Drive a Senior Northwest has around 350 volunteers who provide rides.

### The SMiles Program

Staffed with a full-time manager and a director who assists with marketing through events, presentations, social media and traditional media. Word of mouth is the key to the program’s success and area partners such as the Chamber of Commerce, retirement communities and physicians’ offices help spread the word. However, seniors themselves are Best Practice 3 the program’s biggest advocates. Seniors spread the word about SMiles at doctor’s offices and other places they frequent. Volunteers are also great ambassadors of the SMiles program. SMiles has 130 volunteers.

### Foothills Caring Corps

In addition, Foothills Caring Corps have set up displays and booths at many local events with information to sign up potential volunteers. The organization utilizes local papers, social media and magazines to advertise. However, they have discovered that word of mouth in small communities is the most successful recruitment method. Foothills Caring Corps holds a general

volunteer orientation every second Thursday of the month to give an overview of the program, as well as policies and procedures. Foothills Caring Corps has 1,724 Registered Volunteers and 512 Active Volunteers.

## Summary

Rural volunteer transportation programs are filling gaps when there are limited options available for older adults and people with disabilities to stay connected to essential services and other activities. Volunteer drivers are not only getting people to where they need to go, but they also provide social interaction to prevent social isolation. Healthcare, employment, community organizations, and local agencies are encouraged to connect with volunteer transportation programs as these programs are a viable transportation option for older adults and people with disabilities to access their community.

## References

Blind Spot: Mobility and Aging in Rural America, Insights for Philanthropy, Age Friendly Arizona, Elliott Sparkman Walker, Strategic Communications & Planning. August 2020

[http://www.agefriendlyaz.org/Portals/4/Blind-Spot-MAG-Rural-Mobility-report-08022020-FINAL\\_1.pdf](http://www.agefriendlyaz.org/Portals/4/Blind-Spot-MAG-Rural-Mobility-report-08022020-FINAL_1.pdf)

Promising Practices for Increasing Access to Transportation in Rural Communities

[https://www.norc.org/PDFs/Walsh%20Center/Rural%20Evaluation%20Briefs/Rural%20Evaluation%20Brief\\_April2018.pdf](https://www.norc.org/PDFs/Walsh%20Center/Rural%20Evaluation%20Briefs/Rural%20Evaluation%20Brief_April2018.pdf)

The Older Population in Rural America: 2012-2016

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/acs/acs-41.pdf>

The National Volunteer Transportation Center

<https://ctaa.org/about-nvtc/>

Volunteer Driver Programs

<https://www.giaging.org/issues/volunteer-driver-programs/>



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