

Project Amistad

Project Amistad is a not-for-profit human services agency based in El Paso, Texas, that is a pioneer in paratransit services for older adults and people with disabilities. Amistad has over 45 years of experience with the challenges of the targeted demographic, performing over 17,000 non-emergency medical trips in 2023 alone.

Project Goal:

The project fielded surveys and focus groups to understand the needs of older adults and people with disabilities, then used that data to create a program offering transportation to medical and mental health appointments, as well as social services, for residents of a highly remote area. This affordable and accessible program will support existing, but limited, transportation services.

Population Served:

Older adults and people with disabilities, including physical and cognitive or intellectual disabilities, who have incomes at or below the Federal Poverty Level guidelines.

Transportation Barriers:

- Low population density and large coverage area (Five counties covering 20,686 square miles with an average population density of 1.1.)
- Long distances to health care and basic necessities; extreme weather in summer and winter, including dust storms; rough and inaccessible terrain; remote and potentially unsafe areas; poor infrastructure.
- Financial distress affects the ability to pay for transportation; the general population in these areas is below the median income guidelines.
- No public transportation alternatives or paid services such as Uber.
- The only shared ride service is unreliable and costly; community members rely on family or neighbors to take them to medical appointments.
- Businesses may close during their normal hours of operation; riders may travel yet be unable to complete errands.
- Challenges retaining drivers; the local Area Agency on Aging pays for 45-50 trips monthly that are often two to four hours long.

Community Needs:

- In nearby areas where Amistad has used 5310 funding for city and rural transit, the majority of the trips are 60 percent for social reasons and 40 percent medical. This ratio is important to note, as the social component is critical for riders to maintain a healthy mental state.
- Amistad continues to receive calls and applications from rural older adults and people with disabilities for its previously established 5310 program, and the need for rural transportation is even greater in the counties this project serves.
- In focus groups, many people said they were forgotten.

Community Engagement Efforts:

To learn of transportation needs, Project Amistad distributed surveys throughout the five counties and collected 173 responses, hosted four focus groups with transportation recipients

that attracted 40 participants and conducted one-on-one outreach to build trust within rural communities.

Multi-sector Collaborative Partnerships:

Amistad is the lead agency of the West Texas El Paso Regional Transportation Coordinating Committee (WTEP), which focuses on improving the availability, quality and efficiency of transportation services for populations with limited mobility options. Members include the City of El Paso's public transportation provider, an area transportation services committee, a community action committee, City of Socorro, regional transit district, family services organization, local council of governments, center for independent living, workforce solutions organization, local National Program for All-Inclusive Care of the Elderly (PACE) program, NEMT and managed transportation services provider, plus an education service center. This collaboration has improved the flow of services in the communities.

The committee is implementing the 2022-2026 WTEP Regional Health and Human Services Transportation Coordination Plan, a Central Texas Council of Governments planning report that provides strategies for meeting the public's transportation needs and prioritizes transportation services for funding and implementation.

During the grant project, Amistad also created a subcommittee through WTEP for Rural Area Community Partners and engaged five more partners.

Funding and Sustainability:

To strengthen available resources for vulnerable populations, WTEP partners review potential projects addressing community transportation needs. For example, the WTEP Committee reviews 5310 fund applications to ensure that proposals align with the current Regional Transportation Coordination Plan before they are submitted, to support project completion.

As a nonprofit, Amistad prioritizes sustainability. Funding efforts include submitting for Section 5310 Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities through Texas Department of Transportation and applying for the 5-Year Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan.

Amistad also fundraises for its Client Health and Welfare Fund, which assists clients who otherwise would not qualify for funding in other programs and funds morale activities for the transportation and social services employees who provide front-line services.

Outcomes:

Next steps include the following:

- Work with rural community partners to apply for transportation funding
- Advocate for better infrastructure changes in the area
- Continue to engage partners and community members through outreach within other programs such as the Aging, Disability & Transportation Resource Center (ADTRC) and 5-Year Regional Plan outreach.

Learnings:

- Trust is extremely important; encouraging community members to open up takes time and consistency.
- Partnering with community organizations like a local food pantry, crisis center or library and even initiating relationships with local businesses can build trust with community members.
- When traveling into remote areas, plan during good weather and rent a capable vehicle.
- Travel in teams for support.

- In areas with limited internet access, paper surveys are helpful in gaining engagement, as are radio and TV announcements.