

## Aroostook Area Agency on Aging

The Aroostook Agency on Aging, located in Presque Isle, Maine, in partnership with the Aroostook County Health Improvement Partnership (ACHIP) transportation working group and other regional stakeholders, worked to better understand and address the unmet transportation needs that affect older adults and people with disabilities across the county.

### Project Goal:

Thanks to previous research, ACHIP knew that a lack of reliable transportation for older adults and individuals with disabilities was the primary barrier to accessing vital services. The project was intended to delve deeper into the transportation-related needs and perspectives of its target populations, then develop implementation plans in response. ACHIP expected the program to raise the visibility of older adults and those with disabilities and their unique transportation challenges, incorporating their voices into the planning process and future initiatives.

### Population Served:

- Population: 67,351
- 26% of Aroostook County residents are aged 65+.
- 21% live with a disability.
- Low income: Households with less than 80% of the local median income for the county.

### Transportation Barriers:

- County of 6,671 square miles, larger than Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.
- Known for natural resources and agricultural economy, long distances and harsh winters.
- Nonprofit Aroostook Regional Transportation System (ARTS) is the only organized group other than within the government that does transportation work.
- Pervasive lack of ride-sharing opportunities, taxis or other forms of travel.

### Community Needs:

- ACHIP's original lived experience research in 2023, which consisted of 800 survey respondents and 60 qualitative interviews, showed major transportation barriers, especially to medical care. Yet unanswered questions and unmet needs remained.
- 35% of people who were unable to get needed medical care reported transportation as the barrier and the same percentage found it somewhat or very difficult to get alternative transport, with many canceling or never scheduling appointments. For individuals over 65, 29% were unable to drive and 38% did not own a car.
- ARTS provides door-to-door public transportation with low-cost fares for older adults, individuals with disabilities and people with lower levels of income. The service offers demand-response, plus weekly fixed routes. The ARTS bus is often over capacity on the return trip, resulting in an additional bus being used. Ridership is increasing, but funding limits service.
- Growing urgency to address the gaps in mobility services, coupled with dynamic new leadership at ARTS, set the stage for comprehensive planning.

### Community Engagement Efforts:

- Received 200 completed surveys promoted to riders and eligible non-riders within the target populations, with paper surveys being highly successful.

- Planned focus groups at three sites, offering hybrid participation for those in remote areas and transportation to the in-person event; however, only one person attended.
- Conducted 19 follow-up interviews and held one community meeting with 39 attendees.
- Aroostook made a commitment to data-driven decision-making. The team developed a qualitative interview guide to complement survey findings with deeper, narrative-driven perspectives.

### **Multi-sector Collaborative Partnerships:**

Several partnerships are working to advance transportation within the area.

- The ACHIP transportation working group consists of five partners, including the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, two hospitals, ARTS and Aroostook Emergency Management Services.
- The Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians is a tribal nation in Aroostook County that experiences similar transportation-related challenges around health services. Their guidance helped envision inclusive transportation planning for older adults and people with disabilities.
- New partnerships between Aroostook Agency on Aging and ARTS involve 1) coordinating medical appointment scheduling and bus transportation to decrease appointment no-shows and 2) developing a volunteer driver network to support adult day services and health appointments such as dialysis and cancer treatment.
- Lifelong Maine's Community Connector Pilot Project, of which the Aroostook Agency on Aging is a partner, is planning a meeting with county agencies, businesses, civic organizations and community residents to explore partnerships to strengthen resources.
- The Aroostook Agency on Aging made plans to attend an upcoming regional government summit to identify additional partners and share findings from the grant.

### **Funding and Sustainability:**

More than \$50,000 is committed to ACHIP's ongoing work by the Maine Health Access Foundation and the Point 32 Foundation. This funding will enable the project team to identify and apply for funding to support transportation projects that address the needs surfaced in the lived experience research.

ARTS is actively utilizing 5310 funds and its commitment to the ACHIP planning process will keep the momentum going and make the most of available funds.

### **Outcomes:**

- The outreach surfaced that challenges include out-of-county transportation, weekend and after-hours transportation, awareness of public transit, weather conditions and night driving.
- Next steps in the planning process include a county-wide summit to connect and reconnect, as well as form collaborations.
- Aroostook Agency on Aging is tracking a project that may offer future overlap with needs identified through the planning process. A non-emergency medical transportation project in partnership with ARTS and AR Gould Hospital launched in April 2025. Hospital scheduling staff will assist patients in coordinating their medical appointments to align with the bus schedule. The project's second year will expand service to new rural areas by using existing ARTS routes more effectively.
- Aroostook is participating in a temporary pilot project with ARTS to provide volunteer transportation for participants of the Adult Day Service (ADS) program. The partners are building the infrastructure for this project, to be prepared when future funding is available to implement the initiative.

## Learnings:

Response to paper surveys at congregate meal sites, Meals on Wheels clients and mailings to a randomized sample of agency clients exceeded expectations.

When launching the project that coordinated bus rides with scheduling of non-emergency medical services, the service was not used right away. Plan for it to take some time for new appointments to be scheduled.

While the survey generated a higher-than-anticipated response rate, the results did not fully capture the challenges and needs that are known to exist in Aroostook County. As a result, focus was shifted to conducting in-depth telephone interviews with individuals who indicated on the survey a willingness to engage in further discussion. The interview guide was developed in part from the survey questions and encouraged participants to share more deeply about their transportation barriers and the resulting impacts, such as canceled medical appointments, loss of independence, and increased social isolation. Participants' use of and perceptions regarding public transportation in the County was also explored. In addition, interviewees were invited to provide suggestions for addressing transportation challenges and improving services in the region.

This approach revealed valuable insights into the broader impacts of transportation barriers, particularly related to healthcare access both within the County and to out-of-County providers—an issue identified as a critical and urgent need. Another key finding was the limited awareness and understanding among participants of the services offered by the Aroostook Regional Transportation System (ARTS). Beyond transportation, several interviewees also shared challenges related to their living environments, such as housing that lacks wheelchair accessibility or other accommodations necessary for individuals with mobility limitations.

Another important takeaway learned was the need to establish and reinforce clear partner expectations from the outset. Although application for the grant was made as a partnership initiative, the partnership cohort often lacked a clear sense of ownership for the project. As a result, engaging and sustaining the commitment of our partners proved to be a challenge. Rather than creating a formal Memorandum of Understanding specific to this project, Aroostook AAA relied on the prevailing ACHIP MOU that had been signed by all of the working group organizations. A project-specific MOU would have been helpful to secure the commitment promised in the Letters of Support that accompanied this grant application. Such an agreement would clarify the representatives designated by each partner organization—ideally individuals with decision-making authority—and outline roles, responsibilities, and expectations to ensure more consistent and active engagement.

Convening the group for “live” meetings was especially challenging, given the other commitments of partner representatives. As a result, the project became largely asynchronous in nature, which made sustained momentum difficult.

Other lessons learned center around the survey process. In hindsight, it would have been valuable to consult with others who have conducted similar work and developed comparable surveys to strengthen the design and ensure the questions elicited the information we were seeking. Additionally, when distributing surveys by mail, targeting specific ZIP codes could have yielded more meaningful responses, particularly from rural communities in Aroostook County. Instead, surveys were sent to a random selection of residents across the County, which included larger hub communities, potentially overshadowing insights from more remote areas where transportation challenges are often most significant.