

## Benzie Transportation Authority

A public transit agency based in Beulah, Michigan, the [Benzie Transportation Authority](#) planned to expand its Health Rides to improve non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) and community access. This project assists people with disabilities and older adults who experience a greater burden accessing health care due to the need to travel long distances and transportation costs.

### Project Goal:

The Benzie Transportation Authority sought to develop a plan for innovative service delivery that integrates the scheduling of health and wellness appointments with the scheduling and management of public transportation, yielding greater access to NEMT.

### Population Served:

- 17,970 people across 860 square miles, of which 63% is water; the population density is less than 50 persons per square mile.
- Located on the shores of Lake Michigan, Beulah offers vast farmland, hilly terrain and a temperate climate that attracts “snowbirds” and retirees.
- 27% of the population is over age of 65; over 18% of the total population are persons with disabilities.
- The county is “medically underserved” due to its lack of health care providers and aging population.
- Low income: Households that fall below both 150% of the Federal Poverty Line and asset limited, income constrained, employed (ALICE) households.

### Transportation Barriers:

- Residents’ trips to medical appointments are usually 30-50 miles one way.
- No taxis or private transportation services exist in the area.
- At the start of the planning project, the Health Rides program only ran three days a week, with no rides on Saturdays and Sundays. These gaps caused less access to work, worship and care.
- Residents’ medical appointment times often did not coincide with the limited bus schedules, meaning passengers endured long waits before and after appointments.

### Community Needs:

While the Health Rides program had been providing curb-to-curb service, offering regional NEMT to neighboring counties with stronger health systems, the three-day-a-week schedule led to 20-25 percent trip denials, and community members often missed appointments for preventative care as well as urgent care like dialysis. Without transportation for scheduled medical care, residents were taking an ambulance to the emergency room, which leads to more costs. Residents needed more options for NEMT.

### Community Engagement Efforts:

The Benzie Transportation Authority fielded a survey to learn more about the locals’ needs, primarily targeting adults age 65+. Partners like Benzie Seniors Resources, which offers community meals and home-delivered meals, helped distribute the surveys; ultimately, 450 surveys were returned. In addition, four focus groups were held, but turnout was low, with the best feedback coming from one-on-one stakeholder interviews. Opportunities to give feedback

were also publicized to community members through postcards delivered via Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM), a local radio interview and newspaper article, social media and digital media placement, flyers and surveys distributed throughout the county and on buses, plus in-person meetings at community organizations. Feedback came from 60 percent older adults, 25 percent people with disabilities and 15 percent caregivers/providers.

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

The Benzie Transportation Authority formed a 10-member advisory committee with representation from health care professionals, older adults and people with disabilities.

The authority is working to coordinate travel with neighboring counties, especially around veterans' care. Additional community organizations are also looking to transportation as a need. The most recent Coordinated Public Transit - Human Services Transportation Plan, completed in April 2024 to cover three counties, supports the effort to increase transportation accessibility and equity for the target populations. Benzie Senior Resources identified "finding ways to keep pace with the growing need for life-sustaining services" as a priority in its most recent 5-Year Strategic Plan.

### **Funding and Sustainability:**

The Benzie Transportation Authority receives funding from a local millage, state formula funds and federal operating assistance, plus a small amount of Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) and mobility management funding. The authority signed a contract with the Michigan Transportation Connection to pursue matching funds through the New Freedom program.

For the future, the authority is working to coordinate travel with neighboring counties, especially around veterans' care. The expanded program also needs more wheelchair-accessible vans and SUVs, which 5310 Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grants could help acquire. The Benzie Transportation Authority is leveraging relationships with local health care systems, to eventually enable third-party scheduling software so that rides can be set at the same time that medical appointments are scheduled.

### **Outcomes:**

In the fall of 2025, the Benzie Transportation Authority will expand its Health Rides to five days a week, including Saturday until 8 p.m. Sunday service will launch in January 2026. October 2027 will see a transition to Rides to Wellness, introducing same-day scheduling for rides and expanded trip types.

Over this time period, the authority will add three full-time drivers and one half-time dispatcher, plus purchase three all-wheel-drive minivans/SUVs and one wheelchair-accessible van. It will track ridership via the Ecolane platform and reduce trip denials to under 10 percent.

### **Learnings:**

- Awareness builds trust and engagement, as well as improved outcomes.
- Partnerships with health care providers enhance engagement, coordination and funding.
- Engaging stakeholders early is key; use mixed outreach, such as digital, print and in-person methods.
- Leverage FTA resources for rural transportation planning and funding.