

Cortland County Planning Department

Cortland County oversees the public transit agency and Title VI program in Cortland, New York. The county sought to increase collaboration among agencies, create consistent public information on transit options and strategically plan future investments and grant funding to increase availability of transportation for older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Project Goal:

Update Cortland County's coordinated transportation plan by assessing the current needs of the target population, identifying current transportation barriers and gaps of service, evaluating underutilized resources and developing objectives for improvement.

Population Served:

- Older adults, individuals with disabilities, their caregivers and those with accessible needs in underserved and marginalized areas of Cortland County.
- 45,945 residents across 502 square miles.
- 17% of the county's population is 65 and older.
- According to the 2021 American Community Survey, 6,428 people had at least one disability.
- As of 2023, the poverty rate is 12.8% overall and 8.6% for adults 65 and older. The project serves individuals whose family income is at or below 100% of the poverty line.

Transportation Barriers:

- People with disabilities have the desire to utilize Cortland Transit but have concerns with accessibility, safety, limited hours of operation and lack of service area coverage. The operator struggles to find drivers and service can be inconsistent and unreliable.
- There are almost no taxi companies and transportation network companies.
- Transportation is unaffordable.
- Lack of accessible transportation from the medical center can delay patient discharges or require expensive transportation, plus lack of Medicaid-approved transportation providers.
- Few intercity bus services connect Cortland with larger cities in the region.
- Residents on the outskirts of town faced the biggest barriers.
- Residents are not aware of the public transportation system.

Community Needs:

- At the time of the grant application in June 2024, Cortland County's public transportation system, Cortland Transit, serviced approximately 32% of the county, Monday-Friday from 6am-6pm, with deviated fixed routes, flex routes and Dial-A-Ride. When the flex routes were not in service, 16% of the county had service. Cortland County now has a new transit provider, Centro, and new data is in the process of being collected.
- Half-fare eligibility applies to adults' 65+, individuals with disabilities and youth under 18. In 2023, the system had 10,107 half-fare passenger trips and sold approximately 285 half-fare passes, demonstrating transportation needs for the target population.
- Cortland County Office for Aging owns an accessible vehicle to provide transportation from rural senior centers to the Age Well Center in the City of Cortland for residents 60 years and older. However, transportation is needed to medical appointments and to meet other essential needs; 30% of survey respondents missed trips, including medical.

Community Engagement Efforts:

Cortland County worked closely with its partners to engage community members in the target population, ultimately gathering 237 surveys, conducting five stakeholder interviews, hosting four community conversations and attending seven community outreach events. A final public community summit presented outcomes and invited any final input for the plan.

Multi-sector Collaborative Partnerships:

A Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) of 15 key stakeholders and agencies guided the outreach, including county legislature and workforce development board, institutions of higher education and a faith-based organization, as well as agencies supporting health, social services and local transportation organizations.

The project team lead met with various TAC members to learn about their vehicles and programs. In addition, the project team partnered with the county's grant administrator and mental health director to stay aware of possible funding opportunities.

Funding and Sustainability:

Cortland County has received FTA Section 5311 funds through the New York State Department of Transportation, including operations, capital and mobility management funding since 1993. The county recently received over \$5 million for operating, mobility management and capital improvements, enabling additional mobility staff to assist with education and outreach, specifically in travel training.

The project team lead applied for Opioid Settlement Funding and an ARC grant to help provide transportation assistance to eligible individuals, plus explored a grant through Excellus BCBS in partnership with the county health department. The proposed funding would support transportation assistance for medical appointments, grocery shopping, wellness visits and pharmacy access. Future funding may be available to support a pilot transportation assistance program under mobility management.

Outcomes:

The planning process yielded these strategies, priorities and solutions:

- Centralize access to mobility information: Waytogocortland.com will be rebranded as the hub of all transportation information, to include trails in the future.
- Expand medical and essential rides: Collaboration with partners around town will build a program for medical transit.
- Enhance first mile and last mile services: Explore employer shuttles, pilots to rural hamlets, bike share or e-bike lending in rural villages and leverage trails and waterways.
- Strengthen public transit usability through public education: Surface residents' needs and provide assistance through Weekly "Mobility Meetups."
- Recruit and retain volunteer drivers: Identify volunteer drivers to help with medical trips, including supporting The Community Action Program of Cortland County (CAPCO) with its underutilized volunteer drivers program that recently received 5310 funding.
- Improve walkability, bikeability and accessibility: Conduct a sidewalk audit as a next step.

Learnings:

- Meet people where they are, especially for those who have transportation challenges. Examples include discussing transportation challenges in community spaces that host various meetings for older adults, including satellite sites on the outskirts of town; sending surveys with pre-stamped envelopes to all previous riders of certain transportation programs; and texting all WIC and Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program participants.

- Connect with partners around funding opportunities, including 5310 and 5311 grants.
- Cortland County engaged partners and community members who are not typically thinking of transportation as part of their planning process to address outcomes. For example, the county worked with the health department to address transportation as a significant upstream driver. Programs that coordinate with social services provided options for individuals who require assistance. Maintaining open channels for public feedback provided the ability to continuously monitor and improve services and experiences.
- Include the county's grant administrator in meetings with TAC partners, to raise awareness of partner agencies' programs and to assist in exploring grants around sustainable transportation services.
- Take advantage of changes in transportation services—such as a new transit company with new buses—to educate residents on how to use the transit system.