

Franklin Regional Council of Governments

Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) is a regional service organization serving the 26 municipalities of Franklin County, Massachusetts.

Project Goal:

FRCOG is seeking to expand a micro-transit program serving the “Hilltowns” in rural Franklin County, more than doubling service from 11 to 26 towns. The Access Program uses an app-based booking system, like Uber/Lyft, that allows the general public to book rides on small buses. Older adults and people with disabilities receive priority seating on these vehicles and remaining empty seats are filled by the general public using the app.

The Access Program has been transformational in the rural zones where it has been operating for four years. Expanding the service area to 15 additional towns will be highly impactful, as these towns have minimal to no public transportation. The planning project seeks to determine the needs and steps to expand the Access Program to service additional towns and satisfy unmet transportation needs.

Population Served:

- Rural: 26 towns, with an average town population of 1,700
- Focus on older adults with physical disabilities, dementia, isolation and other needs.

Transportation Barriers:

Recent research—for FRCOG's Regional Transportation Plan, a needs assessment for a local nonprofit and an “Age- and Dementia-Friendly Regional Action Plan” by FRCOG and its partner LifePath—indicates that expanded public transportation options are strongly desired and needed, particularly for older adults and low-income residents in the rural region, but face these barriers:

- High transportation costs (cited by 78% of residents in the region) that lead residents to forego medical care.
- Insufficient transportation services.
- Lack of information about existing services.
- Lack of assistance to participate in transportation services.

Community Needs:

Outreach identified the need for transportation to medical appointments outside of the county and weekend rides, as well as better understanding of transportation options. Residents feared change, such as losing familiar drivers or dependability with a new service. Other concerns were finding funding for rides across Regional Transportation Authority borders and funding availability at the municipal level.

Community Engagement Efforts:

The project assessed needs in the 15 new towns, engaging older adults through the project partners, LifePath and the Mass in Motion Age & Dementia Friendly Project. The project partners facilitated focus groups and spread the word about completing the transit needs survey using their existing connections to town Councils on Aging and older adults.

Eight focus groups attracted 55 attendees; almost all were older adults and people with disabilities, with 40 percent being caregivers. The survey received 100 responses. It was distributed online and by paper, shared via email list serves, newsletters, town public health nurses, Meals on Wheels deliveries, senior centers, councils on aging activities and social media. Project partners placed paper copies of the survey with self-addressed stamped envelopes in Meals on Wheels deliveries and at a housing community. FRCOG planned to analyze the survey results as well as ridership data for the existing FRTA Access Program to determine patterns or needs based on current use.

Multi-sector Collaborative Partnerships:

- Two existing groups provided input on the project: Franklin Regional Transportation Planning Organization (FCTPO) and Franklin Regional Transit Authority Transportation Advisory Committee (FRTA TAC).
- FRCOG and the FRTA regularly partner to conduct surveys of transit ridership (fixed routes, paratransit and demand response), which indicate desire for weekend transit services. The FRTA began a pilot using the Access Program to better understand where and when people needed rides on the weekend. The pilot data led to an established fixed route service.
- Outreach partner LifePath, a social service agency to enable older adults and people with disabilities to live in their homes, recently completed an Area Plan on Aging needs assessment that identified transportation as a major unmet need among older adults in Franklin County.
- Outreach partner Mass-in-Motion Franklin County is working with towns on municipal age- and dementia-friendly planning and transportation was identified as an issue that affects the health and well-being of older adults and the community as a whole.

Funding and Sustainability:

- The FRTA is fortunate to receive dependable federal, state and local funding to operate its services, including federal transportation funds 5311 and 5310. The FRTA also receives state funding via regular State Contract Assistance as well as competitive grants. Local assessments provide a small portion of revenue. While this funding is dependable, it is only enough to provide very limited fixed route services to nine of its 41 communities, limited demand response and micro-transit to only several zones within Franklin County.
- The FRTA recently received two state-funded innovation grants, to provide a commuter bus for increased interregional connections and to facilitate transfers between systems.
- FRTA applied to the Massachusetts Clean Energy Commission to understand how to transition its fleet to electric vehicles.

Outcomes:

- Two towns were identified as potential candidates for Access service expansion. Finalizing cost data and “selling” the Access Program to town administrators and town meeting voters are next steps.
- MassDOT just released a grant opportunity for microtransit expansion. FRCOG and FRTA will be applying for this grant to expand the Access Program for these two towns.
- Based on outreach findings, FRTA will address riders’ fear of change with “Meet your driver” and “Local leader uses the Access Program” promotional messages and travel trainings in partnership with area senior centers and councils on aging.

Learnings:

- New cross-collaborative partnerships with trusted community sources are invaluable: Regional public health nurses carried paper surveys and envelopes with them on visits;

Meals on Wheels included surveys and self-addressed stamped envelopes in lunches; senior centers and councils on aging will assist with travel training.

- Using online and paper surveys is important. Code hard copy surveys before distribution.
- On surveys, ask if people are caregivers.