

## Living Independently for Today & Tomorrow

[Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow \(LIFTT\)](#) is center for independent living that provides services for older adults and people with disabilities in 18 counties in South-central and Eastern Montana. LIFTT offers a wide range of services—including personal care assistance and community health work—to support independence, self-confidence, knowledge, skills and access to community resources.

### **Project Goal:**

Because LIFTT's service area is nearly 100% rural it has a significant need for quality, reliable, transportation services that meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility standards. LIFTT received a 5130 grant to purchase two ADA-accessible vans. The project sought to add ADA-accessible transportation to the core services that LIFTT's independent living specialists provide, significantly enhancing the quality of life for older adults and people with disabilities.

### **Population Served:**

- Older adults and people with disabilities in 18 rural counties who are traveling to meet medical needs or to government agencies.
- People who are at or below the 2024 Federal Poverty Level for Montana, as well as any older adults or people with disabilities who face obstacles traveling.

### **Transportation Barriers:**

- Lack of quality, reliable, accessible transportation services in a highly rural area.
- A chronic shortage of doctors and mental health providers that forces many residents to travel long distances for medical care.
- Inability to afford travel for treatment.

### **Community Needs:**

The transportation barriers noted above lead to a lack of effective health care access, which can significantly impact the ability of older adults and people with disabilities to live independently.

In addition, LIFTT outreach identified these pressing challenges: Limited mobility for older adults, limited access to essential services such as medical appointments and grocery shopping, plus Glendive residents' difficulties in obtaining necessities. Desired service improvements include an accessible transit system that focuses on essential destinations.

### **Community Engagement Efforts:**

LIFTT implemented a comprehensive planning process, collecting 521 transportation needs surveys—221 over goal, with strong representation from older adults and people with disabilities. Seven focus groups (remote and in-person) engaged riders, potential riders and key stakeholders.

Direct outreach, events and partnerships were successful in promoting the survey and focus groups. Examples include attending an ADA Resource Fair, placing flyers in a partner's Meals on Wheels delivery bags and visiting county health department staff to introduce LIFTT's programs.

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

LIFTT's ADA Accessible Rural Transportation Program Advisory Committee members were representative, including individuals with disabilities, older adults, local agency representatives and transit providers, as well as members with expertise in health care, transit planning and disability advocacy. The team engaged with tribal governments, senior centers, local businesses, health care providers and transit stakeholders across multiple counties to gather data, advocate for accessible transportation and identify LIFTT as a key player in rural transit solutions, plus create new referral pipelines for LIFTT rides.

LIFTT also strengthened relationships with public health offices, chambers of commerce, banks and educational institutions, opening doors for future co-hosted events, data sharing and referrals. Dawson County Transit is a crucial partner in relation to the original capital funding for LIFTT's accessible vehicles and future operational coordination.

## **Funding and Sustainability:**

Through targeted outreach to peer agencies, LIFTT gathered examples of startup funding models and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that could inform its own long-term planning. This peer-to-peer learning helped LIFTT to diversify funding sources and build essential partnerships.

LIFTT established communication with Dawson Urban Transit & Stillwater County Transit for potential MOUs to prevent service duplication and ensure funding collaboration under the 5311 program. LIFTT continued to integrate its ADA Accessible Rural Transportation Program with its internal programs to share staff and resources, increasing efficiency and sustainability across multiple funding streams.

Attending the Montana Transit Association spring conference allowed LIFTT to gain knowledge of funding opportunities and compliance, as well as benefit from key networking opportunities.

## **Outcomes:**

- LIFTT's Comprehensive Transportation Plan will integrate insights from the focus group data, policy drafts, outreach reports and infrastructure planning discussions. This living document will serve as a strategic roadmap, reflecting the community-driven nature of the planning process and the operational steps ahead.
- A LIFTT consultant created a multimedia marketing campaign emphasizing the difference between LIFTT and private ride services such as Lyft. A "Living Well in Montana" segment on community TV showcased the transportation planning work supported by NADTC.
- Next steps include securing a location and building a transportation facility, coordinating with local transit providers, launching pilot routes with ADA-accessible vans and securing sustainable funding.

## **Learnings:**

- Partners helped to achieve an outstanding survey completion—74 percent over goal. Nurses, caregivers, hospitals and managers of assisted living and retirement homes valued and shared the survey, enabling LIFTT to collect input that will improve transportation and quality of life for residents.
- Connecting with a wide range of partners provides invaluable information. Transportation sector reps provide insights into rural mobility challenges and program structuring. Outreach to town councils, clerks and elected officials can surface grassroots-level transportation needs. School counselors, adult protective services staff and health educators can identify vulnerable populations and discussed how transportation access intersects with health, safety and social participation.

- Participating in statewide transit planning discussions elevated LIFTT's perspective in broader policy decisions. Attendance at a statewide conference provided key insight on funding opportunities and offered networking opens doors for rural transit programs.