

Rural Community Innovations:

Key Learnings From NADTC Transportation Planning Grants

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National Aging and Disability Transportation Center



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Introduction

The NADTC has a strong history in investing in community solutions focused on increasing accessible transportation options as the critical link to medical appointments, healthy food, social activities, employment and other vital community services for older adults and people with disabilities. To enhance rural transportation and alleviate barriers, the NADTC has awarded community grants that target areas with high need and limited resources.

Selected projects strengthen connections between transit and human services transportation programs. Additionally, these projects identify strategies for better utilization of Section 5310 and other Federal, state and local funding opportunities to improve the accessibility of transportation.

To assist professionals across a variety of transportation-adjacent organizations with developing their own accessible transportation projects in rural areas, *Rural Community Innovations: Key Learnings from NADTC Transportation Planning Grants* highlights the [2024 NADTC Rural Community Innovations Grants](#) and key lessons learned.

About the 2024 NADTC Rural Community Innovations Transportation Planning Grants

The [2024 NADTC Rural Community Innovations Transportation Planning Grant](#) program awarded funds to 12 rural communities to support planning efforts to expand accessible transportation. The selected organizations received grants of up to \$35,000 to engage in planning activities that identified transportation barriers, addressed current and future needs, established multisector partnerships and actively involved older adults and people with disabilities. At the end of the 10-month funding period, 11 of the 12 grantees developed a written plan to guide the implementation of strategies co-developed by the community to increase the availability of accessible transportation services in their rural community.

Key Learnings

The 2024 NADTC grantees were successful in conducting community outreach, understanding the transit needs of older adults and people with disabilities in their rural service areas, as well as collaborating with local partners to plan needed improvements to rural transportation systems. These efforts lay the groundwork for transportation services that increase access to much-needed health care and socialization opportunities for older adults and people with disabilities—and ultimately increase quality of life for these valued community members.

NADTC grantees sought to address many shared transportation barriers, including long distances to medical centers, grocery stores and job sites; limited bus service and few or no additional transportation options; unaffordable ride costs; and transportation funding that did not enable services to cross county lines, in addition to limited staff and funding resources.

Most NADTC grantees looked for ways to expand existing transportation services in the future, like planning for new or newly configured routes and schedules, buying needed vehicles and filling service and resource gaps. Additionally, many grantees planned public education initiatives to address findings that residents were not aware of their community's transportation options.

Key learnings, supported by examples from NADTC grantee projects and advice from NADTC grantees, include the following:

- Build trust with community partners, including forming a broad and representative advisory committee for community inroads.
- Maximize outreach to learn riders' needs by meeting people where they are, leveraging surveys and community conversations, casting a wide net for data and using a low-tech approach.
- Promote transportation programs effectively, including by inviting potential riders to have fun.
- Form partnerships, network and reach out to policymakers.
- Plan for sustainability by keeping stakeholders engaged, elevating persuasive data and finding funding sources.

Together, these learnings and best practices highlight innovations and provide direction to guide rural communities across America in increasing access to transportation that vastly improves quality of life for older adults and people with disabilities.

NADTC 2024 Rural Community Innovations Transportation Planning Grantees

Each of the 2024 NADTC Rural Community Innovations grantees offers a successful model for transportation planning that addresses barriers and meets the needs of older adults and people with disabilities in rural areas. The summaries below offer insights into each project's specific goals and outcomes, with [detailed information on the NADTC website](#).

- 1) **Aroostook Area Agency on Aging** – Located in Presque Isle, ME, Aroostook Area Agency on Aging aspired to delve deeper into transportation-related needs and connect its target populations with vital services, despite long travel distances and challenging winter conditions. Outcomes of the planning process included gathering feedback on a new collaborative project to provide non-emergency medical transportation and setting as next steps a county-wide summit to form collaborations.
- 2) **Benzie Transportation Authority** – Located in Beulah, MI, Benzie Transportation Authority planned to improve non-emergency medical transportation and community access. The authority has expanded its Health Rides to five days a week and extended Saturday hours, with Sunday service, same-day scheduling for rides and expanded trip types expected by 2027. Additional drivers, dispatch services and four new vehicles are planned to support this expansion.
- 3) **Cortland County Planning Department** – Located in Cortland, NY, the Cortland County Planning Department sought to assess the target audience's current needs and identify underutilized resources and solutions for increasing access to transportation. Cortland plans to centralize access to mobility information and provide public education; expand medical and essential rides; identify volunteer drivers; enhance first-mile and last-mile services; and improve accessibility, walkability and bikeability.
- 4) **Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG)** – Located in Greenfield, MA, FRCOG developed a plan to identify unmet transportation needs and determine the steps to expand its Access micro transit system. FRCOG identified two towns as potential candidates for Access service expansion and proceeded to finalize cost data and get buy-in from town stakeholders. Based on outreach findings, FRTA will promote the new program and offer travel trainings to older adults.
- 5) **Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow (LIFTT)** – Located in Billings and Glendive, MT, LIFTT developed a plan to increase access to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible transportation, enabling access to education, health care, employment and community across 18 rural counties. LIFTT is integrating planning data into a strategic roadmap, creating a multimedia marketing campaign for its services, planning a new transportation facility, coordinating with local transit providers, launching pilot routes with ADA-accessible vans and securing funding.
- 6) **Penquis C.A.P, Inc.** – Located in Bangor, ME, Penquis C.A.P, Inc., developed a transportation plan that aims to reduce transportation barriers so that members of the target population can be healthy, safe and connected to their community. Penquis used the input received from its

outreach efforts during the planning grant to hire four more drivers, increase service to the region and educate community members on using available transportation options.

- 7) **Project Amistad** – Located in El Paso, TX, Project Amistad collaborated with the regional transportation planning committee to improve transportation services, especially access to medical appointments and social trips to improve mental health, for older adults and people with disabilities across a remote area. Extensive outreach led to community trust-building and collaboration. Amistad's next steps include applying for transportation funding, advocating for local infrastructure changes and continuing to engage partners and community members.
- 8) **Snohomish County Transportation Coalition (Snotrac)** – Located in Everett, WA, Snotrac identified solutions to increase transportation access for members of the target population in remote communities with limited public transit options. Snotrac outreach yielded extensive recommendations, from improving city pedestrian and bicycle networks to piloting microtransit, advocating for Amtrak stops and community vans, providing travel training at the senior center, strengthening trail access and more.
- 9) **Southwest Georgia Regional Commission (SWGRC)** – Located in Camilla, GA, SWGRC developed a strategy to increase access to and frequency of rides on public transit services for the target population. The commission's engagement effort connected regional agencies, revealed unknown transportation barriers and created work groups with partners to implement five goals: increase awareness of services, community participation and transit funding; discover and work with other providers like local nonprofits; and envelope aging and disability transportation planning in local plans.
- 10) **Southwest Missouri Council of Governments (SMCOG)** – Located in Springfield, MO, SMCOG initiated a planning process to identify the county's transportation gaps and barriers. Innovative, interactive engagement approaches yielded key data. Resulting goals included expanding transit service availability and efficiency, as well as increasing visibility of current transit services. The county will add the surfaced needs to Missouri Department of Transportation funding considerations.
- 11) **The Arc Chemung-Schuyler** – Located in Watkins Glen, NY, The Arc sought to explore transportation solutions for cross-county and regional trips, develop complete transportation options and enable people with limited mobility options to travel more freely. Primary needs identified include expanded service hours, shorter routes and no fares. The Arc is testing weekend service, a shorter route and fare-free rides, with expanded Dial-a-Ride services to be tested when funding allows. To promote these pilot options, The Arc is distributing in-person community engagement packets.

Innovative Learnings: Key Learnings from NADTC Grantees

As the 2024 NADTC grantees carried out their planning processes, they learned from both successes and challenges. The key learnings below present top insights that arose from these projects, featuring select grantees that utilized a particular key learning. Detailed information is available on the [NADTC grants page](#). The innovations provide important food for thought and can guide the journeys of professionals in transportation, aging and disability services seeking to launch or improve rural transportation services.

While the methods presented have brought success to NADTC grantees, please remember that all communities are unique. While these tactics were effective for some communities, they did not work for others. Be sure to talk with your partners and community members to determine what will work best for your particular audience.

Build Trust With Community Partners

NADTC grantees emphasize that each project's success depends on the ability to build trust within the community, with partners as well as community members.

Form a Broad and Representative Advisory Committee, for Community Inroads

To start their planning process, many NADTC grantees formed advisory committees of 10 to 30 members to surface transportation needs from across the community. Advisory committee members helped grantees to develop questions for community surveys and focus groups. Committee members also publicized grantees' outreach efforts to their own constituents.

When committee members assisted with outreach, NADTC grantees gained credibility with community members, who learned of outreach efforts through a trusted source. NADTC grantees also partnered with advisory committee members to draft transportation plans for community review, after synthesizing outreach data.

Developing an advisory committee is a long-term strategy. Committees may initiate relationships among leaders who have not previously met. They also provide a forum to discuss solutions and share resources that can help facilitate transportation projects.

A strong advisory committee reaches across sectors, offering multiple perspectives on transportation needs. Representatives of aging and disability services organizations, transit systems, local governments and health agencies, to name just a few, bring unique perspectives. Including members of the target audience on advisory committees is essential to gain input from those who know the landscape best.

Find Local Champions to Support Outreach Efforts and New Transportation Services

Building personal relationships with partners is another way to connect with communities and elevate the importance of transportation projects.

- To conduct its outreach, Project Amistad teams journeyed to remote and unfamiliar communities. To make inroads, team members began building relationships with local businesses to establish trust and meet people in the community.
- LIFTT also committed to driving throughout its service area and found champions at unlikely places, such as hardware stores.

To begin establishing relationships, sharing personal stories of people affected by transportation challenges can lead to offers of partnership and assistance.

- SWGRC engages programs by using leading questions that enable partners to coordinate around data. “Did you know that X number of people in our region cannot find rides to medical appointments? How could you help?”

Maximize Outreach to Learn Riders’ Needs

Another key step in the planning process is to engage members of the target population in completing surveys and attending community conversations. While vitally important, engagement can be challenging. Several recent NADTC grantees promoted their surveys, focus groups and community meetings widely yet still did not attract as many participants as they hoped. Below are some learnings around engaging the target audience and receiving valuable input.

Meet People Where They Are Already Gathering

To connect with people in small rural communities, travel to each town and get to know the locals. Partner with nonprofits and human service agencies that are familiar to and trusted by community members, like a local food pantry or crisis center. Connect with libraries, which are tapped into their communities and in some locations offer social service support. Attend community events, such as health fairs, to gain feedback. Talk to locals to find out where “water cooler” gathering spots are in each community.

When trying to reach people with transportation challenges, going to them becomes especially important. Make it easier to connect in person by arranging free transportation to community meetings, focus groups or community events that you will attend. Instead of mailing a survey to a senior center, visit the center and interact with people there. Doing so can greatly increase the survey response rate.

- Benzie Transportation Authority tapped public health nurses, who have established trusted relationships with older adults and people with disabilities, to gain feedback on transportation needs. Thinking broadly about places community members already go, the authority also set up a table and offered giveaways at dump transfer stations, joined library education programs and attended a popular monthly coffee talk for veterans.
- Cortland County Planning Department met with older adults at Local Aging Adult Satellite Service locations, community spaces that host activities for older adults. The team also

distributed surveys through partners at holiday events, a day space for people who are unhoused, an Age Well center, a school for children with disabilities, a healthy neighborhoods program and more.

Leverage Surveys and Community Meetings

Asking partners to share surveys and news of community meetings is a key learning. Other survey tips include creating a single survey rather than tailoring different versions to specific populations, coding hard copy surveys so that you know which outreach efforts provided the most return on investment and asking survey-takers to indicate if they are caregivers.

At community meetings and focus groups, highlight riders by inviting them to share their stories as part of the presentation. In discussions with community members, gain buy-in by having transportation users and/or their caregivers present.

- LIFTT asked nurses, caregivers, hospitals and managers of assisted living and retirement homes who recognized the importance of the initiative to share the survey. LIFTT set a goal of 300 completed surveys and received 521—a completion rate of 74 percent over goal.

Prioritize Community Conversations

Many of the 2024 NADTC grantees noted that one-on-one organic conversations were the best source of gathering data with riders and their caregivers, agencies, elected officials and the general public. Involving community members throughout the planning process also increased community interest in future transportation services.

- SMCOG engaged with residents directly through three rounds of small group meetings at trusted venues like senior centers, clinics, libraries and food distribution events. These discussions enabled SMCOG team members to explain the draft transportation plan in detail to each participant, address accessibility challenges (hearing, reading, writing, comprehension, etc.), gather relevant stories and build trust. Regularly sharing progress helped residents understand and trust the process. SMCOG was honored for its outstanding public engagement, and its resulting transportation plan received a 2025 NADO Excellence in Regional Transportation Award in July 2025.

Cast a Wide Net for Data

Some NADTC grantees went beyond engagement efforts and pursued broader data-gathering activities to inform their transportation planning.

- The Snohomish County Transportation Coalition suggests incorporating the [University of Michigan Transportation Security Index](#), the first validated measure of the experience of being unable to move from place to place in a safe or timely manner, into research efforts to better understand the target audience's ability to travel, connect to opportunity and flourish.

Go Low Tech

Many NADTC grantees discovered that paper surveys, in some cases distributed with self-addressed stamped envelopes, outperformed digital surveys.

- Aroostook Area Agency on Aging found that responses to paper surveys given at congregate meal sites and to Meals on Wheels clients, plus mailings to a randomized sample of agency clients, exceeded expectations.
- In addition to paper surveys, Project Amistad learned that radio and TV announcements were effective in publicizing outreach, as the organization serves areas where internet access is limited.

Promote Transportation Programs Effectively

Several NADTC grantees found that potential riders were not aware of available transportation services. These grantees used a variety of tactics, including knocking on doors at housing sites and attending relevant community gathering places and nonprofits, to educate residents. Asking partners to share information in their e-newsletters, and connecting with e-newsletter editors, proved highly effective.

- The Arc Chemung-Schuyler delivered swag bags to apartment complexes and congregate dining sites to educate and engage riders around its pilot service. The shopping bag included announcements of the new shuttle and fare free days pilot project that met needs identified in the planning process, plus a riders' guide, a Schuyler County Transit anniversary announcement and paratransit information.
- Cortland County Planning Department took 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.
- Penquis C.A.P, Inc., noted an opportunity to educate participants around its new programs. Participants indicated they feared not knowing what to do after call center hours, which underscored the importance of building trust. Penquis also noted the need to rework its documents and brochures to be accessible.

Invite Potential Riders to Have Fun

Whether to build excitement around an outreach event or to promote a new transportation option, NADTC grantees suggest increasing engagement by having fun. Throw a party and tailor the activity to your audience. Offer an open house with live music, bring in a bouncy house and face painting to attract families or partner with the library when it is presenting a puppeteer performance. Host Transit Days at a tea house, brewery or a trivia night. Join with other partners to talk about transportation services in an enjoyable setting. Offer gift cards or raffles for survey takers or event attendees.

Form Partnerships

NADTC grantees have found partnerships to be instrumental in launching transportation programs and continuing services long term. To form these collaborations, grantees have identified partners through community connections, referrals and dedicated efforts.

- LIFTT found that connecting with a wide-ranging group of potential partners is invaluable. Transportation sector representatives provide insights into rural mobility challenges and program development. Outreach to town councils, clerks and elected officials can uncover grassroots-level transportation needs. School counselors, adult protective services staff and health educators can identify vulnerable populations and discuss how transportation access intersects with health, safety and social participation.

Innovative partnerships have facilitated transportation services through funding assistance, vehicle-sharing, volunteer drivers and more.

- The Arc Chemung-Schuyler discovered that outreach to other agencies can catalyze key partnerships. The Arc sent a provider survey to partner agencies to inventory vehicle fleets and identify ways to share technology or assets. The survey received a 50-percent response rate; however, many agencies now are considering how to incorporate transportation into their budgets. One local agency can pay for bus wraps or ads, freeing up funding at The Arc to cover fares.
- The Cortland County Planning Department worked with the county health department to address transportation as a social driver of health. The planning department also included the county's grant administrator in meetings with advisory committee partners to raise awareness of partner agencies' programs and to assist in exploring grants around sustainable transportation services.
- The SWGRC set a goal to work with local government partners to incorporate aging and disability into transportation in all local plans.

Network to Increase Opportunities

Networking can open many doors and put rural transportation systems on the map. Attending conferences and joining groups focused on transportation issues can enable transportation providers to meet people and connect around shared interests.

- LIFTT participated in statewide transit planning discussions, which elevated its perspective in broader policy decisions. Attendance at a statewide conference offered LIFTT key insights on funding opportunities and invaluable networking for its rural transit program.
- The SWGRC found that fruitful conversations came from having a booth at a regional housing conference. The event brought together many regional stakeholders and provided an interesting

dynamic to discuss issues that extend beyond, yet touch on, housing concerns such as transportation.

- The Arc Chemung-Schuyler is officially listed in the Southern Tier Central Regional Planning and Development Board's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy project list, which opens opportunities to connect with governments and human services agencies, plus economic and community development organizations.

Reach Out to Policymakers

Leaders in rural transportation are encouraged to share their community's challenges and stories with their state and federal legislators. Make sure policymakers know about community needs and funding shortages. Elevate issues to your state Department of Transportation. Doing so may influence policy that could support accessible transportation. Additionally, legislators who receive inquiries from constituents about rides may connect you with potential riders.

Plan for Sustainability

Transit specialist Michael Koch, principal of [Compass Transit Consulting](#) in Lakewood, CO, presented "Rural Transit Program Sustainability" at the final meeting of 2024 NADTC Rural Community Innovations Transportation Planning Grant recipients. Several key takeaways can help to guide community leaders and transportation professionals in pursuing funding for rural transportation services.

Move the Needle, Even in Small Steps

Even modest progress builds momentum. Small successes show that a project is advancing, which helps attract collaborators, partners and potential funders. If funding is not available for a full project, identify an element of the plan that you could pursue, and start by implementing it.

Solve the Public Awareness Gap

Awareness can help bring support. A clear priority is making sure riders know your transportation service exists. Get system information out in front of community members. Attending community events enables organizations to build exposure and to educate community members around using transportation services.

Elevate Persuasive Data From Your Plans

Highlight your strongest data, and share proposed transportation maps with community leaders and decision-makers. Pair those visuals with community testimonials. Use messaging that is clear, local and personal.

Keep the Project in Front of Decision-Makers

Stay visible with executive directors, county managers, city administrators and community agencies. Keeping a project on their radar ensures it remains relevant and top of mind.

Keep Stakeholders Engaged

Continue updating the stakeholders who were involved in planning. Potential partners can become ambassadors for the project and help build ongoing support.

Identify Funding Sources

Explore the following resources for potential funding:

- [Federal Transit Administration \(FTA\)](#) grants, e.g., 5310, 5311 and 5311(f).
- USDA Rural Development grants.
- Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation funding; see the [Medicaid Transportation Coordination Fact Sheet](#).
- Private, corporate and community foundations, as well as local health organizations.
- Technical assistance programs such as [National RTAP](#) (Rural Transit Assistance Program) and [CCAM-TAC](#).

To widen the net, look beyond transit-only funding. Collaborate with community partners; consider adding a line item for transportation when applying for grants. School districts, housing providers, medical facilities, libraries and more could form win-win partnerships. Consider layering small grants to implement transportation projects.

The Learning Continues

The learnings and best practices highlighted in this report show the power of experimenting with innovative ideas, pivoting to new solutions as necessary and always moving forward to meet the transportation needs of older adults and people with disabilities—making America’s rural landscapes a place where they can thrive.

Who We Are

About the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center

Established in 2015, the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) is a federally funded technical assistance center administered by Easterseals and USAging based in Washington, DC. The NADTC is funded through a cooperative agreement of Easterseals, USAging and the U.S Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living. www.nadtc.org

USAging is the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. USAging and our members work to improve the quality of life and health of older adults and people with disabilities, including supporting people with chronic illness, people living with dementia, family caregivers and others who want to age well at home and in the community. Together, we are ensuring that all people can age well. Our members are the local leaders that develop, coordinate and deliver a wide range of home and community-based services, including information and referral/assistance, case management, home-delivered and congregate meals, in-home services, caregiver supports, transportation, evidence-based health and wellness programs, long-term care ombudsman programs and more. www.usaging.org

Easterseals Easterseals provides life-changing services nationwide and advocates for improving the quality of life for people with disabilities, veterans and their families. Through a vast network of Affiliates, Easterseals offers essential support each year to 1.5 million people—from early childhood programs for the critical first five years to autism services, medical rehabilitation and employment programs, transportation and mobility services, veterans' programs and more. Easterseals continues to positively shape perceptions and address the urgent and evolving needs of one in four Americans with disabilities today. www.easterseals.com