



best practices

Access to Healthy Food

Reliable transportation provides a critical connection to fresh, healthy food for many older adults and people with disabilities, especially those who do not drive. Lack of transportation to grocery stores and farmers markets means that instead of eating healthy, nutrient-packed fruits and vegetables that would benefit their health and well-being, some older adults and people with disabilities are buying shelf-stable supplies and stretching a week's worth of food into a month's worth of meals.

Without access to healthy foods, older adults can experience malnutrition, which causes weight loss and weakens muscles and bones and may result in falls and broken bones, according to *The Geriatric Dietitian*. Malnutrition can also make older adults more likely to get sick and take longer to recover from illness. This is especially true for those who have chronic diseases. Older adults who have insufficient access to food are 60 percent more likely to have a heart attack or congestive heart failure, 50 percent more likely to have diabetes and 2.3 times as likely to have depression as people in other age groups.

In 2019, the NADTC funded two projects that focused on addressing food insecurity among older adults and people with disabilities. In both communities, older adults and people with disabilities reported a lack of access to healthy food options in their neighborhoods, long bus rides to get to full-service grocery stores, limitations on the number of bags they could bring on the bus and an inability to carry grocery bags the distance between the bus stop and home. Some indicated that they might go weeks between grocery visits and were dependent on family and friends who could not provide rides as often as needed. A third NADTC grant, which focused on providing rides to a variety of destinations in a highly rural area, responded to a need identified by riders for better access to groceries and the local food bank. Together, these projects used different approaches to connect older adults and people with disabilities in their communities to farmers markets, grocery stores and food pantries.



Credit: Wallingford Committee on Aging, Inc. Wallingford, CT

Bringing Healthy Food into a Food Desert

In a food desert that stretches for nine square miles in north Tulsa, OK, many older adults and people with disabilities have limited access to affordable, fresh and nutritious food sources. Thirty-three percent of residents live below the poverty level, and 63 percent of households have one vehicle or none. The **Indian Nations Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging (INCOG)** was involved in a citywide effort to address this issue as a member of the Hunger & Food Desert Taskforce which recognized transportation as a critical component of their work.

Through the NADTC grant, INCOG engaged older adults and people with disabilities in the effort to secure access to healthy food. INCOG held focus groups, conducted a survey and deployed other outreach to identify challenges with food access. INCOG learned that local residents prioritized the need for neighborhood or easily accessible grocery stores with affordable, quality products and more

This best practice is based on the experiences of grant programs funded by the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) from 2017 to 2019 to support innovative programs to increase the accessibility of community transportation services for people with disabilities and older adults.

low-cost/no-cost transportation options to access food. The resulting report, the *Tulsa Creating Access to Nutrition (C.A.N.) Plan*, identified accessible transportation solutions.

In response, INCOG launched C.A.N. Ride, which began by implementing travel training sessions to introduce potential riders to local paratransit services and featured group trips to grocery stores and Hispanic markets nearest to the food desert to familiarize riders with the stores. Participants received tours of the stores, coupons and sometimes gift cards and introductions to the store manager.

The project also set up ridesharing to select grocery stores using Uber Health. For riders needing wheelchair-accessible vehicles, Deano's Senior Transit provided rides. All rides were provided free of charge and were coordinated through INCOG's Information & Assistance specialist. Through the program, participants learned how to reserve a ride and were supported before and during their trips. Participants who did not use smartphones could ask grocery store staff to call the I&A specialist for a return ride home.

Fifty-two residents completed the travel training. At the end of the grant, 75 older adults and 44 people with disabilities used ridesharing services. Overall, the program provided 594 trips with 84 percent of participants using the service more than once, exceeding the goal of 30 percent repeat customers.

Food Access and Public Transportation

In Cumberland County, ME, lack of coordination among transportation, social services and health care providers brought challenges for older adults and people with disabilities who used public transportation to buy food. Difficulty in reaching bus stops, in accessing the local food pantry that was not on a transit route and in taking large quantities of groceries on the bus were all challenges.

The **Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG)** set out to address these challenges. Its Steering Committee was a multi-sector coalition focused on access and mobility that included transportation providers, aging and disability organizations, and members from health care, housing, economic development, bicycle-pedestrian and trails advocacy groups and social services. The project engaged more than 400 stakeholders through a two-hour Mobility Solutions Workshop, focus groups and a survey.

GPCOG adopted a two-pronged intervention strategy for improving access to healthy food. First, to address gaps in the fixed route bus service, GPCOG created Shopper Links, a ready-to-launch solution with a shuttle that offered better access to grocery stores and the local food pantry, which was not on a transit line. Second, free on-demand rides that could pick up residents wherever they lived and take them to food stores were arranged through GoGo Grandparent, which offered 24-hour phone-based customer service.

Shopper Links provided weekly door-to-door service to the South Portland Food Cupboard and 41 rides to 17 older adults and people with disabilities over 14 weeks. After the pilot ended, the Regional Transportation Program continued to operate its pre-existing city shopper shuttles and the Housing Authority continued to run theirs.

Food Pantry Trips over Vast Distances

On the Navajo Reservation in remote San Juan County, NM, Capacity Builders Inc. (CBI) helped older adults and people with disabilities travel as far as 70 miles one-way to the nearest food pantry. Most transportation services—and the Economic Council Helping Others (ECHO) Food Bank—are located far away in Farmington, NM. Without an easy way to get to town, many older adults had been stretching food boxes meant for one week over an entire month. In response, CBI created the Northwest New Mexico Transportation Alliance Project. Now “Big Bertha,” an Americans with Disabilities Act—compliant, wheelchair-accessible vehicle, together with close coordination with other social service agencies, provides much-needed free and low-cost curb-to-curb service within the region.

CBI was officially named the transportation vendor for the ECHO Food Bank Senior Program. In this partnership, the CBI bus provides rides to the food bank twice a week, targeting low-income riders who are age 65 or older. CBI does not receive funding from ECHO, but flyers made at ECHO help publicize the service.

From May 14 to October 31, 2019, CBI provided 1,295 rides, with an average ridership of 257 per month. More than half of these rides were for grocery shopping and food pantry pickups. Once the partnership with ECHO Food Bank started, the number of weekly rides for pickups to and from the food bank increased, with CBI providing approximately eight to 10 rides per week for ECHO.

Learnings

The grantees interviewed for this best practice were asked to provide insights into key takeaways they gathered through the implementation of their grants. Below are summaries of the most critical concepts for others seeking to develop or enhance accessible transportation to healthy food in their communities.

- **A single-purpose transportation program can be challenging to get off the ground.** Both GPCOG and INCOG undertook research that pointed to a clear need for better access to healthy food in their communities. However, despite extensive outreach efforts to reach potential riders and the broader community—a critical element in any program’s success, both projects struggled to build ridership. Both had to overcome residents’ reluctance to try a new service or change longstanding arrangements, even when unsatisfactory, for getting groceries.
- **It can take time to build ridership for a new transportation program, so there may be advantages to modifying an existing program that serves a wide range of needs.** Capacity Builders’ trips to the food bank were an outgrowth of a transportation program that provided rides to a variety of destinations but grew into an important aspect of their program. At GPCOG, the conversation about how to best meet food-access needs continues: since the neighborhood with the highest poverty level has the least access to transit, expanding fixed-route transit may be a more viable solution than shuttles and on-demand rides. High-frequency fixed route transit would provide people with more flexibility and independence around when they go to the store. Bus service is already well-known and visible to the community and may be easier to promote.
- **Building trust is critical for any transportation program, but it requires an investment of time and a willingness to understand riders’ fears and reluctance to try something new.** In follow-up research, GPCOG learned that many riders were afraid to use on-demand rides because they were riding with someone they did not know. These riders also found the on-demand GoGo Grandparent rides intimidating, because they were confused by interfacing with several different organizations with different names and phone numbers. INCOG found



Credit: NADTC

that the Information & Assistance (I&A) specialist who scheduled rides provided reassurance and developed relationships with nervous riders, which helped allay any concerns about using the service. The provision of one-on-one assistance was a critical element in this program’s success, but it required more staff time than anticipated.

- **Many older adults are most comfortable getting information from a trusted source or by word of mouth.** GPCOG found outreach success when the housing authority put a letter on residents’ doors. In a tribal community where trust-building is a challenge, CBI went to community gathering places like the county fair and chapterhouses on the Navajo Reservation and brought an interpreter to surmount language barriers.
- **Conduct as much outreach as possible to learn about community needs and reach riders.** To choose the best outreach tools, identify the media channels the target population typically uses to receive news and information. Go to places where the population you are trying to reach gathers, such as senior centers and independent living centers. Leaving flyers, posters and postcards and setting up presentations with residents, social services coordinators or resident managers can be effective, but word of mouth from satisfied riders is the best endorsement for any program.

Funding

- CBI received a 2019 Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Access and Mobility Partnership Grant (ICAM). Funds are being used to buy an additional vehicle and continue the Northwest New Mexico Transportation Alliance Project. CBI has applied for additional funding to support transportation through the New Mexico Developmental Disabilities Medicaid Waiver Program, the Section 5310 Program and the state AARP office, and is investigating corporate fundraising by offering to put company logos on its buses for a fee.
- GPCOG does not currently have dedicated funding to continue its Shopper Shuttle program but is pursuing opportunities to increase the availability of transportation to a variety of destinations. The agency

is a recipient of a 2019 ICAM grant which will support pilot testing of a travel training program and a regional one-call/one-click service, responding to a need identified by older adults and people with disabilities for increased knowledge of transportation resources and how to use them.

- After the NADTC grant funding ended, INCOG suspended the C.A.N. Ride program but has since partnered with a nonprofit organization that serves older adults, has a call center and I&A specialist to coordinate rides to grocery stores. These plans are on hold for now due to COVID-19.



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