

Coordination in Transportation Programs

In areas with a patchwork system of transportation options, gaps in service can be especially challenging for older adults and people with disabilities who rely on transportation to access employment, medical appointments, grocery stores and social engagements. An effective way transportation agencies can fill these gaps is through coordination, where multiple entities come together to provide transportation services and share a single access point for arranging rides.

For someone who lives just across a jurisdictional boundary or an area where the major medical center or employer is in a neighboring county, transportation programs that serve a single municipality or county may not be able to help residents get where they need or want to go. This situation can be dire for people who do not have a car or those who stop driving due to health concerns, preventing many older adults and people with disabilities from accessing necessities as well as life-enhancing opportunities.



Credit: NADTC

Coordinating transportation services among providers and stakeholders, as well as engaging older adults and people with disabilities in the process, can solve this challenge. By working together, neighboring communities can align their resources, connecting residents with the outside world and the assistance they need to stay safe and independent while living in the community.

This best practice explores the experiences of two NADTC grantees that successfully coordinated multiple entities and services to form regional transportation partnerships, provide rides to older adults and people with disabilities living in highly rural areas, and connect residents to doctor visits, food shopping, employment and other critical destinations.

Forming Regional Partnerships to Implement Technology

In the suburban and rural mix near Fort Collins, CO, transportation options were limited and often costly in the less-populated areas. Coordinated transportation services did not exist, so people seeking transportation needed to contact each service provider separately to secure a ride. **North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)** set out to better meet the needs of older adults, people with disabilities and veterans living in the county's rural areas by serving as the contracting and fiscal agent for Project MILES (Mobility Inclusiveness; Locations Everywhere; Simple).

Previous outreach conducted through the Larimer County Senior Transportation Needs Assessment had pointed to two opportunities: to better coordinate existing mobility services and to implement a one-call/one-click system that would enable riders to book rides easily from a single phone number or website. The Project MILES planning phase, funded by an NADTC grant, created an expert panel that joined rider, provider, driver, advocate and system

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.

perspectives. The panel piloted two mobility management software systems that would support a one-call/one-click service.

The expert panel found that existing providers and ride services had a wide range of experience and comfort with technology. Ride providers were very dedicated to their riders and did not want technology to disrupt their reliable service. Riders wanted more options, clearly comparable pricing and a continued voice at the planning table. Importantly, collaborators at all levels were ready to move forward.

To implement the project, an array of regional partnerships formed. North Front Range MPO provided grant and project management. The Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities and Larimer County’s Office on Aging collaborated to implement the project and engage and coordinate with ride providers. Via Mobility expanded its call center, provided staff resources to schedule rides and coordinated with ride providers to use its one-call/one-click center. RouteMatch provided software support to Via Mobility.

This coordination among technology and service providers was unprecedented for Larimer County—and successful! Between May and September 2019, approximately 400 rides were delivered through a mix of volunteer and private transportation providers. The success of Project MILES has led to its expansion into a neighboring county.

Coordinating 32 Jurisdictions for Equitable Rides

In Berkshire County, located in western Massachusetts, 32 jurisdictions maintained their own transportation systems, and, as a result, service levels varied. Older adults and people with disabilities who lived in a municipality with a Council on Aging (COA) or other van service had access to transportation to medical appointments and other necessities, but those living just across the municipal line did not. This situation led to health care inequities and meant that each jurisdiction’s transportation provider invested extensive resources to run its own program.

The **Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC)** asked transportation providers participating in the Massachusetts Mobility Assistance Program to pair up with those in neighboring jurisdictions to give rides across jurisdictional lines, primarily to pre-arranged medical

visits. To support the partnership, providers reviewed transit contracts that governed their service areas, and towns discussed how to share liability to enable the rides to happen.

The Regional Coordinating Council, a partnership between the social service agencies and the regional transit authority, with representation from residents with disabilities and older adults, was a strong partner and advocate. Elder Services of Berkshire County, Inc., the local Area Agency on Aging which has a toll-free phone line, arranged all rides with the Councils on Aging and other transportation providers and handled reporting.

Since the NADTC grant ended in 2017, the partnership has continued with area COAs providing rides. Two towns are applying for a joint grant for an accessible vehicle. Four-wheel-drive vehicles are being considered for the future fleet, to help drivers navigate the area’s snow-packed roads during the winter.

Coordinated Transportation: First Steps

If your agency is seeking information on ways to better coordinate transportation services in your region, below are a few key considerations to keep in mind based on the experiences of North Front Range MPO and Berkshire RPC.

- **Readiness to coordinate.** Critical questions include the following: Has your area completed regional planning or other outreach that identified transportation gaps? Do you have existing transportation options that could be run through a central coordinator? Do your elected officials, community leaders, other stakeholders and community members support the project? Are members of the target population supportive? Are partners in place? Do partners have shared challenges that could act as catalysts for action? Whether an organization has addressed factors like these in advance can indicate a readiness to coordinate.
- **Determine roles and responsibilities.** It is important to identify all essential tasks and specific agency responsibilities. One agency does not have to do everything. Berkshire provides an example. Those running the rides program are not transportation professionals used to managing the puzzle of pick-ups and drop-offs needed, but Council on Aging staff and sometimes volunteers are in charge. Elder Services of Berkshire County, Inc. provides scheduling through its

existing call center. The Councils on Aging have vehicles and provide transportation and in-kind donations of staff time. Berkshire RPC encourages municipalities to pair off two by two to help share the load.

- **Include older adults and people with disabilities in every stage of your program.** Only by having potential riders tell you their needs themselves will you be able to design a truly effective program to meet those needs. (See best practice on outreach and engagement for additional details.)
- **Reach out to educate and cultivate champions.** Community partners, staff and volunteers can serve as champions, helping to promote and reduce unease about your program. For North Front Range MPO’s regional efforts, a County Commissioner helped advance the project. Berkshire RPC established personal relationships with town councils to address issues such as funding and how to share liability across jurisdictional borders.
- **Establish a lead agency to streamline the process, coordinate communication, and more.** In Project MILES, North Front Range MPO took seriously its role to facilitate the collaboration of local governments, interested parties and residents in policymaking and planning, which helped streamline the project.

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 and enhance their coordination with other agencies.

- **Prioritize building trust.** Partners must trust one another to coordinate effectively. At the start of planning, determine what the group and each partner seek from the project. Be open and ask questions of all partners. Stay curious to find good solutions.

North Front Range MPO noted that it took time for the partners to learn to trust one another. Because each of these transportation providers serve special populations, they worried about whether other providers would be dependable and care for their long-time riders in the same way. Partner organizations

also feared changing their operations and losing their identity.

Once the partners began to meet regularly and work together, they learned that each partner shared a high level of professionalism and care for riders, and that no rider would be left waiting for a ride. Partners also realized that each organization would be able keep its own identity, and the concerns dissipated.

None of the organizations working with North Front Range MPO had sophisticated technology, but they learned that a centralized call center could improve their operations and reduce the time spent answering phones. As time went on, the partners developed a sense of community, appreciating their new built-in team of colleagues.

- **Collaboration can break down traditional barriers and enable agencies to coordinate.** Both North Front Range MPO and Berkshire RPC found that conversations among partnering organizations led to a re-examination of contracts and small policy changes that enabled providers to give rides to those who lived just outside regular ride-service boundaries.
- **A call center made booking rides easier for riders.** Having a single number or website to request rides simplified the process, which encouraged more ride bookings and helped to build riders’ trust. These programs found that a central coordinator is crucial for ensuring that requests do not get misdirected and that limited resources are used effectively.
- **Having a central coordinator supports the collection of community transportation data.** Using a call center or mobility manager supports collection and analysis of data on the number of rides provided, unmet ride requests and gaps in service, as well as other critical information.
- **Coordination and outreach go hand-in-hand.** Knowing that riders may be more receptive to a message coming from an organization they already know and trust, partner organizations can tap their own networks to reach different communities and populations.
- **Shared documents can help orient riders and keep all providers on the same page.** North Front Range MPO created a Riders Guide and a Providers Guide, specifying hours of operation, pickup spots, maps with

boundaries and other useful information. These guides also helped ensure consistency of service standards across the five participating providers.

- **Coordination, partner relationships and expanded services require time and patience to develop.** Both North Front Range MPO and Berkshire RPC were able to bring the partners and prospective riders into a planning process. This enabled both to identify barriers and begin to address trust issues. Even when services began, it took time to build interest in the program and work out partners' concerns. Finally, neither grantee considered their work to be done at the end of the NADTC grant and both continue to work on expansion and improvement.
- **A strong collaboration can move a community forward.** In the Colorado project, the county government, Area Agency on Aging and nonprofits collaborated to create a robust Senior Rural Transportation Needs Assessment. Throughout the design and implementation phases of the pilot project, government organizations, ride providers, riders and advocates all contributed time and resources. The willingness of Via Mobility to make its call center available for the pilot project was essential for building the success shared by everyone involved.

Funding

Below is a breakdown of funding used by North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization and Berkshire Regional Planning Commission for their projects.

- **Traditional Federal and State Sources:**
 - North Front Range MPO:
 - Uses Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5310 (Seniors and People with Disabilities)

funds and does a sales tax exchange to fund the Mobility Coordinator's time.

- Leveraged a Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) / FTA Section 5304 grant to support creation of the Larimer County Senior Transportation Implementation Plan (a business plan) to deliver coordinated dispatch services. This funding lent stability and credibility to approach new and existing partners.
- Applying to the Colorado Department of Transportation to expand its program to a neighboring county. North Front Range MPO is also applying for additional Section 5310 funding to make the program truly regional. State Multimodal Options funding will predominantly be used in the North Front Range MPO region.
- Berkshire RPC receives FTA Section 5310 funding and State Mobility Assistance Program (MAP) funding to purchase vans for use by Councils on Aging or other social service agencies.
- **Grants and Partnerships:**
 - At North Front Range MPO, Partnership for Age Friendly Communities provided leadership and staff time for concept development.
 - At Berkshire RPC:
 - Councils on Aging contributed in-kind staff time.
 - Successive partners received vehicles to augment services through funds from insurance companies, car dealers and donations.
 - A mini-grant from a community foundation paid for staff time to do further outreach to learn of evolving community needs.

