



# Rural Transportation

The need for transportation in rural America is high, due to both demographics and distance. In rural areas, transportation programs that serve older adults and people with disabilities are especially important. Visual and mobility impairments related to aging or disability may impact an individual's ability to drive or use public transportation. Long trips are often cost-prohibitive. Without adequate transportation to meet their needs, older adults and people with disabilities cannot access health care, fresh food or the social activities vital to a healthy, independent life.

According to the U. S. Census Bureau's report, [The Older Population in Rural America: 2012-2016](#), 17.5 percent of the rural population was age 65 and older compared to 13.8 percent in urban areas. Older adults may drive less frequently or not at all, and many rely on family members, caregivers or public transportation. The [Rural Health Information Hub \(RHlhub\)](#) presents 2014-2018 data from the American Community Survey showing that the disability rate in rural communities is 15 percent, higher than in metropolitan areas (11 percent).

This best practice presents the experiences of NADTC grantees who developed transportation programs in rural areas. Common themes include the need to build trust with riders, coordinate with other providers and structure programs to serve long distances.

## Crossing Jurisdictional Boundaries

In western Massachusetts, residents must travel long distances to medical appointments. It can take 90 minutes to cross Berkshire County by car and more than two hours to reach Boston for specialty care. In Berkshire, 32 jurisdictions maintained their own transportation systems with varied levels of service. Older adults and people with disabilities who lived in a municipality with a Council on Aging vehicle or another van service had



Credit: NADTC

access to transportation, but those living just across the municipal line often did not. This situation led to health care inequities and meant that each organization invested available resources to run its own independent program.

The **Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC)** fostered cross-jurisdictional transportation by encouraging local entities to pair up with neighboring communities to provide rides, primarily to pre-arranged medical appointments. Together, six groups of municipalities found ways to collaborate. Municipalities met to decide how to share liability, and providers reviewed transportation contracts to find flexibility that would allow them to serve individuals living outside their traditional service areas and cover longer distances.

An Area Agency on Aging, Elder Services of Berkshire County, Inc. (ESBCI), offered its toll-free number and remains a central access point for scheduling rides. During the grant period, ESBCI handled reporting and arranged all rides with the Councils on Aging (those that had vehicles) and other transportation providers. While ESBCI is no longer the only access point for transportation, it continues to respond to call requests for rides.

*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.*









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