



# 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.*

The NADTC project ended in 2017, but area Councils on Aging continue to work together to provide rides to older adults and people with disabilities. 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 winter roads.

## Covering Vast Distances

Transportation options were few in remote San Juan County, NM, which includes part of the Navajo Nation. Prior to the NADTC grant, **Capacity Builders Inc. (CBI)** already operated the local transit and taxi services. Due to vast distances, with rides up to 70 miles one way to the nearest town, Farmington, pickup times were only once per day, sometimes taking all day to make the round trip with a long wait to go back home after an appointment. Travel costs were prohibitive for many residents. Some older residents, unable to make regular trips to the food bank in town, were stretching food boxes meant for one week into a month's worth of meals.

CBI founded the Northwest New Mexico Transportation Alliance Project to identify transportation needs, gather data, and find and implement solutions. Building trust was critical in this tribal community, long skeptical of outsiders. The Alliance brought together Navajo elders and people with disabilities residing on the Navajo Reservation, the local transit service and a center for independence, as well as local nonprofits and business owners.

A community survey revealed that 75 percent of respondents needed transportation assistance. Survey results also identified barriers and missed trips impacting all aspects of life, including trips to shopping, groceries, banks, medical/dental appointments, social outings, religious service, work and school.

Informed by the Alliance's work, CBI provided five 12-hour days of curb-to-curb, paratransit transportation services on the Navajo Reservation, at no cost to older adults and people with disabilities who live in remote areas of the reservation. To address language barriers, dispatchers and drivers who speak the Navajo language were hired. During the grant period, CBI provided 1,295 rides with an average ridership of 257 per month.



*Credit: NADTC*

## Filling Gaps with Volunteers

In the rural Coastal Bend of Texas, residents face environmental and economic challenges. Public transit does not reach outlying areas on a frequent basis and trips must be booked several days in advance. The region is prone to flooding, which makes accessing driveways difficult. Arsenic in the water requires residents to haul gallons of clean water to their homes, a challenge since public transit rules limit each passenger to three bags. Transportation costs are high, and many residents live in poverty.

**Feonix—Mobility Rising** reached out to four major stakeholder groups and ultimately convened Mobility Leadership Circles, which included engagement from agencies serving older adults and people with disabilities, as well as education, employment, health care, transportation and other social service providers. Members determined a volunteer transportation program would address gaps in existing transportation and be affordable. They knew building the program would take years and identified a need for more than 100 volunteers.

Using targeted outreach materials including Facebook ads, Feonix recruited volunteer drivers and paid mileage. The volunteer driver program is managed by Feonix for Coastal Bend. The program has become an important part of the mobility ecosystem serving this rural area, providing longer-distance rides and transportation to destinations such as grocery stores, churches, Walmart or the post office. By the end of the grant period, January 30, 2019, the volunteer program had provided 52 trips for more than 30 clients. The program continues to operate today and includes a centralized online scheduling system and call center.

## Transportation for People with Chronic Health Conditions

In the remote Appalachians in southwest Virginia, the area served by **Mountain Empire Older Citizens (MEOC)**, trips to medical specialists are sometimes as far as 75 miles each way. As the primary transportation provider in the area, MEOC Transit became aware of the rising numbers of local older adults and people with disabilities with chronic conditions who did not have anyone to travel with them or provide needed support at home. In addition, some were too confused by the complex health care and transportation system to arrange the rides they needed. Adding to the challenge, residents of this tight-knit coal-mining community are hard-working, proud, often distrustful of government agencies and reluctant to accept help.

MEOC added a Care Coordinator to work with an existing mobility manager at the local call center operated by the Area Agency on Aging (also housed within MEOC). Callers were asked about their needs for food, prescription delivery and utility payments as well as rides. MEOC tapped local volunteers, many from area faith-based organizations, to ride with patients to medical appointments and then help provide the patient's at-home needs for the next week. Volunteer stints were kept short, to make it easy for more people to volunteer.

Creating a single number for people to call for rides simplified the process and began building trust. By joining neighbors with neighbors, MEOC further nurtured trust. Ultimately, the program enabled more older adults and people with disabilities to receive the health care they needed, improving the curve of decline.

## 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 transportation programs that serve rural areas.

- **Coordination is especially important in rural areas where resources are limited.** CBI noted that partnering and leveraging resources is the only way to successfully address the challenges posed by low population density across a vast geographic area.
  - Coordinating eases the burden for all partner

organizations and can ultimately save money and time, and help each program reach its individual goals.

- All stakeholders must be involved from the beginning if coordination is to succeed.

### ● Needs determine solutions.

- CBI found that residents of the Navajo Reservation faced numerous barriers that made driving themselves difficult, including not always feeling well enough to drive, traveling in unfamiliar territory, high-speed roads and destinations more than three miles away.
- Research is needed to identify where and when residents actually need rides. In areas with low population density, even if need is high, a program must be flexible and convenient to attract enough riders.
- It is important to be prepared to make program adjustments over time because needs may evolve. CBI offered rides to meet multiple needs but discovered specific needs as the program served more people.
  - Because older residents were not able to get to the food pantry often enough, CBI worked with the ECHO Food Bank Senior Program to become its official transportation provider and made more frequent trips to that destination.
  - Berkshire RPC started with medical rides and expanded to include rides to hair appointments, grocery stores and other destinations that riders wanted. They also found that escorted “medical specialty” rides outside the county were needed more than other medical rides.

### ● Find efficiencies to serve more riders with limited resources.

- Once you determine where the need is greatest, figure routes, costs, and how many riders you will need for the program to break even financially.
- Consider multipurpose rides that combine long drives to medical appointments with shopping trips.
- Balance appointments at set times with trips like grocery shopping that may fit into the schedule.
- While it is important to be able to accommodate riders with last-minute needs, an advance notice requirement supports the practice of piecing together a ride schedule.

● **Outreach is crucial.** While word of mouth is still the top driver, additional outreach is necessary for creating interest and increasing ridership.

- Be very clear in the information you provide about a new service and who is eligible to receive rides. If you are also recruiting volunteer drivers, be clear about what they will be asked to do.
- Know where your audience is most likely to find information. Ensure that you are also using a variety of outreach approaches. Facebook ads, for example, can be effective if your audience is on Facebook.
- Consider how the physical environment affects riders' access to information. On the Navajo Reservation, where many people do not have electricity and use battery-operated radios, radio ads and public service announcements were effective in gaining riders. Refrigerator magnets with the provider's logo and phone number were also effective.

● **Building trust** in a tribal community or other highly rural areas is essential and requires additional effort. Trust builds support for new programs that can lead to alliances and recognition of shared purpose. To quote Mitch Elliott from MEOC, "If the problem is in the community, the answer is in the community."

- CBI had already worked in the area for 20 years and had longstanding relationships with the Navajo community, which brought tribal members into the Alliance.
- CBI reached out by visiting chapter houses and community gatherings accompanied by a Navajo interpreter. Once an interpreter became an integral part of the team, meetings on the Navajo Reservation proceeded smoothly, and more attendees completed surveys.
- MEOC shared its "story" about the value of transportation services with anyone and everyone, which helped to identify others who shared their vision, and those willing to champion the work.
- MEOC and CBI learned that following up on promises made was essential for building trust.

● **Federal/State/Tribal Funding**

- Two Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds administered by states can be especially helpful in rural areas: Section 5311 (Rural Area Formula Program Grants) and Section 5310 (Enhanced Mobility of Seniors & People with Disabilities).



Credit: NADTC

- At Berkshire RPC, FTA Section 5310 / State Mobility Assistance Program (MAP) funding purchased vans for Councils on Aging or other social service agencies.
- MEOC received FTA Section 5310 and Section 5311 funding as a subrecipient of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.
- CBI received an FTA Access and Mobility Partnership Grant, which supports innovative projects for the transportation disadvantaged that will improve the coordination of transportation services and non-emergency medical transportation services.
- CBI also applied to provide rides for recipients of a state Developmental Disabilities Medicaid waiver program, which would provide payment vouchers for rides.

● **Innovative Solutions**

- Feonix obtained a grant from a private source to continue and expand the volunteer driver program and enhance access to care. Grant funds currently are used to support pharmacy delivery for clients of the Coastal Plains Community Center.
- MEOC receives funding from local community organizations and faith-based organizations to help meet grant match requirements.
- After the NADTC grant in Berkshire ended, 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 conduct further outreach to learn of evolving community needs.



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