

### **Rural Public Transit: Why Is This Important?**

About 10 million older adults live in Rural America, and most have little or no public transit service. These older adults are at great risk of becoming isolated from their communities because of inadequate transportation choices.

Rural public transit provides a **mobility safety net** for older adults, providing trips to medical, shopping, and social destinations, as well as to employment.

Rural public transit is critical in helping older adults maintain a healthy and independent life.



### **Rural America and Transit Needs**

The Census 2010 tells us that while rural populations continue to decline, the proportions of older persons in many areas are increasing. Other challenges related to health care, social services, employment, and even hunger are particularly difficult for Americans over age 65 living in rural areas. Rural America is struggling during this period of economic and social transition, with fewer resources to address the challenges. Rural development initiatives need to consider public transit as one important tool to protect the quality of life of rural residents.

Public transit is particularly critical in helping older individuals stay connected to their communities and get to needed services, social and recreational events, and employment opportunities. Research shows that of those who reach age 70, women will live on average 10 years after they stop driving and men, an average of 7 years after they stop driving. The end of driving need not mean severing connections with the community. Public transit can play a key role.

### **Messages for Policy Makers on Public Transit in Rural Settings**

**Increase the Funding Base.** State and local funding is key to matching and extending the limited federal funding available to rural transit, growing the operating days and service hours of rural transit programs.

**Promote Connectivity.** Funding and policies to support links between services – enabling trips that cross county and state boundaries – are critical as such links are often lacking.

**Encourage Coordination.** Stitching together funding across service systems – public transit, offices on aging, economic development – helps to extend scarce resources and addresses connectivity challenges.

**Build Partnerships.** An element of coordination, new partnerships, will extend the capacity of public transit. Senior centers, rural community development agencies, public and social service agencies, fire and emergency services personnel, interstate bus services such as Greyhound and Trailways, and others all have reasons to support rural transit services.

**Support Dissemination of Transit Information.** Learning about available public transit is a challenge to most Americans, rural and urban alike. Supporting one-call / one-click 2-1-1 and 5-1-1 resources introduces available public transit to older persons and other new riders.

**"Owen County's Rural Transit takes me where I need to go for only \$1.50. I live alone and I don't know how I would manage if Rural Transit couldn't take me! I make several trips a week."**

- Anonymous  
Area Agency on Aging, Area 10  
Owen County, Indiana

### Role of Public Transit

Public transit can provide alternatives to older persons driving themselves – it can serve some or all trips for seniors who can no longer drive themselves or who are reducing their driving or have no working automobile.

But some rural communities have no public transit and others have only limited public transit service, often provided just a few days a week and rarely in evenings or on weekends. Scheduled rural service typically operates infrequently. Many older persons need transportation assistance when rural public transit is not operating, often evenings and weekends.

Rural public transit must cover considerable distances, on very limited budgets, serving individuals who may have equally limited transportation choices.



### What Does Public Transit Cost?

*How are we going to fund rural transit?*

Transit program costs vary by type of service and area of the country. Federal programs support rural transit, and some states and counties add additional local match funding assistance.

The Rural Transit Fact Book (2011) reports ranges for total operating costs per passenger trip:

- Fixed-Route trips: \$ 3.00 to \$10.31
- Demand Response trips: \$ 8.67 to \$46.66

Rider fares are less than the full operating cost per trip, typically ranging from **\$1 to \$3 for fixed-route trips** and often **twice that for demand response trips**. Both demand response and fixed route fares may vary with distance, with long distance trips common for rural riders.

### Transit's Benefits for Older Adults

- Protects mobility. Keeps older adults in their own homes and in the local community.
- Helps older adults stay independent and connected to their communities by reducing the isolation that can come when they stop or limit their driving.
- Helps individuals get to needed services, including critical medical services.
- Helps those who are still working get to work and work-related training or education programs.

### Transit's Benefits to Rural Areas

- Public transit supports the local economy when older adults remain in their own homes and continue to use local goods and services.
- Public transit supports the local economy by attracting new business and supporting existing businesses when it provides access to education, training, and employment opportunities.
- Public transit helps maintain local property values as older adults can remain in their homes; without public transit for local mobility, they may have to move away to live with their adult children; and, their houses may stay vacant with the declining populations in rural communities.
- Public transit keeps the community safer by providing a transportation option for older adults who can no longer safely drive themselves.

***"I love the Bus. It lets me be independent and I can get to my doctor, go to the pharmacy or to the grocery store. I haven't driven for 16 years and I don't know where I would be without the Bus!"***

*- Marie B. (age 86)*

*Twentynine Palms, California  
Unmet Transit Needs Public Hearing*

### About Rural Public Transit

Public transit services are generally provided by one of three types of service modes:

**Fixed-Route  
Service**

**Demand Response  
Service**

**Flex-Route  
Service**

Service modes are characterized by how vehicles are deployed and what passengers must do to obtain the service.

Public transit in rural settings must balance coverage and frequency.

**Coverage** is the distances and area served by public transit.

**Frequency** relates to how frequently a bus will come, the days and hours of service it operates.

**Fixed-Route  
Service**

**Demand Response  
Service**

**Flex-Route  
Service**

#### What is it?

Scheduled service operates between fixed-time points, usually with the same schedule daily.

#### How do older adults obtain service?

Riders can board buses at bus stops or local transfer centers. In some rural areas, passengers can wave or “flag” the bus driver to stop along the route, and the driver will stop if safe to do so.

Fixed-route transit provides reliable, time-certain service, picking up riders at bus stops at predictable times and delivering them to their destinations or close by within known time-frames. Rural fixed-route services often travel long distances and make limited numbers of trips per day or operate only on particular days per week, depending upon their operating budgets. Fixed-route coverage, which is the area served, is often limited in rural areas. This means that riders may have to walk or travel some distance to connect with the service. Fares for fixed-route service are sometimes based upon distance and often have a discounted rate for seniors. Traditional fixed route service is less common in rural areas than the other two modes, because population densities are often too low to support fixed routes.

#### What is it?

Sometimes called dial-a-ride, it is a shared-ride public transit service. It can be open to all riders, using vans and small buses. Demand response transportation services are common in rural areas as there is typically not sufficient density to support fixed-route service. In fact, 86% of rural transit services operate as demand response.

Rural communities that operate fixed route service also provide a particular type of demand response transportation – ADA paratransit. This is required by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and serves passengers with disabilities that prevent use of the fixed routes.

#### How do older adults obtain service?

Riders typically call a central reservation number for trips. Advance trip reservations are common. Most dial-a-ride services provide limited to no same-day service. Riders are picked up at their home, typically curb-to-curb service is provided, and passengers are responsible for getting to the curb. Fares for demand response are higher than fixed-route. Demand response programs that serve as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) complementary paratransit services have defined, formal eligibility requirements.

#### What is it?

Flex-route services, also known as route deviation, are a hybrid between fixed-route and demand responsive services. They travel a defined route but will deviate off that to pick-up a rider who lives within close proximity of the route, typically less than a mile (the specific distance is set by local policy). For older adults who are frail or cannot wait outdoors at a bus stop, the deviation capability is very helpful.

#### How do older adults obtain service?

Riders connect with flex routes in either of two ways. They may catch the bus at a bus stop along the published route. Or they may call for a deviation pick-up, making that trip reservation through a central phone number into the transit system's dispatch. Fares for deviation pick-ups are generally higher than for riders catching the bus at a bus stop.





The State of Missouri has a number of small rural transit programs in various areas of the state, each with different operating parameters. The State DOT created an **umbrella brand and image**, rolling each into the overall Mo-Van program while still retaining individual operations. Riders now view the separate services as part of a larger system and rural residents can **travel more easily between services and communities**. Some additional federal funding has been possible because of the inter-city connections.



Paul Bunyan Transit provides demand response service in rural Beltrami County, MN, an area over 2500 sq. miles. The non-profit transit agency operates six days per week in Bemidji, the county's largest town of 13,000 residents, with rotating service to the many smaller communities in the county. Service to small Washkish, for example, is provided on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Fridays, connecting Washkish residents to Bemidji, a distance of about 63 miles. Paul Bunyan Transit won the Minnesota **Transit System of the Year** in 2007.



Trinity Transit ([www.trinitytransit.org](http://www.trinitytransit.org)) operates in rural northern California within the Salmon / Klamouth Mountains, following the Trinity River for 100 miles between the central valley's Redding to the east and west to Willow Creek, where it connect with other transit services. Its original three-day-a-week service was difficult for seniors and others to understand and use. Recent policy decisions provided for local funding to **increase service to five-days-a week**. A new website invites prospective riders to use **Google Transit to plan their trips**. Ridership is rising steadily.

### More information?

- AARP National and State Offices: [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)
- AARP Public Policy Institute: <http://www.aarp.org/research/ppi/>
- **United We Ride** is a great resource for transit, particularly in rural settings. [www.unitedweride.gov](http://www.unitedweride.gov)
- **Project Action** is a helpful resource for many aspects of accessible transportation. [www.easterseals.com/projectaction](http://www.easterseals.com/projectaction)
- **National Rural Transportation Assistance Program** provides resources including a rural transit database, webinars, and links to the Rural Transportation Assistance Programs (RTAP) at the state level. [www.nationalrtap.org](http://www.nationalrtap.org)
- **5-1-1** and **2-1-1** often provide public transit information in counties with one-call / one-click services
- **Area Agencies on Aging** - regional offices
- **Other resources:**
  - **Community Transit Association of America** [www.ctaa.org](http://www.ctaa.org)
  - **Federal Transit Administration** [www.fta.dot.gov](http://www.fta.dot.gov)
  - **Transit Cooperative Research Program** [www.tcrponline.org](http://www.tcrponline.org)
  - **Google transit for trip planning** [www.google.com/transit](http://www.google.com/transit)



**Meeting Older Adults' Mobility Needs –**

- 1 - Public Transit in Rural Communities
- 2 - Transportation Planning and Coordination in Rural Communities
- 3 - Additional Transportation Options for Rural Communities
- 4 - Funding Rural Public Transit
- 5 – Transit's Role in Livable Rural Communities
- 6 - Health Care and Transportation in Rural Communities