Assessing the Need for New Transportation Service in Rural Communities

TOPIC GUIDE #1: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Introduction

This is the first topic guide in a series developed in partnership by Easter Seals Project ACTION, the National Center on Senior Transportation and the National Rural Transit Assistance Program. Sponsored by ESPA, *Topic Guide #1: Needs Assessments,* provides information on assessing transportation needs and gaps in rural areas, evaluating community assets and implementing new transportation services.

    The guide includes:

- An examination of why accessible transportation is needed in rural areas based on economic and demographic factors;
- Steps a community can take to determine transportation service gaps and mobility options;
- Models from New York State, Connecticut and California that serve as examples of how a community can walk through the assessment process; and
- Resources for identifying and implementing rural accessibility options.

The Need for New Transportation Services in Rural Areas

Since 1990, particular regions of the country have experienced a higher growth in rural population than others. Between 1990 and 2000 regions with the fastest growth included

2011 Accessible Transportation Coalitions Initiative, Clark County, Wash.

the Mountain West (including Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico), Pacific Northwest (including Washington and Oregon), Upper Great Lakes, the southern Highlands and the Piedmont (including North and South Carolina), Florida, and Eastern Texas.[1] While several factors spurred this growth, key trends included older adults moving to retirement destinations and an increase in immigration. The Hispanic population grew at the fastest rate of any ethnic group in rural areas between 1990 and 2005. These demographic changes in rural areas, the growing need for access to medical care and shifts in employment have driven the need for transportation service options in rural areas.

In response to customer needs, rural counties have been called upon to offer a mix of vehicles and services. Rural public transportation providers often apply creative and innovative strategies to offer service in areas where traditional roadside transit stops are a great distance apart or may not exist. Private operators, such as taxi and volunteer driver programs, also have a significant role in providing demand-responsive service.

Rural Transportation Needs of Older Adults, People with Disabilities and Culturally and Ethnically Diverse Customers

Older Adults

Recreation gateways and retirement destination counties have been the fastest growing counties in rural America.[1] In addition, there has been an accelerated rate of people in their 50s and 60s moving to destination counties. This trend is running parallel with the movement toward livable communities where residents and local governments have a significant interest in fostering health and well-being and active participation in the community by older adults as long as possible. Older adults living in rural communities have specific priorities as identified in a recent Adirondacks Community Empowerment Plan.[2] These include:

- Varied types of transportation options
- Public transportation for senior centers, adult day services, groceries, faith centers, cultural events
- Enclosed bus stops with seating and timetables
- Programs to increase use of public transportation ridership by older adults

- Sidewalks and safe street crossings
- Larger signs and clear markings

Customers with Disabilities

For people with disabilities in rural areas, priorities include a need for long-distance transportation to reach jobs and essential services (particularly medical) and a need for accessible vehicles and lower cost options.[3]

Notable limitations for providing accessible service for those with disabilities in rural areas include:

- Limited funding or restrictions on how funding is used;
- Limited trip purposes—with limited funding, rural transportation may predominantly focus on medical or priority trips;
- Client-only transportation limited to clients who qualify for a specific program;
- Limited days and hours of service—limited and may be less flexible than urban areas;
- Transportation costs may be higher for long distance trips and lower population densities;
- Driver training and technology may not be the same as for urban areas; and
- People with disabilities may not be aware of all the transportation options available.

Rural communities can provide and support accessible services to meet the needs of travelers with disabilities through a variety of approaches including coordinating transportation services and vehicle use among transportation providers, establishing a voucher program where eligible individuals purchase trips—often with alternative providers such as volunteers or taxi operators—at a reduced cost, and offering volunteer driver programs where volunteers

are reimbursed by a transportation provider or other agency. Other types of service include offering accessible taxicab service or flex-route transit service that allow customers to reserve pick-up or drop-off locations off the main transit route. Additional options include auto support programs where eligible individuals can purchase donated vehicles or purchase modified, accessible vehicles, and developing travel training programs to help people develop the skills to use fixed-route transportation.

Culturally and Ethnically Diverse Populations

The United States is expected to continue to experience cultural and ethnic diversification in rural areas just as it has experienced economic diversification beyond farming to retailing, service and manufacturing employment. From an ethnic diversity perspective, the traditional population has been non-Hispanic white (82 percent in rural areas vs. 66 percent in metropolitan areas). African Americans are still the largest minority group in rural areas (8 percent of rural population in 2000), and the Hispanic population made up 5.4 percent of the rural population in 2000. Native Americans represented 4 percent of the rural population in 2000. In metro areas Hispanics now constitute the largest minority population, and the Hispanic population is expected to continue to grow in rural areas.[1]

Actions rural communities may need to take to address the needs of culturally and ethnically diverse rural residents include translating materials about transportation services for people with limited literacy, targeting outreach to their communities and offering affordable options. Other needs include raising public awareness of the role of churches and places of worship as a support network and increasing awareness of how cultural mores regarding family and privacy affect use of public transportation.[4]

Rural demographic trends help determine the transportation needs of the community. Based on that foundation, the next steps are to identify service gaps and evaluate community assets. Together this information can be used to develop a plan for developing new service or altering existing service.

Community Assessments and Gap Analysis Studies

The purpose of a community assessment is to identify existing transportation services and providers; examine service, funding and resource needs; determine gaps between needs and available services; and develop an action plan to address the gaps. Community stakeholders are traditionally involved by providing input throughout the planning process. Assessments are as individual as the communities that conduct them, but most share common themes. The following section describes key elements of community assessments based on models from the Adirondacks region, the State of Connecticut, and Humboldt County, California.

Adirondacks Tri-Lakes Region Community Empowerment Action Plan (2010)

The Adirondacks Region Community Empowerment Action Plan focuses on supporting aging in place for older adults in the Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake regions. The action plan was developed by:

- Forming a community task force

- Investigating examples of good community practices
- Reviewing guidelines for infrastructure, accessibility, walkability, and pedestrian safety
- Conducting interviews with policymakers and community members
- Conducting focus groups with stakeholders
- Conducting a public survey
- Compiling survey responses, prioritizing needs and forming an action plan
- Sharing findings and draft plan

The Adirondack plan demonstrates how customers most likely to use community services can get involved in the planning process early on and take an active role in an assessment of gaps and needs.

> **Grassroots, community-based planning**
>
> - enhances sustainability of the planning effort
> - raises awareness
> - creates ownership
> - makes community leaders aware that community members are concerned
>
> Source: Aging in Place in the Tri-Lakes Region of the Adirondacks, 2010

Locally Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan for the State of Connecticut (2007)

The Connecticut Department of Transportation's planning effort included a statewide survey to gather information on gaps and available services.[5] While it is common to think of gaps in terms of hours of service or funding, Connecticut DOT identified five categories for transportation gaps.

Categories include:

- **Information and awareness**—the public's awareness of transportation resources and how to use the services. Awareness may also include marketing, centralized resources, driver training and coordination, passenger coordination and passenger training because different systems may use different equipment.
- **Geographical gaps**—identifies places where expanded transportation is needed (e.g., may be inter-regional transportation, to a particular facility, etc.)
- **Temporal gaps**—identifies service hours and days where services may be needed (off-peak times, weekends, holidays) or service hours to meet employment, medical and retail hours.
- **Passenger service gaps**—for particular customers, such as people with disabilities, who need to make a trip outside ADA service hours or who have a need for door-to-door or door-through-door service. In rural areas, curbs are few and access may be limited by rural roads and long driveways.
- **Service quality**—where service already exists, improvements can be made in infrastructure and accessibility. Transit stop improvements, such as signage, pads, pull-overs, acquisition of accessible taxis, improved dispatch, replacing vehicles, driver qualification, and training.

Connecticut's plan illustrates that access to transportation extends beyond the vehicle or the bus stop. Getting the word out about the availability of transportation options is part of creating an accessible transportation system and should be considered in any gap analysis.

Humboldt County Transportation Services Gap Analysis (2010)

The final model featured in this guide is a county-level gap analysis conducted in California. Humboldt County's gap analysis considers both formal and informal providers of transportation. Examples of informal services are gas vouchers, volunteers and Meals on Wheels.[6] Aspects of a gap analysis include:

- Conducting an inventory of current transportation services and how they interconnect.

- Incorporating the transit assessment into a larger, overall community assessment or regulated plan, such as a regional transportation plan or a county pedestrian plan.

- Determining if a service gap is an absence of service, an absence of funding or an absence of human resources.

- Identifying gaps such as:
  - need for expanded service
  - need for increased frequency of service
  - need for better connections between providers
  - need for bus stop amenities
  - need for affordable transportation services
  - need to establish non-emergency transit
  - need for improved information about existing services.

As with the Connecticut approach, Humboldt County's process included an initial inventory of current services available that incorporated both formal and informal providers, such as non-profit agencies.

Public Engagement During a Community Transportation Analysis

Based on the three plans, important steps to take when conducting a service assessment include:

- Review current and potential funding sources

- Develop recommendations for staffing, service, coordination and funding structure

- Consider using regional university or county agency resources for GIS mapping, technological assistance, and data analysis

- Incorporate cultural awareness and sensitivity into the process

- Organize stakeholders and engage the community—individuals and agencies can offer valuable perspectives.

Key stakeholders in the planning process include:

- People with disabilities, older adults

- High school and college students

- All modal transportation providers (bus, van, volunteer drivers, taxi operators, intercity transportation, school transportation, paratransit, and rail)

- Bicycle/pedestrian advocates, county engineering/transportation staff state transportation representatives, and locally elected officials

- School administrators, community services (social, aging, recreation) and regional health care providers

- Major employers, faith leaders, center for independent living, mobility manager

- Housing authority representatives

If a community transportation assessment is federally funded, refer to U.S. Department of Transportation requirements related to the public involvement process and requirements for non-discrimination in federally assisted programs.

Resources and Conclusions

Transportation service in rural areas can be provided by one provider or through agency-to-agency collaboration that funds or operates van, bus and taxi services. Operators may be public agencies, private companies, or individuals volunteering their time and personal vehicles. Although transportation service in rural areas may have different service hours, be provided by smaller vehicles, and cover greater distances than urban service, rural communities can conduct their own appropriately scaled planning processes to identify the transportation needs of rural area residents. To find out more about rural community transportation options, accessible service and transportation planning, explore ESPA resources at *www.projectaction.org.*

> **Rural communities can benefit from service assessments and public involvement in the planning process.**

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2011 Accessible Transportation Coalitions Initiative, Southwest Colorado

For people with disabilities in rural areas, priorities include a need for long-distance transportation to reach jobs and essential services and a need for accessible vehicles and lower cost options, such as volunteer or taxi service.

About the Technical Assistance Centers

Easter Seals Project ACTION

Easter Seals Project ACTION is a federally funded technical assistance center serving people with disabilities and the transportation and service provider communities. Since 1988, ESPA has achieved its mission through the provision of training, technical assistance, applied research, outreach and communication.

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National Center on Senior Transportation

NCST is a federally funded training and technical assistance center administered by Easter Seals, Inc. in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. The NCST mission is to increase transportation options for older adults and enhance their ability to live more independently in their communities.

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National Rural Transit Assistance Program

National RTAP operates under a cooperative agreement between the Federal Transit Administration and the Neponset Valley Transportation Management Association. The overarching mission is to address the needs of rural, small urban and tribal transit operators across the nation.

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