



Second Quarter 2022 Edition

eNEWSLETTER

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The Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) was initiated in 1986 by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to provide resources, training and technical assistance to rural transit providers. The Missouri RTAP Center is located at Missouri University of Science and Technology (Missouri S&T) in Rolla. Since April 2012, Missouri S&T has been contracted by MoDOT to manage the RTAP program.



National RTAP is a program of the Federal Transit Administration dedicated to

creating rural transit solutions through technical assistance, partner collaboration and FREE training.

LETTER FROM THE MANAGER



Heath Pickerill
Missouri RTAP Manager

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DEAR TRANSIT FRIENDS,

Summer has arrived! I am always excited for warm weather and a bit more time in the day for the things I enjoy. In the past, I have also used the summer months to travel around the state catching up with the transit agencies we serve. Of course, that wasn't possible during the Pandemic; however, the University has eased travel restrictions, making it possible for me to attend meetings and visit with agencies one-on-one. I look forward to some transit related trips in the upcoming months. If you have any meetings you would like RTAP's participation, please let me know. I am happy to share the latest RTAP offerings or gather your ideas on how we can best serve transit agencies in the state.

The MPTA State Conference and Expo is scheduled September 28-29 at the University Plaza Hotel in Springfield. Registration for all Section 5311 providers will be paid directly by MoDOT as in the past. Use the 5311 – Register Now button so there is no charge. The agenda includes time for a Missouri RTAP update where Doreen and I will share information on the program and gather feedback from all of you. We are both excited to see everyone in person again! In addition, National RTAP will participate as an exhibitor, and I will be helping at the booth. Plan to stop by and pick up the various materials they will have available.

If your agency still has training needs, please reach out to Doreen. The RTAP instructor, John Rice, has several training dates available each month. As a reminder, Scholarship Reimbursement funds can be used for any conferences or educational opportunities, both virtual and in-person, you and your staff would like to attend. Some transit agencies have used these funds for inhouse training materials. We are happy to answer any questions about eligible expenses. We welcome your input, so if you have any agency news to share, let us know. We will include it in an upcoming issue or post it on the RTAP website. We want to thank the agencies who have been contributing great newsletter cover photos and updates. Please feel free to contact Doreen at harkinsd@mst.edu or me at pickerillh@mst.edu with any questions, comments, or suggestion.

Wishing you a fun and relaxing summer,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heath Pickerill". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Heath Pickerill,
Missouri RTAP Manager



STAFF CAPACITY, DRIVER SHORTAGES, SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES TOP OF MIND AT SENATE RURAL TRANSIT HEARING

THIS WEEK, THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS HELD A HEARING TITLED “ADVANCING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN SMALL CITIES AND RURAL PLACES UNDER THE BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE LAW.”

Held under the Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development, this was a short hearing, with only the chair and ranking member of the subcommittee, Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) and Sen. Mike Rounds (R-SD) asking questions in person and Sen. Jon Ossoff (D-GA) asking questions virtually.

WITNESSES INCLUDED:

- Ryan Daniel, Chief Executive Officer, St. Cloud Metro Bus
- Scott Bogren, Executive Director, Community Transportation Association of America
- Baruch Feigenbaum, Senior Managing Director, Transportation Policy, Reason Foundation

Rural transit agencies face unique challenges, often very different from their urban counterparts. All mentioned the variety of services that rural transit provides: while some agencies have fleets of 50 buses, others are much smaller and only have five cars or small vans. Many rural agencies also utilize on-demand transit: Bogren claimed these are often

more efficient for small agencies as these services can increase service levels and the number of people served while lowering overhead costs as compared to running fixed routes.

With smaller fleets, large geographic areas, a sparse concentration of customers, and fewer staff, rural agencies face many challenges. One of the biggest issues witnesses and Senators focused on was staff capacity constraints that exist at small transit agencies. While Sen. Smith mentioned resources DOT makes available, such as hosting webinars and taking phone calls from rural agency staff, many mentioned the capacity crunch that small agencies still have as staff wear many hats.

One solution Feigenbaum proposed was to lower rural agencies’ data reporting requirements. Currently, all transit agencies must report data in up to 21 different categories to the FTA. While large agencies have adequate staff, Feigenbaum argued this requirement places an inordinate burden on small agencies.

Instead, he recommended rural agencies be allowed to provide a minimum amount of information, such as farebox recovery ratio, passenger counts, and funding data. This way, he claimed, agencies would report the essential information, but the process would not be overly onerous.

Because of these staff capacity pressures, both Senators and witnesses commended FTA's recent Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) that streamlined the grant application process for two bus grant programs. This NOFO combined the regular Bus and Bus Facilities grant program (under which diesel, alternative-fuel, hybrid, and zero-emission buses are all eligible) with the Low or No Emission bus grant program (only hybrids, alternative fuels, and zero-emission are eligible). Thus, agencies without large or dedicated grant writer staff only must write one application, cutting down on redundancies.

In addition to difficulties in applying for federal funding, all witnesses agreed on the challenges small transit agencies face in finding local funding matches to satisfy the current 50/50 federal/local split in operating expenses. Both Sen. Smith and Sen. Rounds promoted their Investments in Rural Transit Act of 2021 (S.267), which would increase the federal share of operating costs to 80 percent in rural areas, though this has only been introduced in the Senate. Feigenbaum recommended looking to more local funding sources instead of relying on federal funding. In his written testimony, he mentioned the North Carolina structure, in which the state bundles federal and state rural transit funding onto one Rural Operating Assistance Program allocated via two formulae, one tracking the federal Elderly and Disabled Transportation Assistance Program and the other more general. In that way, the state can supplement rural operating assistance for each county as it judges necessary.

Rural agencies are also struggling with driver shortages. While some agencies' ridership has returned to near pandemic levels, said Bogren, agencies are having trouble filling the drivers' seats.

Bogren gave an example of when he visited one rural transit agency CEO, and when he arrived the staff apologized, saying she was out driving a van that day. Many rural systems rely on volunteer drivers, and these too have declined. One solution Bogren proposed was simplifying the process of obtaining a Commercial Driver's License (CDL),

as law requires drivers possess a CDL for vans designed for more than 16 people. The Biden Administration has also worked to expedite the CDL process through their November 2021 Trucking Action Plan, which expanded apprenticeship programs, connected veterans to trucking careers, and gave states more power to issue CDLs. In February 2022, Congress also introduced two bipartisan bills aimed at accelerating the CDL process. The LICENSE Act (Licensing Individual Commercial Exam-takers Now Safely and Efficiently Act) (H.R. 6567 and S.3556) would allow out-of-state and third-party training and permit those with a CDL learner permit to drive if accompanied by CDL-holder in the truck.

The Transportation Security Administration Security Threat Assessment Application Modernization Act (H.R.6571) will reduce fees and streamline the application process for commercial drivers applying for several TSA authorizations.

Two final issues mentioned revolve around rolling stock. First, Bogren spoke about supply chains' impact on vehicle procurement. He noted that small transit agencies have recently been quoted with long waiting periods due to high demand for small chassis. For van and small bus delivery, he said in the hearing that some agencies have been quoted at a 48-month timeframe, and in his written testimony he cites three years. Particularly with new IIJA money, rural agencies are ready to purchase new vehicles. Yet, a four-year delivery headway is steep, particularly as witnesses noted that many rural fleets are already past their useful life.

In addition, Feigenbaum mentioned the problems with Buy America (BA) requirements. On average, he stated, BA provisions are a big part of the reason why U.S. transit agencies pay 32 percent more for transit railcars than do providers in peer nations. (At least according to the study cited on page 18 of this CRS report.) He proposed lessening BA mandates for transit vehicles.

enotrans.org/article/staff-capacity-driver-shortages-supply-chain-issues-top-of-mind-at-senate-rural-transit-hearing/

RIPLEY COUNTY TRANSIT, INC.

RCT facility



Ripley County Transit, based in the beautiful and wooded Ozark hills of southern Missouri, sits just outside the county seat of Doniphan, MO.

The vision of transporting seniors began in 1982 with a grant for the purchase of one van, known as the Ripley County Senior Citizens Bus. This vehicle marked the beginning of providing transportation services to the elderly and disabled.

Then in 1989, Ripley County Transit received a 12-passenger van from the Missouri Department of Transportation which enabled services to be available five days a week.

In 1994, Ripley County Transit became incorporated. This decision, and a good one at that, was suggested by Shirley Tarwater, a Transit Specialist from Jefferson City. Changing the name provided the means to expand services to include the general public. By 1995, Ripley County Transit, Inc. was fully incorporated and grew steadily.

The agency moved from the Ripley County Nutrition Center in August 2002 to a one-room office rental space at 102 W. Water Street in downtown Doniphan. This former office space would later flood in 2017 due to the Current River cresting at a record 33.13 feet.

By 2004, another site was needed to house Ripley County Transit, Inc., having outgrown the office space on Water Street.

Encouragement and support from MoDOT provided the inspiration to expand the growth of services and much-needed operations space. A grant had to be submitted for a new facility. It was an undertaking that was willingly accepted and well worth the effort. This endeavor would prove to be a positive step for the future of Ripley County Transit, Inc. and Ripley County as a whole.

On April 17, 2005, a notice of public hearing was held for a new facility and by July 27, 2007, an 80% federally funded grant was approved for the office space and garage. Ripley County Transit, Inc. moved on March 4, 2011 to its new facility at RR2 Box 1121, Doniphan, MO. An open house was held at the new facility in Doniphan on May 6, 2011. In 2019, Ripley County Transit, Inc. received a new physical 911 address at 958 US Highway 160E, Doniphan, MO 63935.

May 2013 brought personnel changes to Ripley County Transit, Inc. Executive Director, Pat Lowery, retired and Laura Oldham was appointed unanimously by the Ripley County Transit Board of Directors as the new Executive Director.

The dreams of growth for Ripley County Transit, Inc. came to fruition and were recognized on August 15, 2016, at the MO Public Transit Association (MPTA) State Conference. The FTA Region VII Award of Excellence was presented to Ripley County Transit, Inc. for the highest percentage increase in ridership, 19%, among rural public transit systems in Missouri for the year 2015.

Fast forward 40 years, after purchasing one vehicle to provide transit services, to 2022. There are now 15 smoke-free and vape-free transit ambulatory and wheelchair accessible vehicles providing riders with safe and reliable transportation. Currently, 20 dedicated and safety conscious drivers transport clients to doctor appointments, the grocery store, to pay bills, etc. Door-to-door service for non-emergency transportation is available to all residents of Ripley County regardless of age, income, disability, race, gender, religion, or natural origin. Services are available for local and long-distance travel, including out-of-state.

To remain in compliance with their contract provider, all transit staff and drivers are required to receive specialized training each year through the Missouri Rural Transit Assistance Program.





Yearly, Ripley County Transit, Inc. drives approximately 350,000 miles to deliver riders to their chosen destinations.

In 2020, drivers provided 13,925 one-way trips and in 2021, drivers provided 12,671 one-way trips. Ripley County Transit, Inc. and many transit providers across the nation were deeply affected by the Pandemic. Most were forced to scale back or discontinue services. Ripley County Transit, Inc. weathered the storm and cautiously continued services during the Pandemic. Thankfully they did not need to shut their doors.

As of May 31, 2022, Ripley County Transit, Inc. provided 12,555 one-way trips. Hopefully services will continue to increase to the pre-Pandemic level.

Ripley County Transit, Inc. staff and drivers believe rural transportation promotes quality of life by showing respect to its passengers, caring for their individual needs, and providing needed jobs for the community. The "general public" mentioned earlier simply means "family" to all those of Ripley County Transit, Inc. The executive director, Laura Oldham, and assistant director, Sara McGavock, agree that Ripley County Transit, Inc. has become part of THEIR family.

PHOTOS:

Top left: Driver Doug Williamson and Kristy Bailey

Top Middle: Debbie Pope seriously taking deep cleaning of a vehicle

Top Right: Anita Carrens & Vernon Raper getting ready to begin their day

Right Top: Collage of some of the Ripley County Transit, Inc. employees over the past 20 years

Right Middle: RCT office staff. Front row (left to right) is Kristi Bailey, Dispatcher/Clerk and Sara McGavock, Assistant Director. Back row (left to right) is Melissa Lovins, Dispatcher/Clerk and Laura Oldham, Executive Director.

Right Bottom: Kevin Owen in CPR training



[CLICK HERE FOR MORE PICTURES](#)



WHAT BIG CITIES CAN LEARN FROM THE RURAL U.S. ABOUT PUBLIC TRANSIT

Grappling with bare-bones transportation networks, rural communities are implementing new transit innovations, a trend that federal infrastructure dollars could accelerate.

IT WAS SPLASHED ACROSS HEADLINES THROUGHOUT 2020:

Billions in additional federal funding is needed to keep the country's public transportation systems afloat in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and (most notably) New York getting all of the focus. The federal government did stave off many of the severe cuts that were feared with the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, but those funds are finite.

These investments are critical, but public transportation also exists outside of major urban metro areas, and mobility issues in rural communities are equally as important. Good public transportation in any city is a lifeline for accessing jobs, healthcare and education. While some assume everyone in rural America owns a car, most counties with high rates of zero-car households are actually rural ones. And for those who do own cars, car ownership is too often a massive expense.

As we watch urban areas grapple with slashing public transit services, rural residents and transit leaders are all too familiar with how bare-bones transportation networks can really be. In fact, most rural areas have been cut off from access to effective public transportation for years. But that is starting to change thanks to new transit innovations that rural communities are putting in place, a welcome trend that federal infrastructure dollars could accelerate.

Public transit has always looked different in communities like ours.

While subways and large fixed-route bus systems might work well in Atlanta, those aren't solutions that work well in rural Georgia. Over the last few decades, many rural communities have turned to dial-a-ride systems, in which riders can book rides by phone. As too many rural residents know, those services are rarely convenient or efficient: Rides typically have to be booked days or weeks in advance, pickup and drop-off times are unreliable,

scheduling and routing are often done by hand, and these services are expensive for what they provide. It's no surprise that many rural communities don't even try to provide public transportation.

Our cities have taken a different approach, one that's been a game-changer for our communities.

We're using technology to run our own on-demand transit services that are efficient and are drastically expanding access to affordable, convenient and reliable transit. We launched these innovative transit services in a matter of months — not years or decades — by focusing on outcomes for who we want to serve and embracing new ways that get us there.

A city with less than 60,000 residents — the population and density of Valdosta, Georgia — does not warrant fixed-route buses. This meant that, if they don't own a car, thousands of residents could be left without a convenient way to move around the city. As our city has continued to grow, the need for reliable and affordable public transit has only magnified.

That's why last spring we launched Valdosta On Demand, the city's first-ever, citywide on-demand public transit service. Since implementation, we've received over 14,000 ride requests per month and increased access to jobs and necessary destinations. Forty-five percent of riders use the service to go to work or school, while other trips allow residents to access grocery stores, hospitals, libraries and more.

The growth in this service has been explosive and immediately felt by members of the community. A 10-year resident of Valdosta, for instance, shared that before the service, he was forced to rely on friends for rides to his various part-time jobs because he doesn't own a car and needed to make ends meet. Now he can depend on the on-demand

service to easily get to work, see friends and enjoy the city.

Gainesville, Georgia, faced similar challenges. For years the city suffered from insufficient transit service. So we decided to take a step forward and try something new. On Dec. 14, 2020, we launched WeGo to replace three under performing fixed routes and immediately saw dramatic improvements. In two months, on-demand transit exceeded the ridership of Dial-A-Ride and the remaining fixed-route buses by more than 20%. The service has been so successful and efficient that it now covers the entire county.

The federal government has taken notice. In the new bipartisan infrastructure law, there is a significant new funding program that will provide \$300 million this year alone through the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program.

While the program is open to traditional infrastructure projects like building roads and bridges, it specifically enumerates "on-demand mobility services" as eligible for funds. This presents a huge opportunity for rural communities across the country to launch on-demand transit services.

While the population density and geography of rural communities like ours may stand in sharp relief from that of big cities, one thing is clear: Transit is an essential lifeline to many in both of our communities, and it's time we tap into transit technology innovations to provide a better quality of service immediately. We don't need to wait over 30 years for big, capital-intensive projects to materialize. We can deliver transformative, game-changing transit service in a way that is efficient, flexible and adaptable to a community's mobility needs. While big cities may get more attention for their transit infrastructure, it's actually smaller, rural cities like ours that are rapidly expanding tech-enabled transit services in record time.

smartcitiesdive.com/news/what-big-cities-can-learn-from-the-rural-us-about-public-transit/621640/

Upcoming EVENTS

2022 NATIONAL RTAP PHOTO CONTEST: THE BUS STOPS HERE

Our National RTAP 2022 Photo Contest – The Bus Stops Here – is all about where your bus stops. We're looking for photos that showcase your beautiful bus stop, shelter, station, or hub, as well as photos that show all the great places your bus stops at to bring riders to shopping, school, work, or leisure. Photos can include the bus, bus stop, drivers, and/or riders.

First Prize: \$400, Second Prize: \$200, Third Prize: \$100

Winners will also receive plaques, and all entries will also receive certificates. Entries will be showcased on our website and social media and displayed at one or more upcoming conferences.

JUDGING CRITERIA

- Photo quality
- Artistic design
- Originality
- Creative depiction of this year's theme: **The Bus Stops Here**

SUBMISSION PROCESS

- Send up to 3 photos to info@nationalrtap.org by August 20, 2022
- Photos must be in .jpeg format
- Label each photo as: Photographer's Name. Transit Agency
- Photos must be accompanied by a photo release form. Any people shown in the photos must sign the photo release form.

Photo release form link is :

irp.cdn-website.com/270961f6/files/uploaded/National_RTAP_Photo_Consent_Form_2022.pdf



MISSOURI PUBLIC TRANSIT ASSOCIATION 2022 STATE CONFERENCE & EXPO



MISSOURI PUBLIC TRANSIT ASSOCIATION (MPTA) CONFERENCE 2022

September 28-29, 2022

University Plaza Hotel & Convention Center
333 S John Q Hammons Pkwy | Springfield, MO
Phone: 417.864.7333

You're invited! The Missouri Public Transit Association (MPTA) invites you to the 2022 MPTA State Conference and Expo. This is an excellent opportunity for professional development and to meet industry peers, saving 75% of travel, meals, and lodging. Attendance is expected to surpass more than 200 public transportation leaders, elected officials, and community stakeholders throughout Missouri and the Midwest.

The MPTA 2022 Conference and Expo is a great opportunity to network with all MPTA members. Feel free to email Mike Foley at mfoley@mopublictransit.org with questions. Hope to see you there! Call the phone number above to reserve a room in the MPTA Conference block. **SECTION 5311 PROVIDERS REGISTER AT THIS LINK. REGISTER TODAY!**

HOW DOES TRANSIT HELP THE CLIMATE?

HYDROGEN FUEL CELL HYBRID-ELECTRIC DRIVE



WE'VE HEARD IT A LOT. RIDING TRANSIT IS GOOD FOR THE CLIMATE. AND THE CLIMATE NEEDS OUR HELP NOW MORE THAN EVER. IS THIS TRUE? YES. CAN WE REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE BY CHANGING OUR TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM? ALSO YES. HERE'S HOW.

TRANSIT LOWERS EMISSIONS, BRINGS CONVENIENCE

Transportation is about getting where we need to go — to where we live, where we play, where we work, where we pray. I have the hope that we can do this in a way that allows future generations to do the same. Riding a mile by bus in this country, on average, contributes 30% less to climate change than riding in a gas car alone. This accounts for average occupancy and holds true for most of the major transit systems in the country. Riding by rail is even better. Riding a bike or walking lowers your emissions down to zero. Each trip we make outside of a car makes a small difference in reducing your carbon footprint.

That's where the story usually stops, but these replaced car trips are just a small piece of transit's climate benefits.

Transit investments push our communities to be more accessible no matter how you travel by encouraging more efficient clustered development. So even if you never ride a bus, transit investments help you go places while driving less, grouping trips together, or making it easier to walk or bike. This concept applies at all densities from big cities to rural areas — communities everywhere can benefit from transportation policy that makes it easier to get around.

The impact of these changes to our communities can reduce vehicle travel by anywhere from 5–12 times as much as the benefits from directly replaced car trips. Clustered development allows us to get to where we need to go without literally spinning our wheels an extra distance due to sprawling land use planning. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's most recent comprehensive mitigation report similarly shows that compact and resource-efficient development patterns are a key portion of an overall transportation de-carbonization strategy.

We need better transit not only for the climate though, but also because it enhances mobility for everyone in a country where driving is often the only option.

Over 10 million US households in the United States do not have a car, whether that be due to high costs of ownership, maintenance, and insurance; inability to drive due to aging or disability; criminalization of poor drivers and inequitable traffic enforcement; or

a range of other factors. Public transit can provide another way of getting around that is more accessible to all and reduces transportation emissions.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Transportation has been the biggest contributor to climate change in the US since 2016, and its emissions are only projected to increase in the future without significant changes. While fuel economy and efficiency standards, and current EV adoption push vehicles to emit less per mile, the growth in vehicles miles traveled (VMT) currently outpaces those increases. Improving the cars and trucks we drive has been crucial in reining in transportation emissions, and we will not make the magnitude of progress necessary on climate without just plain driving less.

The country had a dip in transportation emissions around 2005 after Hurricane Katrina, when damage to refineries and production caused oil prices to spike above \$70 a barrel (that's a lot). This was largely linked to a decrease in travel was amplified during the Great Recession, when lower incomes and a host of demographic factors made it seem like the US reached "peak driving." On the contrary, within the decade, travel bounced back and kept climbing.

Through the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, VMT decreased sharply. The world turned upside down, and people traveled less for both work and non-work activities. I was lucky enough to hole up in the virtual universe and rarely get into a vehicle most of that year. Those who weren't so lucky often had to navigate a world of decreased transit service to carry out essential jobs and services. Though transportation emissions decreased around 10% from the previous pre-pandemic year, no one would wish for the turmoil and economic disruption that came with it. Since April 2021, travel has returned to pre-pandemic levels and has kept increasing, though with a different flavor — increasing truck traffic, less commute trips but more non-work trips, and unfortunate declines in transit ridership. Now that traffic is back, the benefits of providing frequent and reliable transit service are even more clear.

NOW'S THE TIME TO ADVOCATE FOR TRANSPORTATION CHANGE. HERE ARE SOME POLICIES THAT CAN HELP PUSH THE NEEDLE:

Assess climate impacts when deciding on all

transportation projects: Currently, highway and transit projects can get built without considering the carbon emissions increases or reductions they would bring. In December 2021, Colorado approved a greenhouse gas emission reduction standard to require this analysis, and other states are thinking to do the same. Reinstating a federal greenhouse gas performance measure in transportation planning could also require states to measure and reduce transportation emissions.

Increase transit investments and funding, especially electric ones: Transit has much room to improve. The latest federal infrastructure bill has given the opportunity for some major investments, though much more needs to be done. Transit operations funding (e.g., paying bus drivers) needs to be secured and increased for frequency and reliability of service. These investments will be even better for the climate if they are electrified, and many transit agencies and states across the country are setting targets for full transit electrification in the next two decades.

Set transit up for success with sustainable land-use policy: Federal, state, and local governments can enable walkable and compact communities as a foundation for transit investments.

Investments in biking and pedestrian infrastructure can make these neighborhoods safer and more sustainable. Investing in affordable housing and anti-displacement measures can help in a world where a scarcity of transit-oriented development often pushes people out of their communities.

At UCS, we have advocated for electrifying transportation and more cleaner fuels for years. These are indeed important, and it's clear that transit and land-use policies are part of the solution as well. Systemic change in making our transportation system connect people and things better is necessary if we want to effectively address the climate crisis, and this will take using all of the tools in our toolbox. There is no "easy fix" or "silver bullet" here, just lots of work to do!

cleantechnica.com/2022/05/05/how-does-transit-help-the-climate/#:~:text=Transit%20lowers%20emissions%2C%20brings%20convenience&text=Riding%20a%20mile%20by%20bus,by%20rail%20is%20even%20better



Justin L. Fowler / The State Journal-Register
via USA Today Network

TRANSPORTATION GAPS MAY PERSIST FOR RURAL OLDER ADULTS DESPITE INFRASTRUCTURE DOLLARS.

Some \$2 billion in federal money will soon be unlocked for rural transit projects, but it may not be enough to resolve long-standing accessibility issues older Americans face.

Judith Fisher doesn't want to be that small-town parent nagging her children for rides for everywhere she goes.

The 81-year-old, who resides in rural East Aurora, near Buffalo, New York, hasn't asked her two children for a ride to the doctor's office for physical therapy in three months.

She instead relies on the Rural Transit Service, a nonprofit transportation organization focused on driving older adults to dialysis clinics, adult day cares, the dentist and other health-related appointments.

Fisher, who has given up winter driving, said the transportation service has been a lifeline for her and other local transit-reliant residents.

"IT'S ALLOWING PEOPLE TO LIVE THEIR LIVES WITHOUT ASKING HELP FROM CHILDREN OR NEIGHBORS," FISHER SAID.

Millions of older adults living in rural America no longer drive and don't have adequate access to alternative transportation that can assist them with rides to banks, pharmacies and other important places, said Baruch Feigenbaum, senior managing director for transportation policy at the Reason Foundation.

Rural Transit Service, which employs three people but largely relies on its 65 volunteers, is an example of how nonprofit organizations can help address a lingering transit problem among older adults in rural populations, Feigenbaum said.

That idea may soon get a shot in the arm. President Joe Biden's infrastructure law is set to unlock \$2 billion in federal money for various rural transit projects. But it still may not be enough to solve the seemingly intractable problem of inadequate transportation for rural older adults.

"Having additional funding to expand services is always a good thing," said David Kack, executive director of the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University. But, Kack said, the "distances involved in rural areas" make it difficult to transform rural transportation.

Monday was the application deadline for the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, which will help fund several infrastructure projects nationwide.

The Transportation Department will award up to \$300 million in grants this year and \$2 billion over the next five years as part of the program.

SOME OF THAT FUNDING WILL LIKELY GO TO MORE TRADITIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS LIKE HIGHWAYS AND BRIDGES, BUT UNCONVENTIONAL PROJECTS LIKE "ON-DEMAND MOBILITY SERVICES" ALSO ARE ELIGIBLE.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, speaking to a town hall audience in Indiana last month, said towns will be eligible for innovative transit systems like on-demand service under the grant program.

"We've seen great results connecting people to jobs, to doctor's appointments, to community activities and resources," he said, citing states such as Vermont and Florida with successful track records using the transit systems.

He didn't mention how much of the \$2 billion could be spent on the systems. Asked how much money could be dedicated for on-demand service, the Transportation Department didn't specify.

The percentage of people over age 65 and living in rural areas increased nationally from around 16 percent to about 20 percent between 2012 and 2019, according to the Rural Transit Fact Book published earlier this year by the Small Urban and Rural Center on Mobility in the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute at North Dakota State University.

It was funded by the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University. Feigenbaum estimated that 3 million to 9 million people are transit-dependent and living in rural places.

RURAL POPULATIONS TEND TO BE OLDER WITH RESIDENTS TAKING FEWER BUT LONGER TRIPS, THE FACT BOOK REPORTED.

Higher concentrations of older adult populations are found in Florida, the rural Midwest and Great Plains region, and parts of the western U.S., the fact book said.

Many of those older adults can't physically drive anymore, don't want to drive or simply can't afford a private vehicle, meaning they rely on friends or loved ones to get around, according to rural transit experts.

What's more, unlike in large or midsize metropolitan cities where trains, buses and even cabs and Uber run nonstop and have the ability to drop older adults off at or near their preferred destinations, rural America is far less equipped and connected.

“THEY’RE STUCK,” FEIGENBAUM SAID. “WITHOUT RURAL TRANSIT, THE ONLY THING THEY CAN DO IS ASK SOMEONE FOR A RIDE OR BASICALLY WALK, WHICH, FOR MANY FOLKS WHO ARE ELDERLY OR DISABLED, ISN’T A VIABLE OPTION.”

One way to make rural transit more accessible for older adults nationwide — including those who are disabled or have low incomes — is to use various forms of federal funding to dole out more grant money for nonprofit organizations like the Rural Transit Service in New York, transportation experts say.

Each year, the organization receives a Community Development Block Grant for \$270,000 to pay for vehicles, maintenance and three employees, said Suni Stachura, the executive director.

“We only operate in towns and municipalities that do not have mass transit,” she said, adding that the priority is to provide medical transportation for clients across 25 towns. “Our goal is to get people back out in the community using health services.”

Feigenbaum called the nonprofit the national model for what an organization can do with the right resources. Federal funding for such programs and those that offer low-cost, Uber-type services, he said, could help alleviate rural transit woes for older people, if the funds are properly spent.

“IT DEPENDS ON HOW THE MONEY IS USED. WE’RE VERY GOOD AT SPENDING A LOT OF MONEY AND NOT GETTING A LOT OF RESULTS,” FEIGENBAUM SAID. “IT CAN GO A LONG WAY.”

He said not only does enough funding need to be made available, but success is also tied to how the transit entity, whether a nonprofit organization or a private transit agency, executes the funding. “If there are no detailed metrics involved, then it will be really easy for this funding to be wasted,” Feigenbaum said.

Several cities in rural areas already have some version of on-demand transit service.

Earlier this month, the Capital Area Rural Transportation System, a van transit service, launched in Lockhart, Texas, a city of 14,000 people about 35 miles from Austin. Van rides anywhere within city limits cost up to \$2.

In Valdosta, Georgia, a similar transit service became the city’s first transportation system last year after

using a \$1 million grant from the Federal Transit Administration to lease seven vans.

Meanwhile, Gainesville, Georgia, used a \$1 million FTA grant to jumpstart its WeGo transit van system, which takes passengers on rides throughout rural Hall County.

The mayors of Gainesville and Valdosta say the transit systems have far exceeded expectations, with both systems operating at max capacity.

Valdosta On-Demand vehicles make 300 trips per day on average. WeGo’s fleet of 17 vehicles conducted 80,000 trips during its inaugural year.

BUT THE SERVICES AREN’T PERFECT. THEY OPERATE FOR ONLY ABOUT 12 HOURS PER DAY MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY. AND EVEN THE MOST SPACIOUS VAN CAN OCCUPY ONLY 15 PASSENGERS.

“Our biggest issue is labor. We need more drivers,” said Gainesville Mayor Sam Couvillon. “We don’t have enough drivers to operate all the vans.”

Some transit experts reiterated that rural America is just too vast to completely lean on those types of alternative transit systems for the majority of older adults in remote places.

“There is quite a bit of demand-response transit service in rural America, as it is more efficient as opposed to fixed-route service,” Kack said. “Hopefully the additional funds can be used to address some of the challenges that exist in rural America.”

He added that other options such as car pools and van pools could use investment.

For now, people like RoseMarie Montreuil, 83, who gave up driving after she said she caused a car accident, will continue relying on alternative transit options such as the Rural Transit Service, where every two weeks she can stock up on groceries.

“I don’t have anybody to take me shopping because I don’t have anybody living close to me, and I don’t like to involve anybody else by asking them to take me shopping,” she said.

[nbcnews.com/news/us-news/transportation-gaps-may-persist-rural-older-adults-infrastructure-doll-rcna30264](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/transportation-gaps-may-persist-rural-older-adults-infrastructure-doll-rcna30264)

AVAILABLE TRAINING PROGRAMS

The following is a list of the training programs and course length of each that are currently available to rural transit providers through Missouri RTAP. Requests for training can be made by contacting Doreen Harkins, MO-RTAP Program Specialist, at harkinsd@mst.edu or 573-341-6155.

1. ACTIVE SHOOTER PREVENTION AND RESPONSE – 2 HOURS.
2. AGGRESSIVE DRIVING – 1 HOUR.
3. BACKING SAFETY – 1 HOUR.
4. BASIC FIRST AID – 1 HOUR.
5. BLOOD BORNE PATHOGENS – 1 HOUR.
6. CPR & BASIC FIRST AID – 4 HOURS.
7. DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PASSENGERS – 2 HOURS.
8. DEFENSIVE DRIVING – 3 HOURS.
9. DISTRACTED DRIVING – 1 HOUR.
10. DIVERSITY & AWARENESS TRAINING - PROVIDING QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE FOR TRANSPORTATION PASSENGERS WHO HAVE DISABILITIES – 2 HOURS.
11. DRIVEN TO EXTREMES – 1 HOUR.
12. DRUG & ALCOHOL AWARENESS – 1 HOUR.
13. EMERGENCY & EVACUATION PROCEDURES – 1 1/2 TO 2 HOURS.
14. FATIGUE AWARENESS FOR DRIVERS – 2 HOURS.
15. HIPAA – 1 HOUR.
16. NIGHT DRIVING – 1 HOUR.
17. OPERATION LIFESAVER – HIGHWAY-RAIL CROSSING SAFETY – 1 HOUR.
18. PASSENGER ASSISTANCE/MOBILITY AID SECUREMENT – 2 HOURS.
19. REASONABLE SUSPICION TRAINING FOR SUPERVISORS – 2 HOURS.
20. SAFE & SECURE PROPER INFANT AND CHILD SEAT INSTALLATION – 2 HOURS.
21. SENSITIVITY AWARENESS – 1 HOUR.
22. SEXUAL HARRASSMENT – 1 HOUR.
23. SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS – 1 HOUR.
24. WHEELCHAIR SECUREMENT – 2 TO 3 HOURS DEPENDING ON NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS.
25. WINTER DRIVING SAFETY – 1 HOUR.

For more information on classes and to register please visit: mltrc.mst.edu/mortaphome/mortaptraining/

RESOURCES

National RTAP – Rural Transit Assistance Program

www.nationalrtap.org/

Transportation Safety Institute – Transit Safety & Security Training Division

www.tsi.dot.gov/Transit.aspx

Federal Transit Administration – Rural Transit Assistance Program Page

www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_3554.html

Missouri Public Transit

www.mopublictransit.org/

National Transit Institute

www.ntionline.com/

Kansas RTAP – Kansas University Transportation Center

www.kutc.ku.edu/cgiwrap/kutc/rtap/index.php/index.html

Transportation Research Board's (TRB) Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP)

www.tcrponline.org/

