

Transportation for Rural People with Disabilities: Example Programs from Minnesota and Idaho

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Key Findings

- Transportation services are vital to the health and well-being of rural residents with disabilities. This case series highlights two rural organizations that have programs to provide transportation services to individuals with disabilities in their communities.
- The United Community Action Partnership in Marshall, Minnesota provides accessible transportation through public transportation and volunteer driver services, as well as mobility management services to help individuals with disabilities coordinate transportation.
- Mountain Rides in Ketchum, Idaho provides accessible transportation to rural residents through their Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) services, as well as their Community Health Transit Program, which provides accessible transportation to medical appointments in neighboring cities for individuals with disabilities.

Purpose

The purpose of this case series is to highlight efforts by organizations serving rural communities to increase access to transportation for individuals with disabilities. These may serve as examples to others considering ways to improve access to transportation for people with disabilities in their rural communities.

Background and Policy Context

Transportation is a well-documented social driver of health with particularly unique features and challenges in rural communities.¹⁻⁶ Distance to medical facilities and lack of transportation to health care services are longstanding barriers for rural residents.⁶⁻⁷ Public transportation services are more limited and less commonly available in rural versus urban areas.⁸ This is due to a range of reasons, including the financial cost and logistical difficulties of serving a smaller population across greater distances.⁶ Where public transportation is available in rural areas, operational constraints (e.g. hours of service, limited routes) can make it challenging for rural residents to rely on for widespread and consistent use, especially for time-sensitive events like medical appointments.⁶ Instead, rural residents tend to be more dependent on private vehicles, but this can be cost-prohibitive due to vehicle, maintenance, and gasoline costs.⁹ Indeed, more than one million households in rural U.S. counties do not have access to a private vehicle.¹⁰ Even for those who do, driving across large distances may increase the risk of accidents and injuries, particularly in inclement weather or on poorly maintained roads.¹¹

Beyond being an important driver of health for rural residents generally, transportation at the intersection of rurality and disability is especially vital. Accessible transportation is a critical component not only of access to health care, but to full participation in society and quality of life.¹²⁻¹³ However, people with disabilities face distinct challenges related to accessing transportation.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Further, people with disabilities living in rural areas face

overlapping challenges in transportation access, and require special consideration and support in order to live healthy lives.¹²⁻¹³

In this case series, we examine how two rural organizations in Minnesota and Idaho provide transportation services to individuals with disabilities in their areas.

Approach

We identified rural organizations with programs focused on providing transportation for people with disabilities through an online environmental scan. Primary data were collected through interviews with organizational representatives, conducted via Zoom in May and June 2025. We analyzed each case study individually to summarize key themes, including challenges and opportunities related to providing transportation for people with disabilities in rural areas.

Case #1: United Community Action Partnership, Marshall, MN

Rural community context

Marshall is a city of 13,996 people in southwest Minnesota.¹⁷ It is the seat of Lyon County and is home to Southwest Minnesota State University.¹⁸ Marshall is known for its deep connections within the agricultural and food industries, including Ralco, Archer Daniel Midland (ADM), and Schwan's Company.¹⁸

According to County Health Rankings, Lyon County ranks slightly higher than the average county in Minnesota for population health and well-being, but still ranks lower than the state average for some health indicators including rates of mammography screenings (48% vs 52%) and ratio of population to mental health providers (410:1 vs 280:1).¹⁹ However, some areas of strength for health indicators are preventable hospital stays (1,105 per 100,000 vs 2,255) and slightly lower unemployment rates (2.5% vs 2.8%).¹⁹ Individuals with a disability under the age of 65 made up 8.6% of the total residents in Lyon County from 2019-2023. The average time it takes for those 16 and older living in Lyon County to travel to work is 14.9 minutes.²⁰

Organizational overview

The United Community Action Partnership (UCAP) is a grassroots non-profit organization that offers programs in the key areas of community and family services, Head Start, housing, tax preparation, childcare pro-

grams, community projects, youth development, and transportation.²¹ Based in Marshall, Minnesota, UCAP serves 9 counties throughout southwest Minnesota with their transportation services, offering accessible public transit in Cottonwood, Jackson, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Pipestone, Redwood, and Rock Counties and volunteer driver services throughout their service area and in Nobles County.²¹ We spoke with Shelly Pflaum, Mobility Administrator, and Nick Leske, Director of Transportation at UCAP.

The Community Transit program is funded by the 5311 Formula Grants for Rural Areas through the Federal Transit Authority.²²⁻²³ As part of this funding, the local share is provided by local governments and through the fares collected. There are over 40 lift-accessible buses and just over 50 hired drivers for this program. UCAP also operates a volunteer driver program to provide transportation for individuals to areas outside of the service area of the Community Transit program. This program is funded through contracts with local counties and partner agencies. Most volunteer drivers use their own vehicles to transport individuals and are given mileage reimbursements for their total mileage. The volunteer drivers utilize their own insurance, but UCAP also has supplemental insurance that covers liability above their maximum. There are also two wheelchair accessible vans owned by UCAP as part of this volunteer driver program. The Community Transit program provides around 200,000 rides a year and the volunteer driver program provides around 16,000 rides a year.

Key features

The drivers of both the Community Transit and volunteer driver programs go through extensive training in order to assist community members with disabilities in accessing transportation via the accessible buses and vans. For example, they take classes on passenger assistance, operating wheelchair lifts, and securing mobility devices. Leske remarked about clients who use mobility devices, *"They [drivers] put a lot of effort into making sure those folks are safe and secure. Obviously, they can't just plop down on and put a seatbelt on like everybody else. They are in their device, and they need to be able to travel safely. I think that is something that we take pride in knowing that we can get them there."*

In addition to the Community Transit and volunteer driver programs, individuals with disabilities can connect with UCAP staff for mobility management services to coordinate accessible and affordable transportation when there are logistical and financial barriers. Individuals who need assistance with coordinating accessible transportation are referred to Pflaum, and she works with transportation services at UCAP and other agencies to coordinate transportation that meets the need of the individual. This mobility management is possible through the Southwest Minnesota Regional Coordinating Council (RTCC), for which Pflaum is the lead staff. The long-standing partnerships and relationships created through the RTCC make mobility management efforts successful. Pflaum said, *"When we do see that there is a problem that needs to be solved then we are able to do some mobility management. So that might even include referring outside of our agency. Just yesterday I found a solution for a lady to get her mom from Windom to Slayton. We can't do that by public transit. Our closest van, in order to do it with a van, we would be adding 342 miles on the trip. It is less than a 40-mile trip. So, it is like 'okay what do we do here?' Well, I can connect with another provider or check out what the options really are and do that leg work. We do all sorts of coordination and collaboration."* Pflaum noted that mobility management offers opportunities to educate people about the resources that exist in the area. She said, *"Sometimes mobility management is really just travel training, teaching people how to use the resources that are available to them. I have a 17-year long web of connections that allows me to have some idea usually where to go to take that next step."* These connections and partnerships across the region, as well as procedures on how to connect people with transportation resources, are well documented to ensure that community members are continuously able to access accessible transportation into the future.

Challenges and opportunities

One of the biggest challenges in providing transportation for individuals with disabilities in rural southwest Minnesota is finding drivers for the Community Transit and volunteer driver programs. Less than 20 years ago,

UCAP had over 100 volunteer drivers for two counties, and every hired driver position was full. The number of volunteers now hovers around 35 for nine counties, and there have been multiple driver positions open for the past 5 years, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *"It takes the right kind of person. You are interacting with the public,"* Leske said. And when it comes to public transit drivers, he added, *"With everything being lift accessible and getting them out and securing, it takes somebody who wants to do that and to try to find that right fit because it is a position that needs that."*

Despite these challenges, Leske and Pflaum expressed how big an impact the drivers they do currently have for both the Community Transit and volunteer driver programs are making in their community. The drivers take pride in ensuring that all community members, with and without disabilities, are able to travel safely and securely wherever they need to go, whether it is for a medical or social appointment. Pflaum shared that they even had two members of their community who were able to utilize UCAP's accessible transportation services right up until the end of their lives. One of these individuals was a veteran, and Pflaum was able to coordinate accessible transportation for him when it wasn't available to him through other organizations. She said, *"We were able to offer him a service and through another program we have, we were able to put two programs working cooperatively together and be able to provide him cost effective transportation to his VA appointments. His last trip with us was the week before he died. To me, it is those things that remind me why we do what we do."*

In addition, Leske and Pflaum both noted how the volunteer driver program has filled a gap in the community by picking up where public transit leaves off. Even with only having two wheelchair accessible vans, the volunteer program has helped provide out-of-area, accessible transportation that is cost effective for people who pay out-of-pocket for transportation.

Pflaum ended by saying, *"Each of these trips is a person. Each of these trips for these people is allowing them to stay here. It is allowing them to live so they can stay where they are, which is probably where they want to be."*

Case #2: Mountain Rides, Ketchum, ID

Rural community context

Ketchum, Idaho is a city of 3,555 people in Central Idaho.²⁴ It is the seat of Blaine County, situated in the Rocky Mountains and Wood River Valley. Ketchum is known for its mountainous landscape that includes hiking and skiing, lively downtown life, and a rich history that is celebrated during Labor Day weekend festivities.²⁵ The Wood River Valley experienced significant population growth between 2010 and 2020, especially in Ketchum which grew by nearly one-third, and Hailey which experienced a 15% population increase.²⁶

According to County Health Rankings, Blaine County ranks slightly better than the average county in Idaho for population health and well-being but still ranks lower than the state average for some health indicators such as the percentage of people under the age of 65 without health insurance (15% vs 10%) and child care cost burden (24% vs 21%).²⁷ However, some areas of strength for health indicators include preventable hospital stays (971 per 100,000 vs 1,534) and ratio of population to primary care physicians (1,240:1 vs 1,530:1).²⁷ Individuals with a disability under the age of 65 made up 7.1% of the total residents of Blaine County from 2019-2023. The average time it takes for those 16 and older to commute to work in Blaine County is 17.7 minutes.²⁸

Organizational overview

Mountain Rides is a public transportation system that offers service throughout the Wood River Valley of Idaho that includes the cities of Bellevue, Hailey, Ketchum, and Sun Valley.²⁹ Their routes span 17 miles through the valley, and they also have in-town routes in Hailey, Ketchum, and Sun Valley. We spoke with Jamie Canfield, Director of Transit Operations.

Mountain Rides has two programs for people with disabilities: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) services and Community Health Transport (CHT).³⁰ They have six vehicles for the ADA service, which provide curb-to-curb services for residents with disabilities, including for medical appointments and other errands such as grocery shopping or going to the post office. Mountain Rides receives funding from the 5311 Formula Grants for Rural Areas through the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and as a stipulation of that funding, they are required to provide ADA services.²³ Users of the ADA service must complete paperwork that de-

scribes their needs and is signed by a health care provider in order to use the service. The CHT program provides transportation from Bellevue to Twin Falls, which is about 65 miles away. This program is intended for medical appointments in Twin Falls, which has a larger hospital and dialysis services.

Key features

The entire Mountain Rides transportation system is fare free, which is a valuable asset to the communities they serve for all residents, including those with disabilities. The system started as a fixed route system not funded by FTA and received funding through the 5311 grant starting in 2007. The FTA funds 80% of the system and the rest is funded by the cities that make up the market.

One key success of the ADA service specifically is they have a 100% pickup rate and have not denied service to anyone upon completing the paperwork. The ADA service is available for residents living within three-quarters of a mile of a fixed route, though they can sometimes be flexible to pick people up just beyond this distance. As Canfield told us, *"I'm not going to deny someone service... [who is] in a wheelchair who can't get out of their driveway or get to their car, or whatever, and you know they don't have a way to get to the hospital. I couldn't honestly feel good about that. Because I mean this [is a] service where we're trying to help people."* Mountain Rides has also upgraded four of their six ADA vehicles to electric vans that have a wheelchair lift rather than a ramp, which makes transport easier and more efficient. They have their own charging stations for the vehicles in a new facility that was finished in 2025.

Challenges and opportunities

Despite the great success of Mountain Rides, there are some challenges they face in providing transportation services in the Wood River Valley. First, because of the nature of the area, there are people who request ADA service who live in a more remote location, which can pose a challenge. Mountain Rides tries to work with these residents to coordinate pick-ups from a location that is closer to the fixed route, and they are working on expanding the ADA service throughout the county to make it more accessible for those who live off the service route. When we spoke with Canfield, Mountain Rides

was also managing the challenges of construction in the area, which poses some disruptions for both fixed routes and the ADA service.

Another challenge is making sure people know the free service is available to them, particularly when there is a language barrier. Mountain Rides has a good relationship with many of the medical providers, including the larger hospital in Twin Falls, where social workers have helped notify patients about the service. Mountain Rides has also invested in a new marketing manager to expand their reach to inform residents about their services and programs for people with disabilities.

Conclusion

Transportation services are critical to the health and well-being of individuals with disabilities living in rural communities. This case series illustrates what two organizations are doing to provide transportation for residents in their rural communities with disabilities.

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