



**WASHTENAW
HEALTH
INITIATIVE**



Equitable Transportation Options for Washtenaw County Seniors

A CALL TO ACTION

June 22, 2023



**Ann Arbor Area
Community Foundation**

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Introduction

The Washtenaw Health Initiative Healthy Aging Collaborative hosted the Washtenaw County Senior Transportation Summit on March 16, 2023 in Ann Arbor. The summit was designed to improve understanding of the county's transportation system and how it serves the needs of seniors. An assets-based approach was used to review community transportation options, areas of unmet need, as well as opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

The Washtenaw County Senior Transportation Summit was funded by the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation

In this report, we provide a synthesis of the summit proceedings as well as **a call to action** for Washtenaw County's policymakers, funders, and decision leaders to improve transportation options for seniors, regardless of their location, disability status, or ability to pay for services.

For seniors, transportation is essential to health

National research findings suggest that transportation, or lack thereof, affects access to preventive care, food, medicine, social services, family connections, faith communities, and more. As such, **transportation barriers for older adults can diminish health, well-being, and quality of life.**

In the U.S., 80 percent of federal transportation investments support roads, bridges, and highways while **less than 20 percent support public transit systems.**

Research into transportation options for Washtenaw County seniors

With existing national research in mind, the WHI Healthy Aging Collaborative assembled an ad hoc committee and secured Sue Ann Savas, a program evaluation expert, to complete a systematic review of Washtenaw County's transportation system and its response to the needs of local seniors.

The review included:

- Studying local reports, such as the [Washtenaw County Coordinated Plan](#) by the [Washtenaw Area Transportation Study](#), and conducting a brief scan of the research literature.
- Developing a Transportation Inventory, including 25 transportation providers and programs serving Washtenaw County residents.
- Interviewing 21 individuals, including transportation providers, seniors, and funders about the top transportation needs of seniors in our county.
- Conducting a Secret Shopper Experiment by calling 17 area transportation providers to find rides to and from various locations within the county (one to two attempts for each provider).
- Reviewing relevant policies, such as [Public Act 196](#), and financial statements such as relevant tax filings, to track the flow of transportation funding in Washtenaw County for a full Sankey Diagram.

Seniors who *are* able to access transportation in our county

Through this research, we were able to identify the types of seniors who were more likely to have their transportation needs met most of the time. These seniors often:

- live in high-density areas
- have a supportive family or social network that can provide rides
- have funds to pay for rides, including non-emergency medical transport
- know of a reliable transportation provider and how to reach that provider
- live on a public transportation route and can safely get out of their homes to the pick-up location
- belong to an agency, senior center, or residential community that offers rides to members
- have and can use a smartphone to find, reserve, and pay for rides.

Seniors who *are not* able to access transportation

The Washtenaw County seniors who are unable to meet their transportation needs were more difficult to characterize, but [one large analysis](#) sponsored by the national Transportation Research Board found that in any given year, approximately 3.6 million people fail to receive medical care due to transportation barriers.

The individuals who face these transportation barriers are more likely to be:

- older
- rural residents
- less educated
- low income
- female
- ethnic minorities
- diagnosed with chronic health conditions

In fact, individuals with the highest burden of disease also face the greatest transportation barriers.

An ideal transportation system for seniors is within reach

An ideal transportation system for seniors would need to meet a variety of requirements to ensure accessibility, convenience, and safety, such as:

1. multiple modes of transportation, including buses, vans, and taxis, to accommodate the differing mobility levels of seniors
2. options for personalized travel assistance, such as door-through-door service, door-to-door service, and free ridership for caregivers to help those with mobility impairments
3. safety measures to ensure that seniors feel secure while traveling and features like wheelchair accessibility, adequate lighting, and clear signage

4. sliding fee scales or other options for affordability, with clear, concise, and easily available ride information on fares and routes
5. options for finding, scheduling, and paying for rides, including tech applications and non-tech access such as a call center
6. elimination of transit deserts in our community (utilizing the Opportunity Index to identify) and adoption of an explicit strategy to close gaps in transportation routes.

Call to action

Summit presenters and participants emphasized that transportation system enhancements for seniors and persons with disabilities **will benefit ALL transportation users**. The call to action below has been assembled from recordings of the presentations, table-top discussions, and closing Q&As.

First, identify a dedicated champion or co-champions.

In Washtenaw County, there are a number of excellent leaders from organizations that see transportation as their primary service and organizations that see transportation is an ancillary but critical service.

A transportation system champion is needed to convene a diverse group of stakeholders to develop a shared line of sight and a set of strategies and actions to advance the county-wide transportation system.

Revisit the coverage of the current transportation authority.

Summit participants learned about the Public Transportation Authority Act (Act 196 of 1986), which allows for the creation of a local public transit authority and taxing district. The Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority presently serves a smaller footprint, is incorporated under Act 55, and provides transit services for the City of Ann Arbor, the City of Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, Pittsfield

Action:

Consider conducting a feasibility study to explore changes to the current transportation authority.

Superior Township, and Scio Township. With adoption of articles of incorporation and a vote from local elected officials, the current authority can be expanded to other communities within the county. With a similar approval process, a second transportation authority could be added to the western side of the county, for example.

Deepen connection with the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA).

Summit presenters addressed the complications of regional transit politics. However, they stressed the need to work on a regional scale. Summit participants, including elected officials, expressed a new interest in learning more about the RTA's roles and responsibilities within Washtenaw County as a funder (not just a provider).

Action:

Work with local and state public officials to establish a working relationship with the RTA.

Increase the effectiveness of mobility manager services.

Summit participants learned that Secret Shopper callers were not guided to other transportation providers when their first request for a ride failed. Summit participants also learned that MDOT provides Washtenaw County with most of our Mobility Manager funding (over \$100,000 per year). One local provider receives 70% of funding for the county.

Action:

Work with MDOT to identify which local providers are receiving Mobility Manager funding from which sources, review service utilization rates, and consider redirecting those funds to perhaps hire one Mobility Manager for the county.

Consider centralizing and coordinating providers to improve access and build data.

The idea of a centralized hub for finding and booking rides was discussed as a possible solution. This could connect disparate services, increase awareness of what is available, and streamline the process of finding, scheduling, and paying for transportation. The hub would also screen for and connect callers to basic resources such as food hubs and housing hubs. The solution could include a review of how insurance coverage can support rides to medical appointments and other places to meet daily needs. What is the role of the health systems in meeting the transportation needs of their patients? Would the service be available in languages other than English? The centralized system would capture real time data on who needs what type of ride from where to where. The data could be used to inform new routes, schedules, etc.

Action:

Consult with Feonix Mobility Rising and other similar organizations to develop the specifications and costs for a centralized coordinated transportation assistance hub.

Map the flow of funding—both current and potential.

How can a few providers receive a majority of the transportation funding while other providers receive \$1000/year for their entire transportation service? Summit participants expressed a need for more information and transparency about our current funding sources and allocations within the county. How are funding decisions made? By whom? How are allocation levels set? What is

Action:

Consider working with MDOT and an accountant to map the flow of transportation funding using a Sankey Diagram. Cull the 130 transportation funding sources and public formula

allowable? Which policies are in place that may be limiting our access to funding?

funds mentioned in the Summit to increase resources to support current needs and emerging innovations. Investigate the LETS model operating in Livingston County.

Improve access to new vehicles, as needed, along with operational funding.

Summit participants learned that the federal government has dedicated funding for new vehicles, but these requests must be processed and approved by the local transportation authority. Once a nonprofit agency, for example, secures a van, they would need to find other funds to cover the cost of the driver, gas, and vehicle maintenance. Senior centers, meal service programs, and other safety net service providers expressed interest in offering transportation to their current program participants. Some summit participants suggested nonprofits contract with existing providers rather than purchase and try to maintain new vehicles.

Action:

Identify current contractual relationships between the providers receiving public funds and the nonprofits interested in new vehicles. Analyze the costs and benefits to both parties including how rider fares are accounted for.

Consider alternatives to technology.

While technology was seen as a potential solution to improving transportation services, summit participants also highlighted the challenges that technology can pose for seniors. For example, the heavy emphasis on autonomous vehicles was met with

Action:

Find alternatives for seniors with limited access to technology.

skepticism, with some questioning whether this would be a viable solution for the aging population.

It is important to note that these call to action recommendations are consistent with the funding requirements and strategies outlined in the [Washtenaw County Coordinated Plan](#) developed by the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS).

In search of champion(s)

The Washtenaw Health initiative is actively seeking champion(s) for this work who can:

- 1) identify the appropriate solutions, such as those recommended above
- 2) identify funding to support planning and implementation,
- 3) set a strategic agenda to improve the transportation system and to make it more equitable for Washtenaw County's seniors and other vulnerable citizens, and
- 4) work with stakeholder groups to ensure community voices are represented throughout the process

About the Washtenaw County Senior Transportation Summit

On a Thursday morning in early March, dozens of local stakeholders came together to discuss transportation challenges for Washtenaw County's aging population—and ways to address those challenges.

Summit participants included elected officials like U.S. Representative Deborah Dingell, State Senator Jeff Irwin's Chief of Staff Erin Williamson, Washtenaw County Commissioner Justin Hodge, and Superior Township Clerk Lynette Findley.



Other participants included representatives from the Commission on Aging, county administrators, transportation providers, non-profit organizations serving older adults and persons with disabilities, health care providers, senior centers, and funder.

Summit speakers included representatives from the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), the Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority (The Ride), and Feonix-Mobility Rising, a national nonprofit that aims to reduce transportation barriers. Summit presenters were selected to provide local, state and national problem-solving perspectives.

Summit presenters and participants used a problem-solving approach. Dale Berry and Marie Gress, co-chairs of the Washtenaw Healthy Aging Collaborative, moderated the summit and facilitated the in-person and online discussions.

[Speaker presentations can be accessed here.](#)

[The summit recording can be viewed here.](#)

Between each speaker, attendees discussed equitable transportation solutions using the following questions to guide the discussion:

- What did you hear from the speaker that would improve Washtenaw County's transportation system for older adults?

- What did you hear from the speaker that might not work in Washtenaw County?
- What would you need to know more about to make more informed decisions about transportation needs and directions?



The impetus for the summit

[Sue Ann Savas](#), a clinical associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work, kicked the summit off by describing the Healthy Aging Collaborative’s research on the ways in which transportation, or lack thereof, can influence health.

“We have really good data on fruit and veggie intake,” says Sue Ann Savas. “But we don’t have data on transportation. We don’t have good data on routes or on what’s working and not working.”

In efforts to change that, the group:

- interviewed 16 key stakeholders,
- inventoried local public transportation providers,
- examined publicly available transportation reports, and

- Conducted a secret shopper study, where they called local transportation providers to identify a transportation route for a doctor's appointment.

Through the experiment, the collaborative found that local public and non-profit providers allowed for wheelchairs and walkers, while most of the commercial providers did not. While 70 percent of the county's transportation providers offered door-to-door services, only 30% offered door-through-door services—a crucial service that helps mobility-impaired people get from their house to the vehicle and from the vehicle back to their home.

Savas notes that the flow of the county's transportation funding was difficult to pinpoint, which can cause challenges when advocates try to identify equitable solutions.

With all this in mind, the collaborative decided to host a summit to convene local leaders and discuss solutions.



Data from the collaborative's research was shared with attendees through a series of six posters:

- 1) Transportation options in Washtenaw County.
- 2) Transit observations for adult living in low population density areas.
- 3) The prevalence of technology in transportation systems.
- 4) Local flow of transportation funding sources.

- 5) Results from the Health Aging Collaborative’s Secret Shopper experiment.
- 6) Centralized call center concept model.

Attendees were invited to add their own thoughts and experiences to the posters before hearing from local, state, and national transportation experts.

Local transportation options.

Matt Carpenter, chief executive officer of the Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority, provided an update on local transportation plans. He outlined the Ride’s services such as:

- fixed route buses that help people get to a job, a medical facility, or a social activity;
- weekly GroceryRide services that take seniors from their homes to Meijer and back; and
- GoldRide, provides free transportation to people ages 65 or older on fixed bus routes.

For more information on The Ride’s services, [visit their website](#).

Additionally, Carpenter discussed [The Ride’s recent millage](#). Funds from the \$2.38 million millage will be used to develop an express route from downtown Ypsilanti to downtown Ann Arbor, as well longer hours of operation, like more frequent service on the weekends.

But this millage only taxes Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and Ypsilanti Township. This means that only residents of those areas will reap the benefits.

“Without a county-wide tax base, you are going to be left with a patchwork of funding which isn’t great for creating a viable network,” said Carpenter. Therefore, seniors who live on the west side of Washtenaw County—where transportation options are limited—won’t benefit from the millage but could benefit from county-wide transportation funding.

During the Healthy Aging Collaborative stakeholder interviews, one senior in Sylvan Township needed door-through-door service “someone to come into my

house and help me into the van.” The service was hard to find, and expensive when it was available. Another interviewee in Bridgewater Township said simply, “Public transportation is not an option for me.”

In 2016, an effort to create regionwide transportation tax through the Southeast Regional Transit Authority was rejected. But Carpenter believes there is potential for counties—like Washtenaw—to approve a county-wide transportation tax.



Innovations at the state level

Janet Geissler (*Mobility Innovations Specialist, MI Department of Transportation*) was invited to share how funds pass from the federal government to the state and then to the transportation authority within each county. She described the various FTA funding sources that are available for urban areas, rural transportation, enhanced mobility of seniors and individuals with disabilities, and miscellaneous discretionary grants,

Lastly, Janet Geissler, a mobility innovations specialist at the Michigan Department of Transportation, shared the urgency for a statewide MaaS platform. Geissler said this is necessary not just for local public transit but also for commercial vendors like Uber and Amtrak.

Geissler believes that governments, transportation agencies, community organizations, and private entities should work together to develop comprehensive transportation networks that address the specific needs of seniors.

Janet also described a few other innovations that are in the early planning stages: automated wheelchair securements, AbleLink Way Finder App, and automated vehicles.

Enhancements made for seniors and persons with disabilities will benefit all users, Geissler shared.

Innovations across the county and mobility as a service.

Kate Schramm (*Director of Programs and Partnerships, Feonix - Mobility Rising*) was invited to share innovations from her organization's work across the country. She introduced participants to the Transportation Assistant Hub model, which maximizes some key components to achieve transportation equity.

Schramm said, achieving transportation equity involves taking a look at:

1. Staffing
2. Technology
3. Community Outreach
4. Capacity

Regarding technology, Schramm discussed Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and the importance of a central access system.

“The fragmented labyrinth of resources, policies, and programs for transportation is not working for those who rely on it the most,” said Kate Schramm.

The MaaS concept is that riders need a one-stop shop to access transportation. Through technology, regions are hoping to make it possible for

residents to see, book, and pay for their transportation options in one app or website. The Feonix model also includes call center support for those without access to smartphone or Internet.

Mobility Navigators, which offer social service navigation and referrals to other social resources, can be a powerful tool to help seniors navigate the transportation system, says Schramm—whether it is a MaaS system or a fragmented one.

But all of this requires funding and buy-in from leaders.

Looking ahead. Next steps for local solutions.

For Washtenaw County, it will be crucial to address these challenges and develop comprehensive transportation services tailored to the needs of senior citizens if we hope to preserve the health of our seniors—regardless of their financial means or location.