



September 2025

RURAL AND TRIBAL TRANSIT

The Federal Transit
Administration Should
Evaluate Its Efforts to
Help Improve
Accessibility and
Service

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107455](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Public transportation can be critical to the millions of people living in rural and tribal areas. Accessible public transit is especially important for those with limited driving abilities due to age or disability. However, even with recent grant funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, stakeholders have raised questions about meeting the transit needs of an increasingly aging population.

GAO was asked to review issues related to accessible transit. This report examines (1) the primary federal funding sources for rural and tribal communities for accessible transit for older adults and people with disabilities; (2) the approaches these communities have used to provide this service, and the challenges they have faced; and (3) how the Department of Transportation (DOT) and FTA's efforts have helped communities use funds to improve accessible transit services.

GAO reviewed statutes, regulations, and DOT and FTA documentation. GAO conducted case studies of three Tribes and four states, including three site visits, and interviewed 44 federal and transportation agency officials and other stakeholders, such as groups representing older adults. GAO compared FTA's efforts to key practices and requirements for assessing the results of federal efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FTA establish a process to regularly assess the effectiveness of its efforts in assisting rural and tribal communities' access and use of funding programs in support of its objectives. DOT agreed with the recommendation.

For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at vonaha@gao.gov.

September 2025

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The Federal Transit Administration Should Evaluate Its Efforts to Help Improve Accessibility and Service

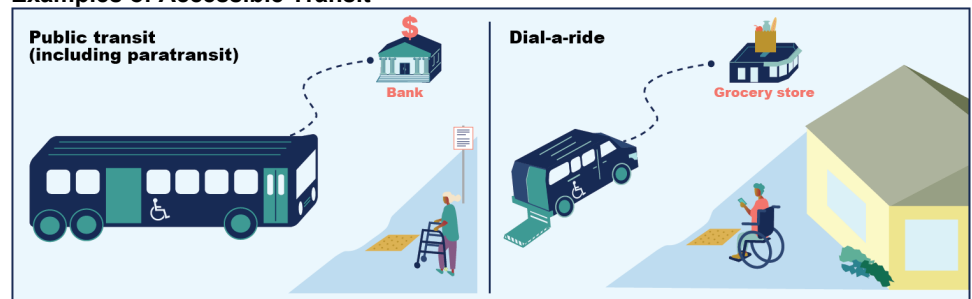
What GAO Found

Federal funding is key for many rural and tribal transit providers to meet their communities' needs, especially the accessible transit needs of older adults and people with disabilities. These needs include accessing jobs, education, and essential services, such as medical appointments and groceries. GAO identified three Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grant programs that rural and tribal communities primarily rely on:

- the Formula Grants for Rural Areas program,
- the Public Transportation on Indian Reservations and Tribal Transit Program, and
- the Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities program.

While Tribes and rural communities use federal funding and other approaches to provide and support accessible transit services, their transit providers face an array of challenges. Based on interviews GAO conducted with federal and transportation agency officials and other stakeholder group representatives, the most frequently cited challenges included funding constraints (25 of 44) and staffing shortages (24).

Examples of Accessible Transit



Source: GAO illustration and review of Federal Transit Administration documentation. | GAO-25-107455

Note: Paratransit, broadly defined, is accessible, origin-to-destination transportation service that operates in response to requests from eligible riders and supplements fixed route services.

FTA assists communities in accessing and using federal grant funds, and addressing the challenges they face in doing so, through a variety of efforts. FTA has identified related objectives to removing barriers and has conducted performance management reviews to assess its progress. However, FTA has not formally or more broadly assessed whether these efforts have helped communities better access and use funds and does not have plans to do so. Additionally, while FTA has conducted performance reviews, it has not formally assessed the effectiveness of its efforts in helping the agency achieve its strategic objectives, as called for by key practices based on legal requirements.

Without regular assessments, FTA may be missing opportunities to help address rural and tribal communities' needs and challenges as related to accessing and using funds, and to more effectively align its efforts to best support its objectives and prioritize resources. For example, FTA might not be fully leveraging the strategies that best assist communities and might be spending resources on strategies that are less effective.

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Abbreviations

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended
CCAM	Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility
DOT	Department of Transportation
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
IIJA	Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act
National RTAP	National Rural Transit Assistance Program
NEMT	nonemergency medical transportation
OAA	Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended
Section 5310	Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program
Section 5311	Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program
TTP	Public Transportation on Indian Reservations and Tribal Transit Program

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September 5, 2025

Congressional Requesters

Public transportation can be critical to the millions of people living in rural and tribal areas, especially accessible public transit for those with limited ability to drive due to age or disability. It offers access to jobs, education, and essential services, such as medical care and grocery shopping. The approximately 1,300 rural transit providers and 140 tribal transit providers across the country face an array of challenges in their efforts to provide safe, cost-effective public transportation.¹ For example, rural and tribal transit systems cover large distances spanning thousands of square miles in remote areas with low population densities, resulting in potentially longer trips and fewer riders at any given time than urban transit systems. Compared to large urban systems, they also generally have smaller budgets, fewer employees, and a smaller proportion of transportation funding.

As such, federal funding is key for many rural and tribal transit providers to meet their communities' transit needs, especially the accessible transit needs of older adults and people with disabilities.² For example, through the Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program (Section 5311), the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provides funding to generally support comprehensive planning and coordinated and effective delivery of public transportation systems in rural and tribal areas.³

¹The most recent edition of the *Rural Transit Fact Book* estimated that there were approximately 1,300 rural transit providers and 140 tribal transit providers in the U.S. in 2022 based on the number of these providers receiving federal funding as reported in the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) National Transit Database. Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute, North Dakota State University, *Rural Transit Fact Book 2024* (Fargo, ND: June 2024).

²There is no standard definition of older adults for the purposes of federal assistance programs, if that specific term is used at all. For the purposes of this report, we are defining older adults as those 65 years and above, as federal assistance programs for older adults generally target individuals 65 and above.

³Under a formula grant program, DOT distributes funding to all eligible recipients using a statutory formula.

In 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided more than \$4.1 billion in funding for this program over 5 fiscal years.⁴ Localities and other eligible entities can use this funding to provide accessible transit services, including services that offer rider-requested origin-to-destination transportation.⁵ However, even with this funding, stakeholders have raised questions about communities' ability to meet needs due to an increasingly aging population.

You asked us to review issues related to accessible transit. This report examines (1) the primary federal funding sources for rural and tribal communities to improve the accessibility of transit services for older adults and people with disabilities; (2) the approaches these communities have used to provide accessible transit services to older adults and people with disabilities, and the challenges, if any, they have faced in meeting transit needs; and (3) how DOT and FTA's outreach, coordination, and other efforts have helped these communities access and use funds to improve accessible transit services.

To address our first objective, we reviewed relevant statutes (e.g., the IIJA, the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended (OAA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended (ADA)), regulations, and policies related to FTA and other relevant federal funding. We also reviewed federal agency project data and documentation to determine which programs are the "primary" federal funding sources.⁶ We focused our review on funding sources identified by the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM), a federal interagency council which we discuss in more detail below. In particular, we focused on sources in the CCAM program inventory, which identifies federal programs through which funding can be provided for transportation for older adults and people with disabilities. When making determinations on primary programs, we considered various factors, such as whether the agency's

⁴As discussed later in this report, this amount excludes certain set-asides and leftover funding.

⁵Some riders, including those with disabilities, may require more specialized transportation, such as paratransit services. Paratransit service, broadly defined, is accessible, origin-to-destination transportation service that operates in response to calls or requests from eligible riders and supplements fixed route services. Paratransit is defined in DOT regulations as "comparable transportation service required by the Americans with Disabilities Act for individuals with disabilities who are unable to use fixed route transportation systems." 49 C.F.R. § 37.3.

⁶Specifically, we reviewed project data for the fiscal year in which the IIJA was enacted and the following 2 fiscal years (i.e., fiscal years 2022 through 2024).

aim for the programs is to fund improvements to the accessibility of transit services for older adults and people with disabilities, as reflected in the CCAM inventory, as well as whether interviewees cited the program as primary.

To address our second objective, we conducted case studies of three Tribes (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Coquille Indian Tribe, and Native Village of Unalakleet) and their tribal transit providers as well as four states (New Mexico, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Vermont). For these case studies, we:

1. conducted semi-structured interviews with transit officials from each selected tribal transportation department, as well as with officials from a rural transit provider from each selected state;
2. reviewed relevant data and documentation, such as FTA project data from fiscal years 2022 through 2024, reports on accessible transit from relevant associations, such as regional transportation planning organizations, and State Plans on Aging;⁷
3. interviewed additional relevant tribal, federal, and state officials; and
4. observed accessible transit options and infrastructure through reviewing maps and images and conducting site visits at three study locations, which we selected based on geographic variation and to observe both rural transit approaches within a state and tribal transit approaches.

We selected case study Tribes and states to reflect a range of criteria, including regional variation (based on FTA's regions), the amount of federal funding they received from the primary programs identified in our first objective, and other factors, such as the percentage of the population that was over 65.⁸ See appendix I for additional information about the case studies.

To address our third objective, we reviewed DOT and FTA documentation, including FTA's Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, CCAM's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, and other policies and procedures

⁷State Plans on Aging are documents that states use to outline their goals and strategies for addressing the needs of older adults and their families. We discuss these documents more below.

⁸We used the 1-year population estimates from the 2022 American Community Survey.

that describe DOT and FTA efforts.⁹ This also included reviewing documentation from FTA-funded or -supported entities, such as technical assistance centers. We compared FTA's efforts to relevant key practices, which are based on legal requirements, we identified related to assessing results of federal efforts.¹⁰

For all three objectives, we conducted 40 interviews with officials from selected federal agencies and transportation agencies (including state DOTs and rural or tribal transit providers), as well as stakeholders. These stakeholders included FTA-funded technical assistance centers and associations who represent programs and organizations related to transportation, planning, or older adults or people with disabilities.¹¹ To obtain a variety of viewpoints from a cross section of stakeholder interests, we selected these interviewees based on a variety of factors, such as whether they have conducted research on relevant topics and testified before Congress on a related topic. The perspectives of these interviewees are not generalizable to all transportation agencies or other stakeholders. However, these responses provided a range of views and informed perspectives on this topic. See appendix II for a full list of interviewees.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2024 to September 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe

⁹FTA's Fiscal Years 2022-2026 Strategic Plan was still in effect as of April 2025.

¹⁰GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

¹¹Additional stakeholders included tribal organizations and community organizations. Some issues we discussed were only relevant to certain types of interviewees, and due to the make-up of certain interviews, the denominator of interviewees may vary. Specifically, in some cases, our interviews included interviewees from multiple entities, and in one case, we interviewed different members of an organization in two separate interviews. Throughout this report we summarize perspectives from different groups, including: the whole group of interviewees (44 total), the total number of interviews (40), or transportation agencies specifically (12 state DOTs and rural or tribal transit providers). In cases where we do not quantify responses, we use "most" to represent over half of any of these groups, "several" for half or fewer of interviewees within a group, and "some" for two or three interviewees within these groups.

that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Millions of people in rural and tribal areas, including older adults and people with disabilities, are unable to drive for health, economic, or lifestyle reasons. According to the 2020 Census, more than 60 million people, or approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population, live in rural areas.¹² The Census Bureau also indicates that rural residents tend to be older and are more likely to experience disability than their urban counterparts. Accessible transit services can be critical to this population, providing them with access to jobs, healthcare, education, shopping, and other services and activities.

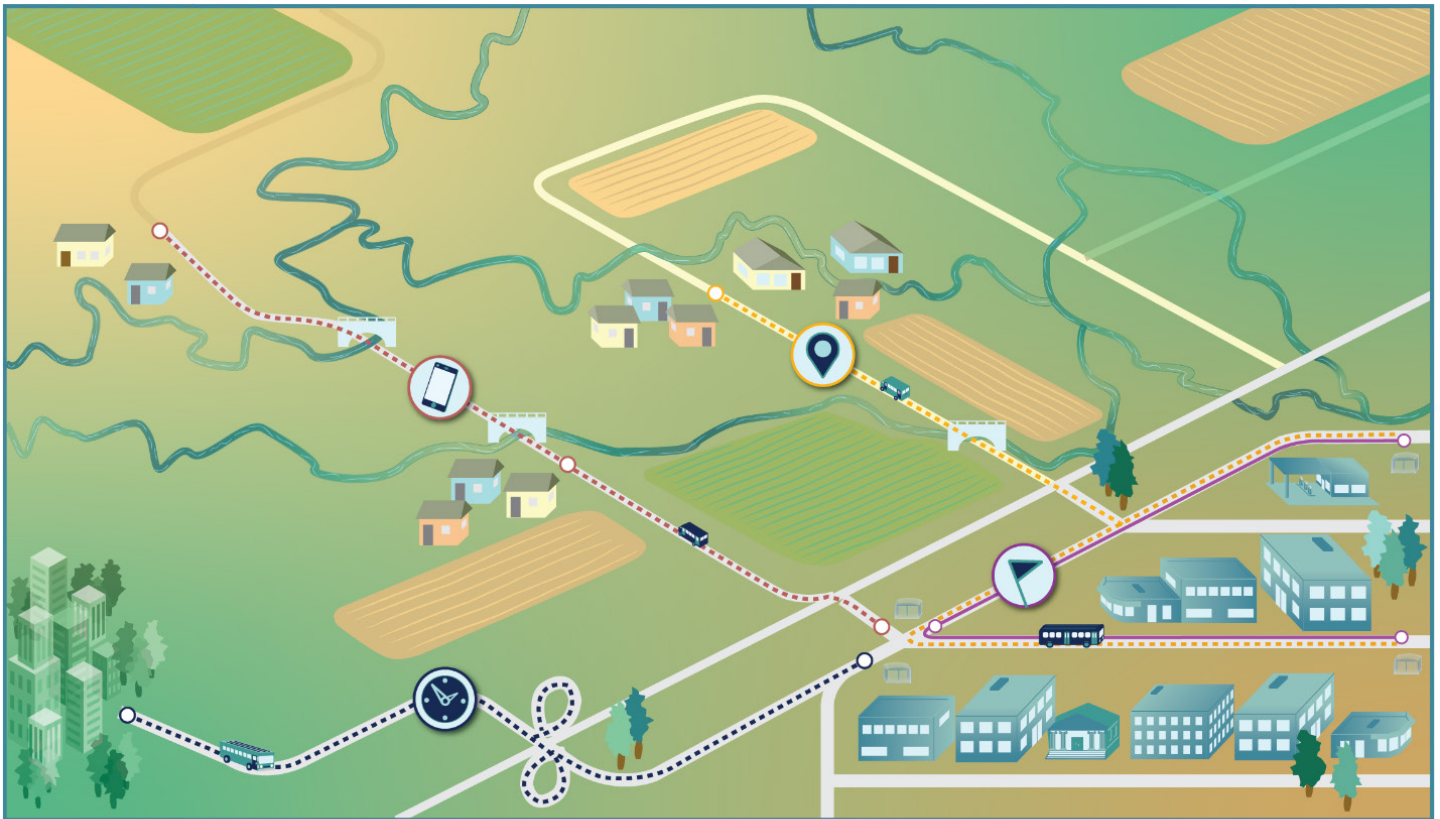
For the purposes of this report, we generally define “accessible transit services” as those services that can transport older adults and people with disabilities, including both transit services provided specifically for those populations, such as paratransit, and transit services that are open to the general public. Nearly all providers of public transportation services are subject to the requirements and prohibitions of the ADA, regardless of whether the provider is a public or private entity and whether they receive federal funding or not. In addition, DOT regulations implementing the ADA provide specific requirements for transit providers, including accessibility requirements for transportation vehicles and passenger vessels.¹³ In general, the ADA protects individuals with disabilities from being excluded from or denied the benefits of most public transportation services, or otherwise discriminated against by the providers of such services, because of their disabilities.¹⁴ See figure 1 for examples of rural and tribal providers’ accessible transit services.

¹²For the 2020 Census, the U.S. Census Bureau defined rural areas as locations that have a population under 5,000 or have fewer than 2,000 housing units.

¹³See 49 C.F.R. pts. 37-39.

¹⁴See Pub. L. No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 327 (1990) (primarily codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.).

Figure 1: Rural and Tribal Transit Providers Operate a Variety of Transit Services That Can Be Used to Provide Transit for Older Adults and People with Disabilities



Demand response



Demand response, including paratransit service, is scheduled in response to calls or app requests from passengers. Passengers with similar origins and destinations are often scheduled to ride the same vehicle. Demand response includes door-to-door and curb-to-curb services.

Fixed route



Fixed route bus service consists of scheduled stops along a pre-determined route.

Deviated fixed route



Route-deviated service operates as a conventional fixed bus route, but permits the bus to deviate from the route and service destinations within a prescribed distance (such as ¼ mile).

Commuter bus



Commuter bus service is a fixed-route bus that primarily connects outlying areas to each other or to an urban core and tends to operate in the mornings and evenings during the week.

Source: GAO illustration and review of documentation. | GAO-25-107455

To operate transit services, rural and tribal transit providers typically use cutaway vehicles (a transit vehicle built on a van or truck chassis), buses, and vans.¹⁵ See figure 2 for examples of accessible vehicles used by rural and tribal transit providers.

Figure 2: Examples of Rural and Tribal Transit Providers' Accessible Vehicles



Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107455

CCAM—a federal interagency council chaired by FTA—was first established in 2004, in part to bring agencies together to promote coordination of federal programs and services.¹⁶ According to its inventory of federal transportation funding, nine federal agencies administer 132 programs through which funding can be provided for accessible transit services. Some of these programs support transportation as their main purpose, while others support transportation

¹⁵On cutaways, a bus body is manufactured and mounted on a chassis built by another manufacturer. Cutaway chassis is a term the vehicle industry uses to describe a full-size van with the section of the body behind the front passenger seats removed.

¹⁶CCAM promotes this coordination, so that transportation-disadvantaged persons have access to more transportation services. For the purposes of CCAM, transportation-disadvantaged persons are individuals who qualify for federally conducted or federally assisted transportation-related programs or services due to disability, income, or advanced age. See Exec. Order 13330, Human Service Transportation Coordination, 69 Fed. Reg. 9185 (Feb. 24, 2004) (codified at 49 U.S.C. § 101 note). FTA leads CCAM on behalf of the Secretary of Transportation. CCAM is comprised of 11 member agencies: DOT and the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration. We have also discussed CCAM in our previous work. GAO, *Nonemergency Medical Transportation: Leading Practices Would Help the Federal Transit Administration Evaluate Its Pilot Program*, [GAO-24-106847](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2024).

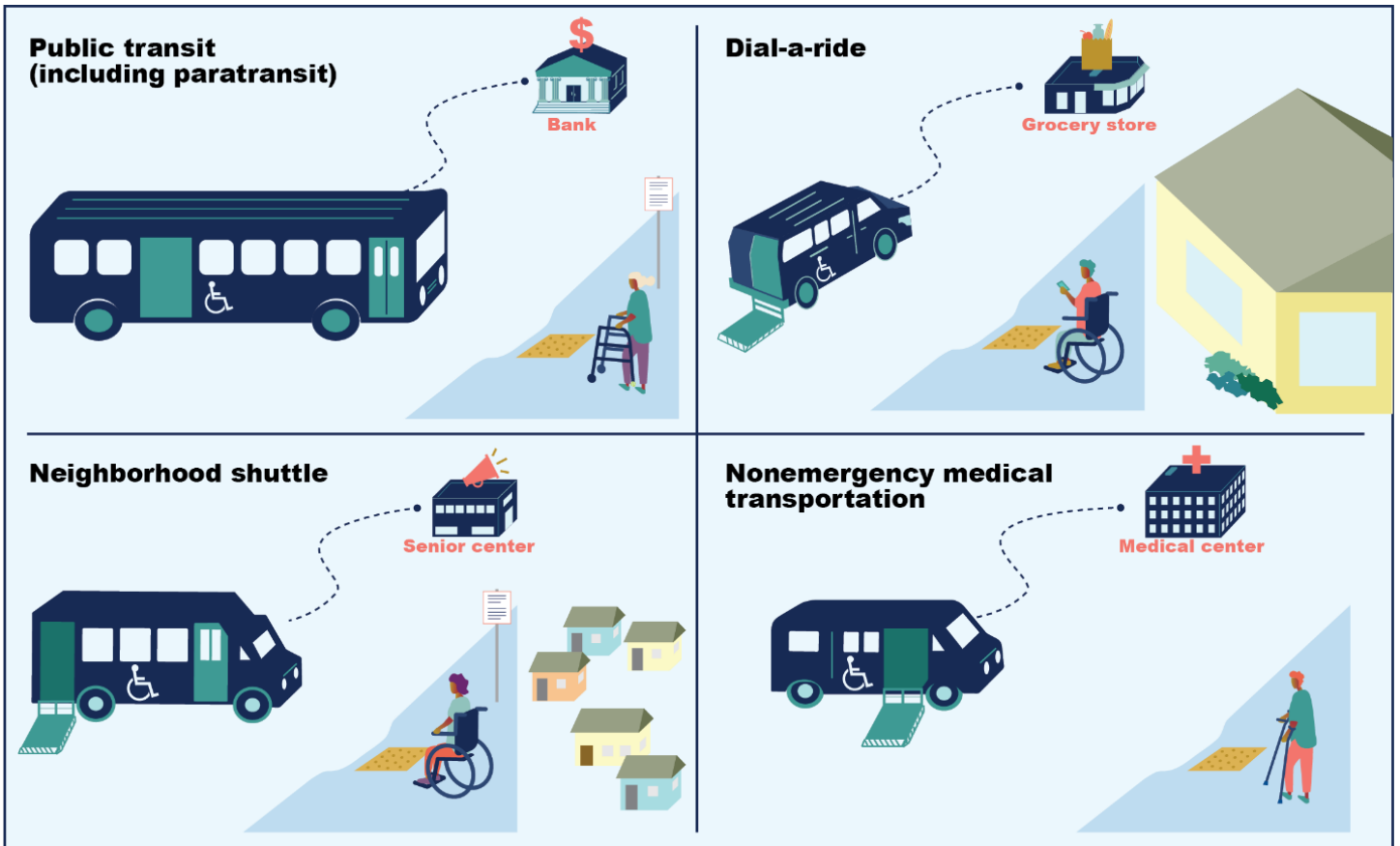
as an eligible program expense.¹⁷ For example, FTA provides funding to cover a broad range of public transportation needs, which includes accessible transit services in rural and tribal areas. Also, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) manages programs that, while not transportation-focused, can provide funding for transportation for eligible older adults and people with disabilities to access a broad array of health and social services. For example, as of August 2025, HHS, through its Administration for Community Living, provides grant funding to states. To receive these grants, states must develop State Plans on Aging, which can include information on transportation services for older adults.¹⁸

In addition to publishing its inventory, CCAM also provides expertise on human services transportation (that is, services designed to assist individuals who have mobility challenges due to age, disability, economic status, or other special needs; see fig. 3). CCAM focuses on programs for three targeted populations: older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals of low income. The council issues recommendations and guidance that are designed to improve the efficiency, accessibility, and availability of transportation for these transportation disadvantaged populations. According to FTA documentation, CCAM members fund technical assistance centers that support the provision and coordination of transportation services and promote the mobility of CCAM's targeted populations. For example, the National Rural Transit Assistance Program (National RTAP) technical assistance center's mission is to address the training and technical assistance needs of rural and tribal transit providers, and to support state programs.

¹⁷In May 2025, CCAM published its updated program inventory, which it originally published in 2019. The inventory identifies 132 federal programs through which funding can be provided for transportation for people with disabilities, older adults, and individuals of low income. The inventory includes program information, such as statutory references, types of recipients and beneficiaries, and eligible transportation activities.

¹⁸In March 2025, HHS announced a restructuring plan. The plan indicated that HHS will integrate the Administration for Community Living's critical programs that support older adults and people with disabilities into other HHS agencies, including the Administration for Children and Families, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

Figure 3: Examples of Human Services Transportation



Source: GAO illustration and review of Federal Transit Administration documentation. | GAO-25-107455

Among Many Federal Programs, Public Transportation Providers Primarily Rely on Three FTA Programs to Fund Accessible Transit Services

Rural and Tribal Transit Providers Primarily Rely on Three FTA Programs to Fund Accessible Transit for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

While there are 132 federal programs through which funding can be provided for accessible transit, we identified three FTA grant programs that rural and tribal communities primarily rely on, based on documentation we reviewed and interviewees we spoke with.¹⁹

Section 5311 Grants for Rural Areas. Through this program, financial assistance is provided directly to states and Tribes to support public transportation needs in rural areas, which are certain areas with populations of less than 50,000. The grant programs authorized under Section 5311 are FTA's main IIJA-funded grant programs that solely support rural or tribal transit.²⁰ The largest share of funds under Section 5311 are for formula grants for rural areas.²¹ FTA apportions (i.e., distributes by statutory formula) this Section 5311 grant funding directly to states or Tribes as recipients. These direct recipients can then allocate their grant funding to rural and tribal transit providers and certain other

¹⁹The IIJA provided about \$6.5 billion in combined funding for these three programs for fiscal years 2022 through 2026.

²⁰The Rural Ferry Program is the only other FTA, IIJA-funded grant program that solely supports rural transit. See 23 U.S.C. § 147 note.

²¹Section 5311 grants are authorized specifically under 49 U.S.C. § 5311, which authorizes other programs, including the Rural Transportation Assistance Program and the Appalachian Development Public Transportation Assistance Program. It also authorizes the Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Competitive and Formula Programs, which are discussed in more detail later in the report.

entities as subrecipients. The IIJA provided approximately \$825.2 million in formula funds under this program for fiscal year 2024.²²

Under the program, funding is provided for eligible capital projects, planning, operating costs, job access and reverse commute projects, and the acquisition of public transportation services, as well as funding for technical assistance through National RTAP. For example, according to National RTAP documentation, one rural transit provider in Mississippi used this program's funds to cover administrative, capital, and operational costs, such as staff salaries and insurance.

Interviewees in 36 of our 40 interviews identified Section 5311 as a primary funding program, including all the rural transit providers we spoke with who offer, for example, demand response transit.²³ For example, representatives from an association that now leads a CCAM technical assistance center highlighted that the program is the main source of funding for accessible transit services in rural and tribal communities.

The Public Transportation on Indian Reservations and Tribal Transit Program (TTP). Under section 5311(c)(2), formula and competitive grant funding is provided specifically for federally recognized Tribes to fund eligible public transportation projects on tribal lands.²⁴ The IIJA provided about \$45.9 million for the TTP for fiscal year 2024—approximately \$36.7 million in formula grants and approximately \$9.2 million in competitive grants. Like the broader Section 5311 program, the TTP provides funding for eligible capital projects, planning, operating costs, job access and reverse commute projects, and the acquisition of public transportation services. According to FTA's fiscal year 2024 TTP documentation, FTA

²²This funding amount for Section 5311 Formula Grants for Rural Areas excludes the annual 5 percent set-aside for Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Programs under 49 U.S.C. § 5311(c)(1)(A), 3 percent set-aside for the Appalachian Development Public Assistance Program under 49 U.S.C. § 5311(c)(1)(B), and 2 percent set-aside for the Rural Transportation Assistance Program under 49 U.S.C. § 5311(b)(3). It also does not include any leftover funding from growing state apportionments that must be added to the amount of grant funding available for Section 5311 Formula Grants for Rural Areas each fiscal year under 49 U.S.C. § 5340(c)(2)(b), since the amount is unascertainable solely based on the IIJA and 49 U.S.C. § 5340(c).

²³"Demand response" transit, or "demand responsive" service, is generally any non-fixed route system of transporting individuals that requires individuals to request the transit service, such as by making a telephone call, in order to use such service. See 49 C.F.R. § 37.3; *id.* app'x D.

²⁴See 49 U.S.C. § 5311(c)(2).

announced approximately \$9.6 million in competitive grant awards to 26 Tribes for their transit projects.²⁵

Tribes we interviewed used this funding to replace vehicles, operate transit programs, or improve technology. For instance, transit providers from two case study Tribes used the funding to expand transit operations, including by establishing a new route, with one provider also using the funding to purchase vehicles. Additionally, one tribal transit provider was awarded TTP funds to cover pre-scheduled and same-day transit services for members of the community, according to FTA documentation. These services are open to older adults, tribal elders, people with disabilities, and others for transportation to medical appointments, grocery and clothes shopping, jobs, and adult continuing education. All tribal transit providers we spoke with identified the TTP as a primary funding program they use to fund accessible transit services.

The Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program (Section 5310). Through this program, funding is provided to states and local government entities to meet the transportation needs of older adults and people with disabilities.²⁶ Of the three primary programs we identified, this is the only one solely focused on improving accessibility for older adults and people with disabilities. The IJA provided approximately \$438.9 million in funding for Section 5310 formula grants for fiscal year 2024.²⁷

The program provides funding for purposes that include eligible administration, capital, and operating expenses to help fill gaps in public transit for older adults and people with disabilities. It also provides funding for public transportation projects planned, designed, and carried out to meet the special needs of older adults and people with disabilities when public transportation is insufficient, inappropriate, or unavailable. For example, in our case study states, officials from one state DOT said that the department uses almost all of its Section 5310 funding to purchase vehicles. Officials from another state DOT said the department distributes

²⁵The fiscal year 2024 notice of funding opportunity for the TTP announced the opportunity to apply for approximately \$9.2 million in competitive grants and provided that if more funding became available for the program before projects were selected, FTA may add it to the total funding available for award under that notice.

²⁶See 49 U.S.C. § 5310.

²⁷This amount includes funding from the Highway Trust Fund and General Fund.

its funding exclusively to mobility management and capital projects.²⁸ According to FTA documentation, project examples for this program include wheelchair lifts and ramps, buses and vans, and transit-related information technology systems (e.g., scheduling systems). Interviewees from 30 of 40 interviews identified this program as a primary funding source.²⁹

See table 1 for additional information on these programs, including the funding provided by the IIJA for fiscal years 2022 through 2026.

²⁸According to FTA documentation, mobility management is an approach for managing and delivering coordinated transportation services to customers, including older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals of low income. Mobility management focuses on meeting individual customer needs through a wide range of transportation options and service providers. It also focuses on coordinating these services and providers to achieve a more efficient transportation service delivery system.

²⁹Most (29) of these interviewees also identified Section 5311 as a primary source.

Table 1: Primary Federal Funding Programs Available for Tribes and Rural Communities to Improve the Accessibility of Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

Grant program	Program description	Type of grant	Allowable project types	Federal cost share	Total funding provided under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act for fiscal years 2022 to 2026 ^a
Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Formula Grants for Rural Areas (49 U.S.C. § 5311)	Funding for public transportation in rural areas, which are certain areas with populations of less than 50,000 people. Eligible projects include the acquisition of buses, vans and other paratransit vehicles, and mobility management. ^b Eligible direct recipients include states and federally recognized Indian Tribes, and eligible subrecipients include state and local government authorities, nonprofit organizations, and operators of public transportation or intercity bus service.	Formula	Capital, ^c planning, job access and reverse commute, ^d operating expenses, ^e acquisition of public transportation services, and administration	80% for most capital projects and 50% for operating assistance ^f	\$4,123,134,849 ^g
FTA Public Transportation on Indian Reservations and Tribal Transit Program (49 U.S.C. § 5311(c)(2))	Funding set aside from the Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program for public transportation projects for rural tribal communities. Eligible projects include those eligible under Formula Grants for Rural Areas. Eligible recipients include federally recognized Indian Tribes.	Formula Competitive	Capital, ^c planning, job access and reverse commute, ^d operating expenses, ^e acquisition of public transportation services, and administration	100%	\$183,250,437 \$45,812,610
FTA Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities (49 U.S.C. § 5310)	Funding for public transportation projects when public transportation is insufficient, inappropriate, or unavailable and for public transportation alternatives to meet the needs of older adults and people with disabilities. Eligible projects include the acquisition of buses and vans, wheelchair lifts, ramps, and securement devices, mobility management, ^b and public transportation alternatives, such as voucher and volunteer driver programs. Eligible direct recipients include states and local government entities that operate a public transportation service, and eligible subrecipients include state and local government authorities, private nonprofit organizations, and operators of public transportation.	Formula	Capital, ^c operating expenses, ^e acquisition of public transportation services, and administration	80% for most capital projects and 50% for operating assistance	\$2,193,105,343

Source: GAO analysis of federal statutes, FTA guidance, and GAO interviews. | GAO-25-107455

^aSee Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021). The amounts do not subtract any authorized administrative takedowns and are rounded to the nearest whole dollar where appropriate.

^bMobility management consists of short-range planning and management activities and projects for improving coordination among public transportation and other transportation service providers carried out by a recipient or subrecipient through an agreement entered into with a person, including a governmental entity. Mobility management activities do not include operating transit services. 49 U.S.C. § 5302(4)(K).

^cEligible capital projects include the provision of nonfixed route paratransit transportation services in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (codified as amended, in relevant part, at 42 U.S.C. § 12143) for amounts not to exceed 10 percent or, under certain circumstances, 20 percent, of the recipient's annual formula apportionment under the Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program. See 49 U.S.C. § 5302(4)(I).

^dJob access and reverse commute projects are transportation projects to finance planning, capital, and operating costs that support the development and maintenance of transportation services designed to transport welfare recipients and eligible low-income individuals to and from jobs and activities related to their employment, including transportation projects that facilitate the provision of public transportation services from urbanized areas and rural areas to suburban employment locations. 49 U.S.C. § 5302(10).

^eOperating expenses are generally those costs necessary to operate, maintain, and manage a public transportation system. Operating expenses usually include such costs as labor, fuel, and items having a useful life of less than one year. See Federal Transit Administration, Rural Areas Formula Grant Programs Guidance, FTA Circular 9040.1H (Nov. 1, 2024); Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program Guidance, FTA Circular 9070.1H (Nov. 1, 2024).

^fThere are some exceptions for any state containing nontaxable Indian lands, individual and tribal, public domain lands (both reserved and unreserved), national forests, and national parks and monuments. See 23 U.S.C. § 120(b); 49 U.S.C. § 5311(g)(1)-(2). In addition, FTA guidance provides that certain capital projects involving rolling stock funded under the Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program or Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program have a federal cost share of 85 percent. See Federal Transit Administration, *Rural Areas Formula Grant Programs Guidance*, FTA Circular 9040.1H (Nov. 1, 2024); *Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program Guidance*, FTA Circular 9070.1H (Nov. 1, 2024).

^gThe funding amount provided in the table for the Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program does not include amounts for the Rural Transportation Assistance Program, the Appalachian Development Public Transportation Assistance Program, or the Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Competitive or Formula Programs. It also does not include the leftover funding from growing state apportionments that must be added to the amount of grant funding available for FTA Formula Grants for Rural Areas each fiscal year under 49 U.S.C. § 5340(c)(2)(b). However, the specific amount of leftover growing state apportionment funding that must be added to amounts available for FTA Formula Grants for Rural Areas each fiscal year is unascertainable solely based on the IIJA and 49 U.S.C. § 5340(c).

Transit Providers Leverage Other Federal Programs to Help Improve Accessibility for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

In addition to these primary FTA programs, some rural and tribal transit providers may use other federal programs, some administered by other agencies whose target purposes may be a better fit for the providers' goals. For example, 15 interviewees identified the FTA Grants for Buses and Bus Facilities Formula Program, through which funding is distributed to states and transit agencies through a statutory formula to replace, rehabilitate, and purchase buses and related equipment and to construct bus-related facilities.

In addition, HHS's Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services provides federal oversight of Medicaid—a program through which the federal

government assists states in financing health care for certain low-income individuals.³⁰ Under Medicaid, HHS partially reimburses states for the medical assistance they provide to eligible individuals, including nonemergency medical transportation (NEMT) for eligible individuals who need assistance getting to and from medical appointments.³¹ Fifteen interviewees identified Medicaid as a program to provide accessible transit services. For example, one rural transit provider in a case study state said that funding from Medicaid makes up 60 percent of its annual funding because the provider's transit services are critical to accessing healthcare in the community. For additional federal funding sources interviewees identified, see table 2.

³⁰See Social Security Act, Title XIX (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 1396 et seq.) (establishing Medicaid). In addition, as of June 2025, HHS's Administration for Community Living oversees the administration of the OAA Title III, Part B program, and OAA Title VI, Part A and Part B grants, which support the provision of a variety of medical and nonmedical services, including transportation, to eligible, older individuals. See Older Americans Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-73, 79 Stat. 218 (1965) (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 3001 et seq.).

³¹NEMT consists of providing transportation to individuals for the purposes of receiving medical and health care. We have previously reported on NEMT. [GAO-24-106847](#).

Table 2: Non-Primary Federal Funding Sources Interviewees Identified That Can Fund Accessible Transit Services

Federal entity	Federal program	Program description	Target population
Administration for Community Living (ACL)	Special Programs for Aging, Title III, Part B, Grants for Supportive Services and Senior Centers	This is a formula grant program established in the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended (OAA). Its general purpose is to encourage and assist state units on aging and area agencies on aging to concentrate resources to develop and implement comprehensive and coordinated systems of service for older individuals via planning and provision of supportive services and multipurpose senior centers. There are a number of supportive services these funds can be used for, including providing both transportation and assisted-transportation services. These funds are flexible and can be used for both medical and nonmedical transportation.	Adults aged 60 or older
ACL	Special Programs for Aging, Title VI, Part A, Grants to Indian Tribes, Part B, Grants to Native Hawaiians	ACL oversees Title VI, Part A and Part B, grants authorized in the OAA. Their general purpose is to promote the delivery of supportive services comparable to those provided under ACL’s Title III, Part B program to eligible, older individuals. Title VI, Part A grants are available to eligible Indian Tribal Organizations. Title VI, Part B grants are available to public and nonprofit private organizations to provide these services to Native Hawaiians. Services include transportation to facilitate access to nutrition services, information and referral transportation, and other services funded under the Title III, Part B program.	American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians aged 60 or older
Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services	Medicaid	Federal law requires states to ensure that eligible Medicaid beneficiaries have transportation to and from health care providers. These transportation services are focused on those who cannot provide their own transportation to and from appointments. Nonemergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) programs and ride scheduling procedures vary from state to state. Generally, beneficiaries must contact the Medicaid transportation provider in their area to arrange for rides. Medicaid NEMT rides can be provided through a number of methods, such as through mass transit systems as well as taxis, cars, or vans.	Eligible Medicaid beneficiaries
Federal Highway Administration	Tribal Transportation Program	This program funds tribal transportation facilities, including certain transit facilities and programs, to provide access to tribal reservations, tribal lands, and Alaska Native communities.	Federally recognized Tribes
Federal Transit Administration (FTA)	Pilot Program for Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility	The pilot program awards competitive grants to support innovative projects for the transportation disadvantaged that will improve the coordination of transportation services and NEMT services.	Transportation disadvantaged ^a

FTA	Section 5339 Grants for Buses and Bus Facilities, Low or No Emission Bus Grants	<p>The Buses and Bus Facilities Formula Grant Program provides funding to states, federally recognized Tribes, and transit agencies to replace, rehabilitate, and purchase buses and related equipment and to construct bus-related facilities.</p> <p>The Buses and Bus Facilities Competitive Grant Program provides funding to states and transit agencies for projects that include those eligible for the Buses and Bus Facilities Formula Grant Program funding, among other projects. At least 15 percent of the amounts of funding made available in a fiscal year for these competitive grants must be distributed to projects in rural areas, if there are sufficient eligible applicants.</p> <p>The Low or No Emission Bus Program provides competitive grants to states and transit agencies for projects that include acquiring or leasing low or zero emission buses, as well as constructing or leasing facilities and related equipment.</p>	None
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Source: GAO review of GAO interviews and agency documentation. | GAO-25-107455

³For purposes of the Pilot Program for Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility, FTA defines “transportation disadvantaged” to include older adults, people with disabilities, and people who earn a low income.

Transit providers also use a combination of federal programs, in addition to other funding (e.g., state and local), to fill gaps in transit funding and services. For instance, 11 interviewees stated that certain other federal program funding can meet the local match requirements of programs, such as Section 5311 and Section 5310.³² This practice is referred to as federal fund “braiding.” According to the *CCAM Federal Fund Braiding Guide*, federal fund braiding for local match occurs when funds from one federal program are used to meet the match requirements of another. CCAM developed the guide to provide program-by-program information on federal fund braiding eligibility. A project that receives funds from multiple federal programs must meet all applicable requirements of those programs in statute, regulation, and any program guidance, including project eligibility and reporting requirements. One rural transit provider we spoke with said that it has braided federal funds to meet local match requirements.

³²DOT grant programs generally require grant recipients or subrecipients to provide “matching” funds (i.e., to pay the portion of the project cost not covered by the grant). The minimum percentage of the project cost that recipients or subrecipients must pay, permissible sources of matching funds, and any other requirements related to the match can vary by program. Recipients of federal awards generally may not use funds from a federal award to pay the matching contribution required by another award program unless the program’s authorizing statute specifically provides for such use. 2 C.F.R. § 200.306(b)(5). Both Section 5311 and Section 5310 have provisions authorizing the use of certain other federal funds as match. See 49 U.S.C. §§ 5310(d)(3)(B)(i), (4), 5311(g)(3)(D), (4).

Tribes and Rural Communities Use Various Approaches to Deliver Accessible Transit but Continue to Face Funding and Staffing Challenges in Meeting Needs

Rural and Tribal Communities Leverage Federal Funding, Coordination, and Various Other Approaches to Support Transit Services

We found that rural and tribal communities use many different approaches to provide or support accessible transit services for older adults and people with disabilities. The most common approaches we identified based on documentation we reviewed and interviewees we spoke with were leveraging federal funding and coordinating between transit providers and human services or other entities.

Federal funding. Documentation we reviewed and interviewees in 21 of 40 interviews cited rural and tribal communities' reliance on federal funding as an approach to meet transit needs, including providing any transit service at all. For example, one study on tribal transit services explained that funding is often the key to implementing and sustaining tribal transit programs, noting that a number of Tribes have been forced to discontinue service because a source of funding was no longer available.³³ All the rural and tribal transit providers we spoke with used federal funding to support their transit services.

Communities used federal funding to help them meet various needs, such as to expand service routes, purchase accessible vehicles, or maintain operations that otherwise would not be continued. For instance, in fiscal year 2024, a transit provider from a case study Tribe received \$65,205 in TTP funding to maintain transit service to the community's health clinic, grocery store, post office, tribal office, airport, and other services, according to FTA documentation. In another example, a rural transit provider used Section 5310 and Section 5311 funding to support and

³³National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Developing, Enhancing, and Sustaining Tribal Transit Services: A Guidebook* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2012), 92, <https://doi.org/10.17226/22818>.

expand transit service for 10 rural communities, according to technical assistance center documentation. This expansion of service allowed community members to access healthcare and employment. The service prioritizes rides for older adults, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes.

Communities have also used federal funding to introduce microtransit service.³⁴ For example, according to technical assistance center documentation, a rural community used federal funding, including from Section 5311, to offer a transit service that allows riders, including older adults and people with disabilities, to schedule on-demand, same-day transportation service. Riders can submit requests via their mobile phones or an online portal, and response time to the ride request takes just a few minutes. This service augments existing demand response service that requires 24-hour notice for scheduling a ride. According to the technical assistance center documentation, through improved availability of transportation, the program gives community members better access to healthcare, food, public services, socialization, shopping, education, and employment. In its first year, the program completed 44,000 trips, with more than 26,000 of those trips provided to older adults or people with disabilities. Additionally, one rural transit provider told us that there are currently microtransit pilot programs in two of the more densely populated areas of their region. Microtransit has a lower barrier for use in that provider's state compared to other services because individuals do not have to qualify to use it.

Coordination. In 17 of 40 interviews, interviewees also cited coordination between transit providers and other entities as a successful approach for supporting accessible transit services. For instance, FTA officials said that the most successful types of approaches tend to involve coordination between transportation and social service agencies in the community. They cited the example of a transportation agency working with other organizations (e.g., a housing agency and a farmers' market) to co-locate services and ensure people get where they need to go.

³⁴According to FTA documentation, microtransit is a technology-enabled service that uses multi-passenger vehicles to provide on-demand services with dynamically generated routing. Microtransit services are traditionally provided in designated service areas. Service models include first mile/last mile connections to fixed route services; hub to hub zone-based services; the commingling of ADA complementary paratransit services with general transit service; and point-to-point service within a specific zone or area.

In one case study, an official from a Tribe said the Tribe used federal funding to coordinate services to meet the needs of its community. Specifically, using federal funds, the Tribe established a wellness center that provides transportation, primary and dental care, behavioral health, and pharmacy services. The wellness center also has a federally funded program for tribal elders to gather for meals, with the center allowing time for socializing, health awareness education, and other activities.

Example of Successful Coordination for Providing Accessible Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

“[A] community center was created using a [state] Department of Health grant to provide access to a senior meal site. The ownership of this program remained with the community group, and socialization has improved among the older adults served. The program provides a common space, and the community group brings in other social service providers. The program supports the use of transportation for an extended period of time and provides a satellite location where seniors can access these social services all at once rather than the transportation provider bringing the seniors to individual services.”

Source: GAO interview with rural transit official. | GAO-25-107455

Coordination through mobility management specifically is another approach interviewees cited. Mobility managers connect with community providers to promote transportation services. For instance, in a case study state, one transit provider’s mobility manager works to increase public awareness about available service options by visiting places like food banks and the state’s department of human services to leave flyers about transit services and schedules. The mobility manager also uses resources from the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center and National RTAP.³⁵




In addition, the State Plans on Aging that HHS’s Administration for Community Living oversees are intended to provide a blueprint for coordination and advocacy activities identified by states to meet the needs of older adults. Among the 51 state plans we reviewed, 41

³⁵The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center is an FTA-funded technical assistance center with a goal to promote the availability and accessibility of transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers. Part of the center’s mission is to provide resources, training, and information through an information and referral hotline and website, as well as both distance and online training.

addressed transportation services.³⁶ Seventeen plans addressed rural transportation services, with three addressing rural and tribal transportation services. For example, one plan included an objective to enhance the quality of transportation services for older adults and adults with disabilities, especially in rural communities and on reservations, by coordinating with entities to expand transportation services.

For additional examples of approaches rural and tribal communities have taken to provide or support accessible transit services for older adults and people with disabilities, see figure 4.

Figure 4: Examples of Approaches Rural and Tribal Communities Have Taken to Provide or Support Accessible Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

Approach	Example of approach
 <p>Contracting for transit services</p>	<p>Two rural transit providers we spoke with contract with nearby Tribes to provide transit services. Officials from one rural provider said that when they first started their transit district, members pooled their funding to start the district (they no longer do so). In partnering with Tribes, officials explained that they were deferential to the Tribes and ensured they respected tribal sovereignty. Those Tribes pass their formula funding to the district to provide services, though the funding does not cover all services. Officials from one of the Tribes said there are several positive aspects to contracting with a nearby rural provider, including receiving help submitting grant applications, maintaining vehicles, and receiving loaner vehicles to maintain the right level of service.</p>
 <p>Leveraging personal relationships</p>	<p>Two Tribes we spoke with leveraged elders' comfort with transit drivers to deliver services. One tribal transit provider said that many of the elders are looking for one-on-one attention. Another tribal transit provider operates a demand-response program where the driver has a cell phone everyone in the community can directly call for pickup and drop off service. There is only one active wheelchair-accessible van available in the community and the driver will assist different members to get to key destinations such as the clinic, store, airport, post office, or appointments. The transit service will also deliver meals to homebound elders and operates 5 days per week.</p>
 <p>Procuring scheduling software</p>	<p>One study on best practices in rural transit recommended purchasing scheduling software as one strategy rural transit providers can use to improve service. When asked about successful approaches rural and tribal communities have taken to improve accessible transit, officials from two Federal Transit Administration regional offices said that some funding recipients in their regions are procuring better scheduling software, which has helped with on-time performance.</p>

Source: GAO review of documentation and GAO interviews. GAO icons. | GAO-25-107455

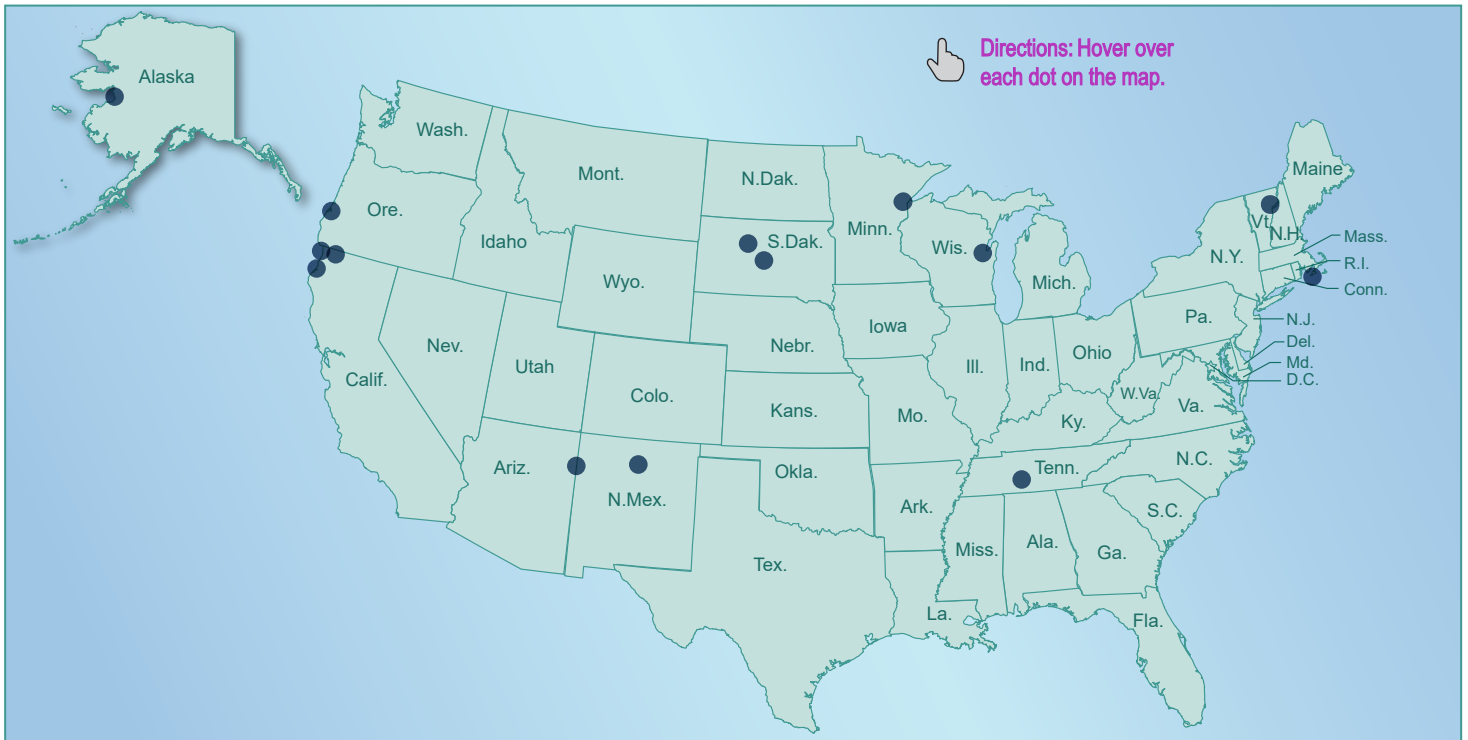
³⁶We analyzed the available plans for states and the District of Columbia. At the time of this review, 51 plans were available. This total includes draft plans that were publicly available.

**Interviewees Identified
Funding Constraints,
Staffing Shortages, and
Numerous Other
Challenges in Meeting
Accessible Transit Needs**

Interviewees we spoke with identified a number of challenges, many of them related to limited resources, that rural and tribal communities encounter when providing accessible transit services to older adults and people with disabilities. Among the most frequently cited challenges were funding constraints, staffing shortages, unsafe and inaccessible roads and other infrastructure, and large service areas. For the most part, these challenges were the same across the regions in our case studies and interviews. However, landlocked rural and tribal communities tended to be the only regions that raised the large size of their service areas as a challenge compared with rural and tribal communities in smaller or coastal areas. For additional information on challenges across the regions represented in our review, see figure 5.

Interactive graphic

Figure 5: Examples of Challenges Rural and Tribal Communities Face in Providing Accessible Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities



Sources: GAO analysis of interviews with rural and tribal officials. Base map from MapInfo. | GAO-25-107455



Print instructions

To access a printable version of this interactive graphic, see appendix III.

Funding challenges. Twenty-five of the 44 interviewees we spoke with said that funding constraints create challenges in meeting accessible transit needs in rural and tribal communities. While interviewees cited the use of federal funding to help meet their communities' needs, they also cited constraints to that funding as a challenge. These constraints include how formula funding amounts are calculated under federal statute, reporting and programmatic requirements, and difficulty obtaining enough funding to cover local match requirements. For example, some interviewees characterized the federal reporting requirements as onerous and creating an additional burden for funding recipients and subrecipients.³⁷ Recipients of certain FTA grants, including Section 5311 grants, must collect and submit data to FTA's National Transit Database, such as data on vehicle revenue miles and operating expenses.³⁸ Regarding local match, in three of four case study states, interviewees discussed how challenging it was for funding recipients to meet match requirements. Officials from one state DOT said they brainstormed with a community about establishing programs to raise money for the match. In another state, a rural transit provider discontinued a transit service because it could no longer afford the local match. In addition, in a case study, state DOT officials noted that their state does not provide transit funding, making transit providers more reliant on federal funding.

Relatedly, compounding these challenges, interviewees, including those from a case study Tribe and state, also cited the increasing costs of delivering transit services as a challenge. For example, interviewees cited the rising cost of vehicles due to inflation and increasing operating costs, such as fuel prices. A tribal official said that prices are going up for everything (e.g., vehicles and car washes), and she does not know whether these price increases will enable her to purchase the minivans she needs. Similarly, officials from a rural transit provider said that everything is more expensive, so they have had to increase fares to cover costs with less funding available from the federal government. Representatives from a technical assistance center said that rising operating costs, driven by inflation and fuel prices, are hitting rural transit

³⁷Grant reporting requirements are generally required by statute or the Office of Management and Budget's Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, which DOT has adopted by regulation. See, e.g., 49 U.S.C. § 5335 (selected reporting requirements for FTA grant recipients); 2 C.F.R. §§ 200.328-200.329, 1201.1.

³⁸The collection and submission of these data are required by statute and affect FTA's apportionment of grant funding to rural and urbanized areas. See, e.g., 49 U.S.C. § 5311(b)(4), (c)(4), 5335(a)-(b).

providers hard. Additionally, when local hospitals or other essential services close, transit providers face increased costs to transport residents over greater distances to reach alternate service locations.

Staffing challenges. Twenty-four interviewees told us that staffing shortages are a challenge that rural and tribal communities face. For example, interviewees in most case study Tribes and states told us that shortages of drivers and staff present challenges for providing transit, including the capacity to apply for and manage federal grants as staff at small transit providers must “wear many hats.” For instance, two rural transit providers noted that they hire drivers who are retirees, with officials from one of the providers adding that these drivers retire relatively quickly from driving given their ages. Furthermore, both of these providers noted that pay for drivers can be low relative to other driving roles in the area. As such, recruiting and retaining drivers and managing turnover is an ongoing challenge and may limit service, such as the number of trip requests providers can accept. In addition, a tribal transit official said that, because she does not have enough staff support sometimes, she serves as a transportation coordinator and the main driver for tribal elders, and she delivers food to elders’ homes. Other challenges to accessing and using funds may be exacerbated by these staffing shortages, such as meeting reporting requirements.

Example of Staffing Capacity Challenges Affecting Accessible Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

“[The Tribe] has a rule that they do not apply for grants under [a certain amount] because the staff resources to apply for and then manage the grants, if awarded, will cost more than the grant is worth.”

Source: GAO interview with tribal official. | GAO-25-107455

Infrastructure challenges. Sixteen interviewees told us that communities face infrastructure challenges that can make it difficult for riders to reach, or drivers to provide, accessible transit services. For example, interviewees from one case study state and other interviewees cited inaccessible and unsafe paths to transit stops. For instance, state DOT officials said that many pick-up points for public transit in rural areas are in high-speed highway areas. These areas do not have curb cuts, might not have sidewalks, and might have unsafe crossings. Some areas might not have fixed route or even demand response options given infrastructure issues. In addition, officials from two case study Tribes and other interviewees said that poor road conditions and extreme weather

are challenges. Transit officials from one of the case study Tribes said that conditions on the reservation’s transit routes cause a lot of wear and tear on their vehicles. They explained that they had to purchase all wheel drive vehicles, which are generally more expensive, for their routes, especially for use in winter given extreme weather conditions (e.g., heavy snow and wind).

Service area challenges. Eighteen interviewees we spoke with, including from three case study states, and documentation we reviewed identified large service areas and associated long travel distances as a challenge. For example, one rural transit provider said that because its service area is so large, it is difficult to provide comprehensive service to rural and tribal communities. In addition, representatives from an association said that trips in rural and tribal areas could be over 100 miles.

Example of Large Service Areas Posing a Challenge for Providing Accessible Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities

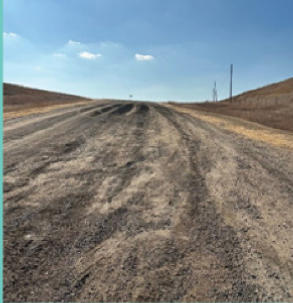
“The large size of [the] service area is a challenge. [T]he service area is very rural and spread out with many impoverished communities and many people living off grid, all of which make it very difficult to reach many elders.”

Source: GAO interview with rural transit officials. | GAO-25-107455

State DOT officials and representatives from four associations also cited cross-jurisdictional issues as challenges to providing service across areas. For example, officials in one large landlocked state said that coordinating dispatch efforts between transit providers to try to help passengers get from one end of the state to the other is challenging. They said that there are many moving pieces, noting that veterans may need to get to Department of Veterans Affairs facilities in neighboring states for services, but it is illegal to have a single driver drive for that long of a trip, according to those officials.

See figure 6 for examples of these infrastructure and service area challenges.

Figure 6: Examples of Infrastructure and Service Area Challenges Rural and Tribal Communities Face in Providing Accessible Transit Services to Older Adults and People with Disabilities

<p>Cheyenne River Reservation: gravel road</p> 	<p>Cheyenne River Reservation: road after rainstorm</p> 	<p>River Cities Public Transit: snowplow</p> 
<p>Description</p>		
<p>A Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) gravel road on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota with the large service area and long distances Cheyenne River Sioux Transit must travel to transport passengers.</p>	<p>A BIA road on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota the day after a rainstorm. Driving in these conditions required all wheel drive and caused the vehicle to stutter going up modest hills.</p>	<p>A snowplow owned by River Cities Public Transit (RCPT) in Central South Dakota. RCPT does its own snow removal to plow transit routes to get to passengers who are dialysis patients, for example.</p>

Source: GAO photos and analysis of interviews with rural and tribal officials. | GAO-25-107455

Looking ahead, interviewees anticipated funding and staffing challenges would continue and demand for accessible transit services for older adults and people with disabilities would grow. Among the most frequently cited future challenges, two—funding constraints and staffing shortages—mirrored existing challenges. In addition, interviewees cited an increasingly aging population and increased projected demand for transit services as future challenges. Two associations we spoke with noted that the lack of transit services is making it increasingly difficult for older adults to age in place, which they anticipate could continue in the future.

FTA Has a Variety of Efforts to Assist Rural and Tribal Communities in Accessing and Using Funds for Accessible Transit, but It Has Not Assessed Their Effectiveness

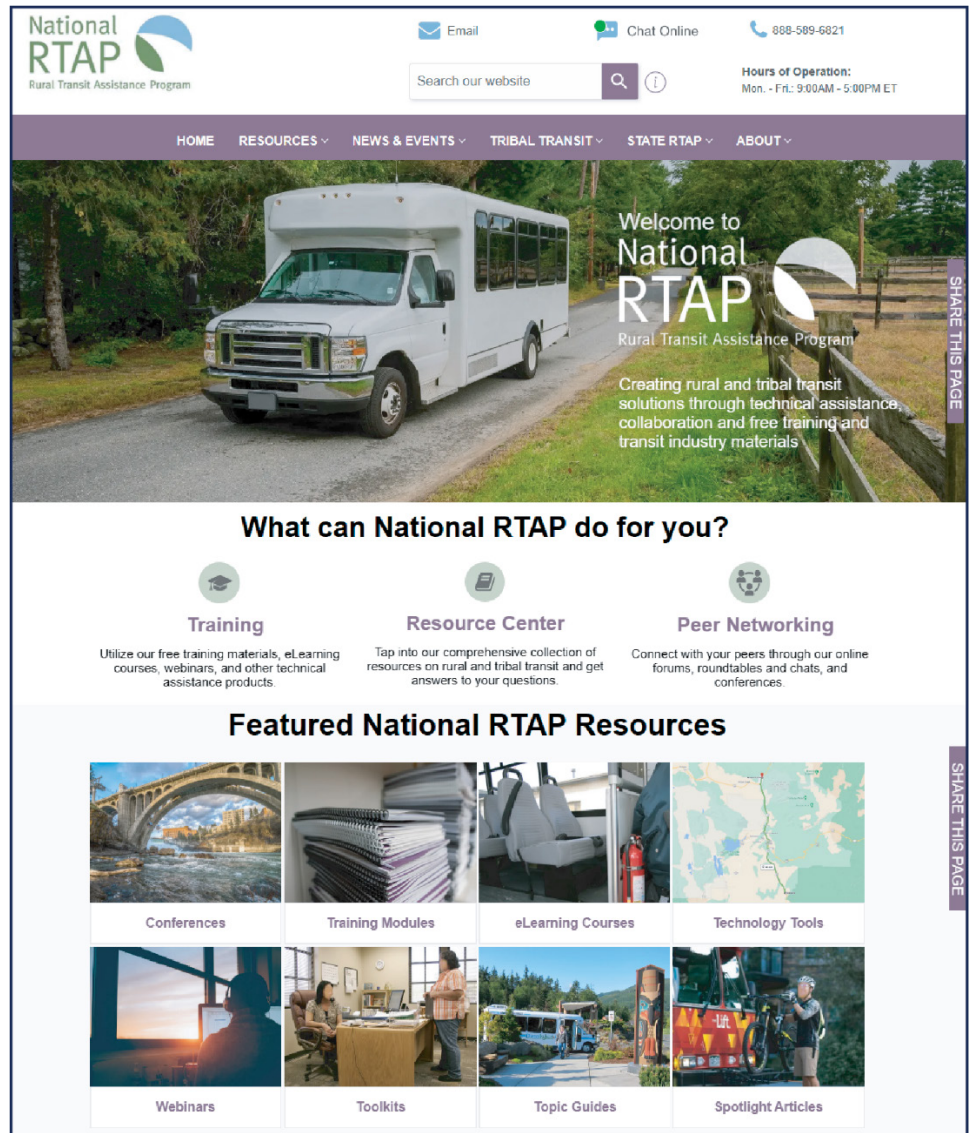
FTA Uses Technical Assistance and Other Methods to Assist Communities

FTA assists communities in accessing and using funds, and addressing the challenges they face, through a variety of efforts. This assistance includes FTA-led and -supported efforts undertaken through National RTAP, CCAM, and FTA's 10 regional offices.

- **National RTAP.** National RTAP, established in 1987 and funded through an FTA cooperative agreement, provides a number of resources, including free materials, trainings, and peer resources.³⁹ Its overarching mission is to address the training and technical assistance needs of rural and tribal transit providers. National RTAP's website includes lists of resources by topic (e.g., funding, procurement, and tribal transit) as well as by role (e.g., dispatch, drivers, and heads of agencies) (see fig. 7). Its many resources include "best practice spotlights" on a variety of issues rural and tribal transit providers may be facing, directories of trainers and grant writers, and webinars on a variety of topics, such as successful strategies for hiring drivers, overviews of and updates on the National Transit Database, and presentations on specific federal requirements and regulations.

³⁹National RTAP funds competitively selected projects of a national scope that provide assistance in the areas of transportation research, technical assistance, training, and related support services in rural areas. See 49 U.S.C. § 5311(b)(3). National RTAP received approximately \$13.7 million for fiscal years 2022 through 2026 in the IIJA.

Figure 7: National Rural Transit Assistance Program Homepage, as of June 2025



Source: nationalrtap.org. | GAO-25-107455

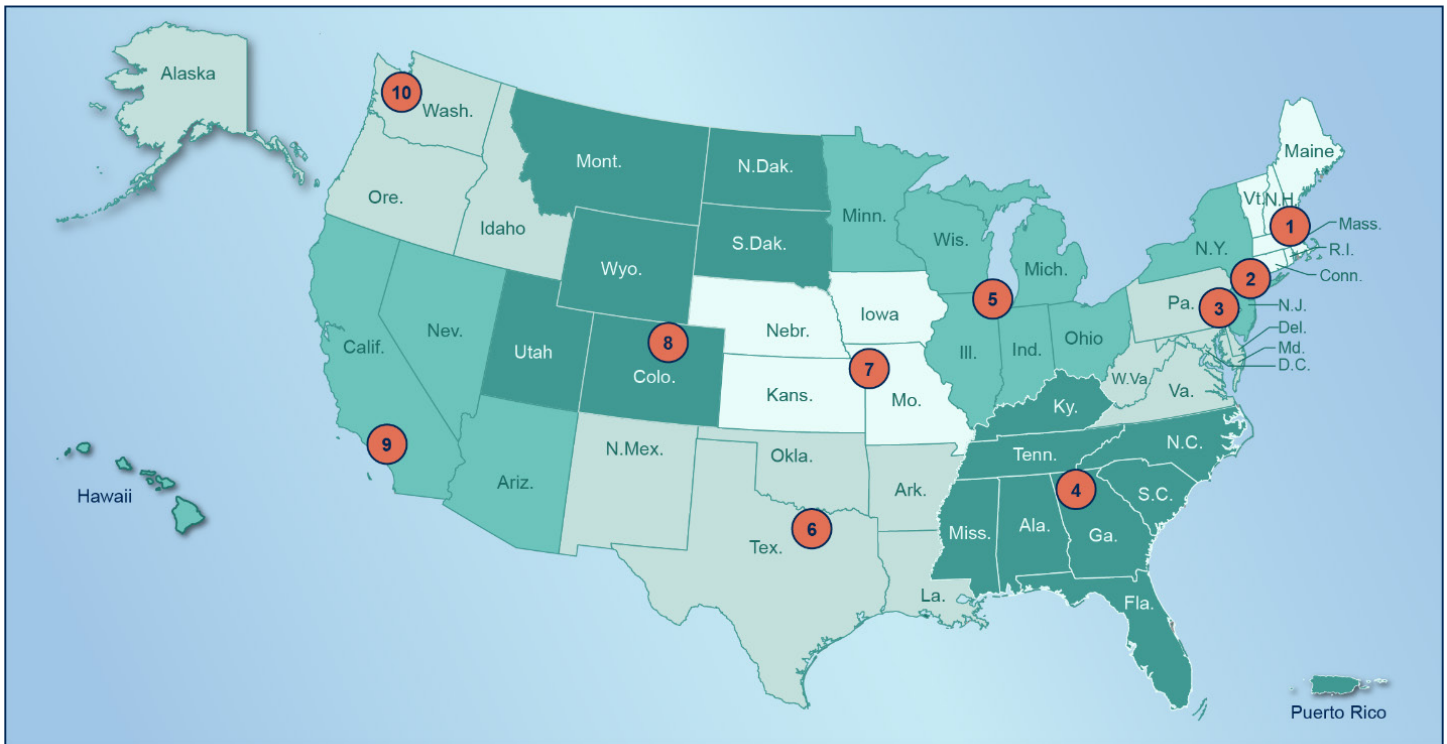
- CCAM.** Key CCAM resources include its fund braiding guide, program inventory, and technical assistance centers. As noted above, the *Federal Fund Braiding Guide* provides information to potential grantees about acceptable scenarios where they can use funds from one federal program to meet the match requirements of another. Also as noted above, CCAM’s program inventory lists the 132 federal

programs through which funding can be provided for transportation for people with disabilities, older adults, and individuals of low income. Finally, CCAM's technical assistance centers promote and facilitate the coordination of services. For example, according to FTA officials, the CCAM Technical Assistance Center, which is supported by multiple federal agencies, provides one-on-one assistance on issues such as cost allocation and fund braiding.

- **Regional offices.** FTA's 10 regional offices work directly with tribal, state, and local transportation agencies (see fig. 8 for the office locations, as of August 2025).⁴⁰ According to FTA officials, regional staff meet monthly with federal funding recipients, attend conferences and meetings, and answer questions as needed. Regional FTA officials we interviewed said that while most of their interactions are with direct recipients of federal funding, they work with subrecipients on request, such as transit providers that receive federal funding through state DOTs. In addition, each regional office has one or multiple positions for regional tribal liaisons. FTA's Tribal Transit Program manager holds monthly meetings with these liaisons to share internal agency communications. According to FTA officials, regional tribal liaisons allow FTA to have a broader reach to Tribes and to assist with amplifying communication and providing training.

⁴⁰FTA has an Office of Regional Services whose role it is to coordinate with and assist the agency's regional offices with implementing FTA programs. For example, FTA officials said the Office of Regional Services amplifies guidelines across FTA's regions.

Figure 8: Map of the 10 Federal Transit Administration Regions, as of August 2025



Sources: GAO presentation of Federal Transit Administration information from transit.dot.gov/regional-offices and base map from MapInfo. | GAO-25-107455

In addition to its outreach as part of these efforts, according to FTA officials, when FTA publishes notices of funding opportunity, officials have strategies to make communities aware of each opportunity that can help communities meet their needs. These strategies include widely publicizing the opportunity, holding webinars with eligible applicants, and sending out mass emails to members of the public who have subscribed for news and information. FTA also regularly attends conferences where officials talk with prospective grantees and present on programs.

FTA officials said that, in addition to sharing information about funding opportunities, conferences are also an important venue to collect feedback. For example, at a past conference, FTA officials heard that it is difficult for smaller transit agencies to track all the different federal grant programs. This feedback led to the creation of DOT Navigator, an online resource to help communities understand the best ways to apply for grants and the technical assistance that is available. Additionally, officials said that at conferences, they may hear about transit providers' needs for

more technical assistance in a particular area and direct that feedback to the technical assistance centers. FTA has also collected feedback through surveys on its business processes and services. This survey is distributed approximately every 2 years to users of the National Transit Database and FTA's grant management tool.

FTA may also undertake efforts to solicit feedback on specific programs. For example, in 2023 and 2024, FTA conducted a consultation about its administration of the TTP competitive program.⁴¹ Based on feedback received during a public comment period and in-person and virtual consultations with Tribes, FTA issued a notice summarizing and responding to comments regarding how the TTP competitive program and technical assistance should be provided to Tribes.⁴² As a result of the feedback and consultations, FTA made changes to the program. For example, starting with fiscal year 2024 program funding, FTA

- continued not to require a local match for any projects funded through the TTP competitive program;⁴³
- increased the cap on planning grants to \$50,000 under the TTP competitive program;
- continued to permit all eligible tribal governments to apply for operating assistance;⁴⁴ and

⁴¹Executive Order 13175 required federal agencies to have an accountable process to ensure meaningful and timely input by tribal officials in the development of regulatory policies that have tribal implications. Exec. Order 13175, *Consultation and Coordination With Indian Tribal Governments*, § 5(a), 65 Fed. Reg. 67249, 67250 (Nov. 6, 2000). DOT's policy to meet the Executive Order's requirements related to consultation with Indian Tribes and other applicable requirements was last updated in 2023. See Department of Transportation, *Department of Transportation Tribal Consultation Policy and Procedures*, DOT Order 5301.1A (Aug. 10, 2023).

⁴²Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Program; Tribal Transit Program; Response to Comments, 89 Fed. Reg. 48953 (June 10, 2024).

⁴³According to FTA's notice, there has been no match for the TTP competitive program in recent years, whereas in the past, a 10 percent match was required on the program's projects, unless the Tribe applied for a hardship waiver.

⁴⁴According to FTA's notice, FTA has been permitting all eligible Tribes to apply for operating assistance in recent years, rather than following its pre-pandemic practice of limiting operating assistance to applicants who receive less than \$20,000 under the TTP formula program.

-
- continued to provide Tribes 90 days to submit proposals under the TTP competitive program notice of funding opportunity.⁴⁵

The majority of the transportation agencies and other interviewees we spoke with had some level of interaction with FTA through these various efforts. The top three most commonly identified types of outreach and assistance they received were (1) interactions with or presentations from FTA officials at conferences or meetings, (2) regular calls or emails with FTA staff, and (3) technical assistance (such as through National RTAP or the CCAM Technical Assistance Center). Representatives from several transportation agencies generally said they did not have frequent contact directly with federal officials, but rather received information from and communicated questions to federal agencies via their state DOT. Specifically, four rural transit providers and one tribal provider said that they worked with their state DOT on issues related to federal program requirements, such as reporting.

Interviewees identified communication with regional offices as a particularly helpful form of assistance to, for example, understand federal program requirements. Specifically, most of the transportation agency representatives we interviewed described positive relationships with FTA regional officials and highlighted, for example, regional officials' regular and timely communication. Officials from one state DOT said that their monthly meetings with FTA regional officials always have an agenda covering topics such as changes at FTA and DOT that the state DOT needs to be aware of, the specific details of federal programs, what is and is not working for the state DOT related to federal programs, and construction project issues. In addition to regular phone calls, several interviewees indicated that they felt comfortable reaching out to FTA regional officials anytime they had an issue with understanding regulations or navigating reporting systems. Officials from a Tribe added that FTA regional officials will get on the phone with them and walk them

⁴⁵In the past, the window for submissions has sometimes been 60 days. According to FTA officials, separate from the consultation and as part of an Office of Management and Budget simplification pilot, FTA also issued a simplified notice of funding opportunity for the fiscal year 2024 TTP competitive program, which was easier for applicants to understand and complete. FTA officials said that the agency intends to simplify all its notices of funding opportunity through fiscal years 2025 and 2026.

through navigating the federal reporting system, which the tribal officials said they could not navigate on their own.⁴⁶

Several interviewees also found technical assistance helpful. They mentioned that they used National RTAP on-boarding guidance for new transit staff and driver and dispatcher training materials, among other things. One rural transit provider official who is relatively new to their position found National RTAP's on-boarding tools for new transit staff useful to learn about federal regulations. Additionally, officials from a state DOT said that National RTAP's online resources make training accessible for those who may not be able to travel for in-person training or conferences. Officials from another state DOT said that CCAM has put a lot of effort into making its resources useful. For example, one of CCAM's technical assistance centers holds webinars that highlight stories on how other entities have used funds and challenges they faced. The officials said it is helpful for transit providers to see these real-world examples.

FTA Does Not Have a Process to Assess the Effectiveness of Its Efforts to Help Communities Access and Use Funds for Accessible Transit

According to FTA officials, FTA has strategic objectives related to removing barriers to accessible transportation access in rural and tribal communities. In particular, FTA's FY 2022-2026 Strategic Plan identifies strategic objectives to remove barriers to transit access for underserved communities and to improve the quality of transit service available to rural and underserved communities, including tribal communities.⁴⁷ Federal agencies are required by statute to produce strategic plans as part of a framework for federal performance management established in the

⁴⁶Representatives from some transportation agencies that mainly worked with their state DOT on issues related to federal program requirements were still familiar with FTA regional officials. For example, officials from one rural transit provider that said they did not directly interact with the federal government were still able to name FTA regional staff based on their conference attendance.

⁴⁷Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, *FTA Strategic Plan FY 2022-2026* (April 14, 2022).

1990s.⁴⁸ They are also required to set goals, measure results, and report progress under this framework.⁴⁹

For each of its objectives, FTA has identified performance goals and measures and has conducted performance management reviews to assess its progress, consistent with certain key practices and underlying requirements. For example, one outcome-level measure for the objective related to removing barriers to transit access is a reduction in the number of repeat ADA-related findings in its oversight reviews of recipients.⁵⁰ As another example, a performance goal for FTA's objective on improving the quality of transit service available to rural and underserved communities is to increase federal transit grant dollars announced or allocated for rural or tribal areas, which FTA measures based on the total dollars announced for these areas.

Although FTA has a variety of efforts to assist rural and tribal communities in accessing and using funds to improve accessible transit services, it has not formally or more broadly assessed these efforts' ability to help communities address challenges, nor does it have plans to do so. Additionally, FTA has not assessed how effective these efforts are in helping FTA achieve its objectives, their associated goals, or any resulting changes FTA could make to these efforts to better support its objectives.

Our prior work has identified key practices that can help agencies effectively manage and assess the results of federal efforts, including using evidence to assess progress towards goals and apply learning to

⁴⁸See Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (1993) (establishing a framework for federal performance management); GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011) (amending GPRA and requiring federal agencies to produce strategic plans every four years). Relatedly, the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 established a framework for federal agencies to take a more comprehensive and integrated approach to assessing, building, and using evidence in their decision-making. See Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (2019).

⁴⁹31 U.S.C. §§ 1115(b), 1116.

⁵⁰These include triennial reviews, which are FTA management tools to assess recipient performance and adherence to FTA requirements and policies, and state management reviews, which assess recipients' management practices and program implementation.

decision making.⁵¹ FTA officials said they do not have any plans to conduct such an assessment, in part because they are always striving to improve their efforts to help rural and tribal communities and take feedback on a rolling basis through a variety of methods, including those we described above. Establishing a regular process to assess its efforts could, however, help ensure that FTA is not missing opportunities to maximize the effectiveness of its efforts to address rural and tribal communities' needs and challenges.

While transportation agencies and other interviewees generally found FTA's efforts useful, they also identified areas where FTA could add to or improve its assistance and tools. For example, some of the areas where interviewees said changes could help transit providers better access and use funds included:

- **Additional targeted guidance and best practices.** Some interviewees identified a need for additional, more specific guidance on topics, such as fund braiding. As discussed above, while existing guidance indicates when fund braiding is permissible, officials from one state DOT said that guidance for implementing braiding is less readily available. They said this makes it difficult to be innovative with funding. Additionally, representatives from an association said they hoped that the next version of the fund braiding guide is more specific and easier to use.⁵² For example, they said it would be helpful for the updated guide to clearly explain what fund braiding means for budgets, clarify what paperwork is required, and share best practices related to navigating partnerships and approvals from the various federal and state entities providing funds. More generally, an

⁵¹[GAO-23-105460](#). In this report, we identified practices that can help federal leaders develop and use evidence to effectively manage and assess the results of federal efforts. The practices are distilled from hundreds of actions identified in GAO's past work. These include best practices for setting measurable goals and interim targets. We have previously assessed some of DOT's performance goals from its fiscal year 2025 performance plan, including its goal to increase transit grant dollars for rural and tribal areas. We found that this goal met selected performance management practices. See *GAO, Transportation Equity: DOT Could Improve Some Performance Goals to Better Assess Progress*, [GAO-24-105652](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 23, 2024).

⁵²CCAM has its own strategic plan with its own goals. One of its performance measures was to, by 2025, release an updated fund braiding guide. CCAM completed this measure in May 2025 with the release of an updated CCAM program inventory, which combined the program inventory and the 2025 CCAM *Federal Fund Braiding Guide* into one resource. FTA officials said this resource is searchable and easier to use and includes additional program-specific information.

association said it would be helpful for FTA to share best practices for rural transit providers.

- **Streamlined and centralized program requirements.** Some interviewees also noted opportunities to streamline certain program requirements to better fit rural and tribal communities' needs and capacities. For example, representatives from one rural transit provider noted that applications for federal funding are the same for rural and urban transit providers, even though urban providers have more resources than rural providers. Additionally, representatives from an association said that across federal competitive funding programs they are aware of, applications are extremely complicated, and that federal agencies should simplify the application process where they can. In addition to streamlining requirements, some interviewees identified ways that FTA could better help rural and tribal providers prepare to meet requirements. For example, officials from a rural transit provider said that aligning the timing of when reporting is due, or at least communicating due dates further in advance, would help transit providers better prepare. Similarly, a representative from an association said an annual schedule of when grants will be available would give smaller transit agencies more time to prepare.⁵³
- **More consistency.** Some interviewees identified that there were areas where consistency in communication could be improved between FTA regional offices and across DOT when interpreting certain program requirements. For example, officials from a state DOT said that they sometimes learn about different FTA regional interpretations on issues like procurement when they talk to other state DOTs.⁵⁴ Representatives from an association said that different interpretations can create confusion around certain federal requirements. These representatives said there is also interest among state DOTs in more unified interpretations of program requirements, especially when it comes to requirements that state DOTs may find administratively burdensome. Officials from a state DOT said that

⁵³However, an agency's ability to plan and issue notices of funding opportunity is contingent on the authorization and appropriation of funding for each program.

⁵⁴When conducting procurements using federal funds, states must both meet federal requirements and follow the same policies and procedures they use for conducting procurements using non-federal funds. See 2 C.F.R. § 200.317. FTA officials said this can lead to differences among states. They said that, in recent years, FTA has been working to make communities aware of flexibilities in its procurement guidance, which might also lead to differences among states.

“fear of requirements” can disincentivize small rural and tribal transit providers from accessing federal programs.

- **More holistic coordination.** Several interviewees identified a need for a more holistic approach to assistance provided by, and coordination between, transportation and non-transportation agencies, including at the federal level. A representative from a technical assistance center proposed a portal-type tool where transportation and non-transportation organizations (e.g., pharmacies and healthcare providers) could see the same appointment schedules or other information to save costs and increase convenience for passengers. In addition, officials from one rural transit provider mentioned a desire for non-transportation agencies to “chip in” more on transportation costs.

Representatives from an association said that non-transportation agencies want to help, but they do not always understand why transportation is so important to their programs. They further explained that transit agencies often provide a service that health providers profit from (e.g., getting patients to and from dialysis appointments), but health providers do not contribute to funding that service. Additionally, a representative from a rural transit provider said that more clearly articulating the role that transportation providers have as health care providers themselves would help other, non-transportation stakeholders better understand the importance of transportation. Some interviewees said that this coordination needs to happen at every level, starting at the federal level. For example, interviewees said that federal agencies could share lessons learned and work more directly with transportation agencies on their own local coordination efforts. Some said that CCAM’s efforts promote this, but there is more that can be done.

In addition to potentially missing opportunities to help address rural and tribal communities’ needs and challenges by not establishing and using a regular assessment process, FTA may not be fully identifying how its efforts support its goals and objectives. For example, it might not be fully leveraging the strategies that best support removing barriers to transit access, or it might be putting resources towards strategies that do not best support that strategic objective. Additionally, it may not be fully identifying whether its efforts are addressing all the challenges rural and tribal communities are facing in accessing and using FTA funding programs (such as with the complexity of program requirements), or whether there are other programmatic or administrative changes or efforts it could be undertaking. Given the characteristics of rural and tribal communities described above, such as low staffing levels and resources,

such a process could also assist FTA in determining whether its methods are right-sized for those communities.

Conclusions

Accessible rural and tribal transit service enables older adults and people with disabilities to socialize, work, and access medical appointments and other services that promote their quality of life. FTA's funding and related efforts are increasingly critical to ensuring that rural and tribal communities can provide these services to these populations. These efforts—such as providing technical assistance, creating new resources, and collecting and responding to feedback—demonstrate its commitment to helping rural and tribal communities. It is essential that FTA understand how best to focus its efforts to help these communities access and use funding, given the challenges communities face and will likely continue to face into the future. Regular, more formalized assessment of its efforts could help ensure that FTA is adapting its efforts to best address the current and future barriers to these communities' ability to access and use federal programs to provide critical service to older adults and people with disabilities. It can also help FTA adapt its efforts to more effectively meet its own goals and objectives.

Recommendation for Executive Action

The Administrator of FTA should establish a process to regularly assess the effectiveness of FTA's efforts in assisting rural and tribal communities' access and use of funding programs in support of its objectives, such as to remove barriers to transit access. Such an assessment could include, for example, identifying additional steps that FTA could take related to the streamlining of program requirements or other challenges communities may face. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOT and HHS for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix IV, DOT agreed with our recommendation. DOT also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. HHS did not have any comments on the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Transportation, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at vonaha@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

//SIGNED//

Andrew Von Ah
Director, Physical Infrastructure

List of Requesters

The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand
Ranking Member
Special Committee on Aging
United States Senate

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate

The Honorable John Fetterman
United States Senate

The Honorable Mark Kelly
United States Senate

The Honorable Raphael Warnock
United States Senate

The Honorable Elizabeth Warren
United States Senate

Appendix I: Tribe and State Case Studies

This appendix contains more detailed information on the Tribes and states we selected as case studies for our review. There are 574 federally recognized Tribes in the United States from which we selected three Tribes: Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Coquille Indian Tribe, and Native Village of Unalakleet. We also selected four states: New Mexico, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Vermont. Our methodology for these selections is discussed above.

In this appendix, for each case study Tribe, we provide a summary that includes a brief description of the Tribe's location and its accessible transit services, and examples of federally funded transit projects. For each case study state, we provide a summary that includes information about the number of rural transit providers in the state and the accessible transit services provided by the rural transit provider we interviewed in the state, as well as examples of the provider's federally funded transit projects. See figures 9-15.

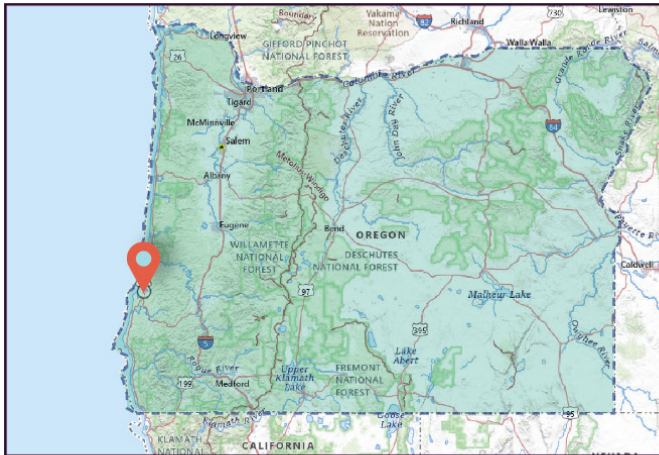
Figure 9: Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Case Study Summary



The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe's (CRST) Cheyenne River Reservation's tribal headquarters in Eagle Butte, SD, is in central SD about 300 miles northwest of Sioux Falls (which is in eastern SD) and about 170 miles northeast of Rapid City (which is in western SD). The reservation is the fourth largest in land area in the United States. CRST provides demand response transit service for community members, including elders and people with disabilities. CRST received federal funding to purchase a new bus and minivan and support for operations. The new vehicles were intended to expand transit service and maintain a state of good repair.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with CRST officials. | GAO-25-107455

Figure 10: Coquille Indian Tribe Case Study Summary

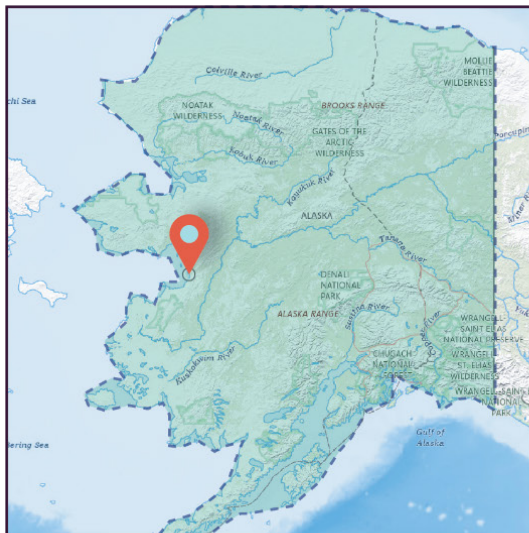


The Coquille Indian Tribe is located in coastal Coos Bay, OR, which is about 120 miles from Eugene to the northeast. The Tribe provides transportation assistance for tribal members and spouses both inside and outside the Tribe’s five-county service area. Three kinds of service are available: transportation for elders and people with disabilities for health, education, work, and social or recreational purposes; travel reimbursement for any community member for medical, dental, mental health, or addiction treatment services; and transportation assistance as part of a Family Support Services case plan. Several years ago, the Coquille Indian Tribe received federal funding to

expand transportation services by adding a third route to allow for connections between its two routes at the time. This enhancement was meant to allow tribal members and residents to have access to reliable transportation for healthcare, legal services, education, employment, and other essential services.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with a Coquille Indian Tribe official. | GAO-25-107455

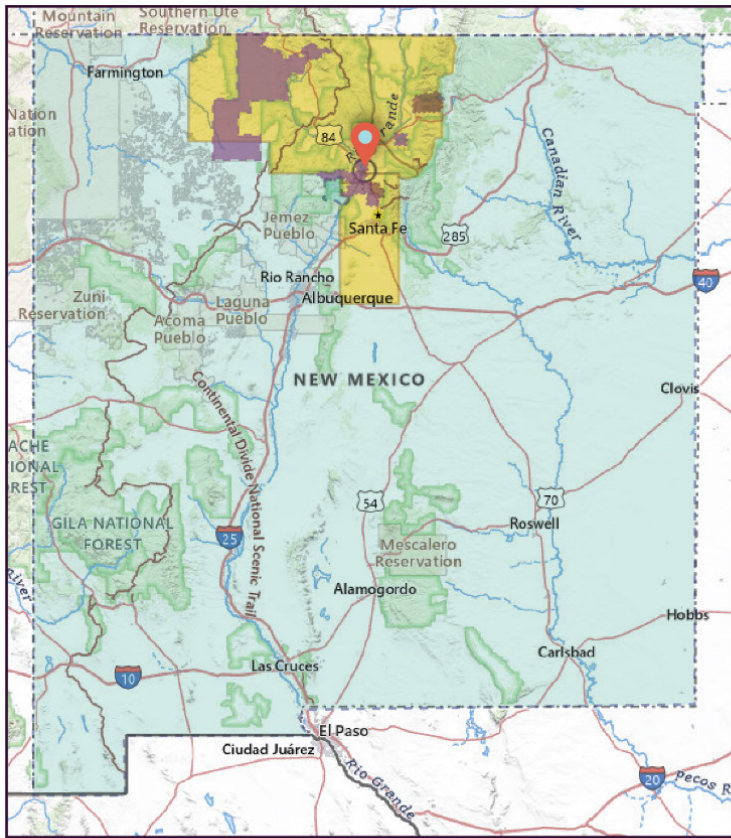
Figure 11: Native Village of Unalakleet Case Study Summary



The Native Village of Unalakleet (NVU) is a rural northwestern Alaskan community located 148 miles southeast of Nome and 395 miles northwest of Anchorage. NVU sits on the coast of the Norton Sound, at the mouth of the Unalakleet River. It is not accessible by any road system constructed to engineered standards and is isolated from any community hubs. NVU provides demand response transit service for community members, including elders and people with disabilities. In recent years, NVU has received federal funding to build a bus garage and maintenance facility to improve the state of repair of its fleet by providing sheltered indoor space to store and repair buses. In addition, NVU was awarded federal funding to maintain their transit service, which provides the only public transportation service in the Native Village.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with NVU officials. | GAO-25-107455

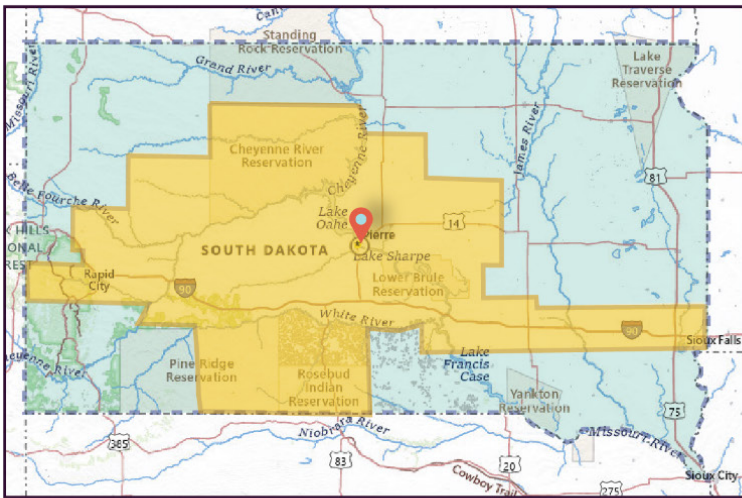
Figure 12: New Mexico Case Study Summary



Twenty-one transit providers serve New Mexico’s rural areas. The New Mexico rural transit provider GAO interviewed, North Central Regional Transit District (NCRTD), serves four counties, eight Pueblos, and a Tribe. It offers the following services, including accessible transit services: Americans with Disabilities Act on-demand service, rideshare service, regional commuter, and fixed route in larger communities. NCRTD received federal funding to renovate a transit center and to help complete an operations and maintenance facility. According to NCRTD documentation, the operations and maintenance facility project will include parking for buses, employees, and visitors, as well as state-of-the-art vehicle maintenance, repair and wash bays, administrative offices, and employee support facilities, such as training rooms, locker rooms, and potential future workforce housing.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with NCRTD officials. | GAO-25-107455

Figure 13: South Dakota Case Study Summary



Thirteen transit providers serve South Dakota's rural areas. The South Dakota rural transit provider GAO interviewed, River Cities Public Transit (RCPT), serves 24 counties and provides demand response service that typically runs Monday to Friday, with service hours varying by location. RCPT received federal funding to buy three vehicles to expand the availability of medical transportation services to older adults, people with disabilities, and the general public. This project is intended to improve service and reliability for residents in the service area.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with RCPT officials. | GAO-25-107455

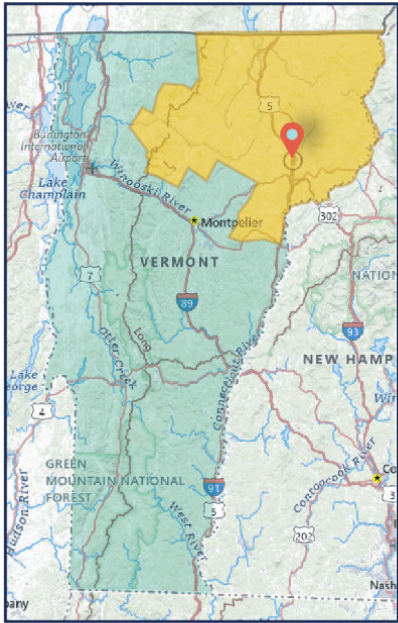
Figure 14: Tennessee Case Study Summary



Nine transit providers serve Tennessee's rural areas. The Tennessee rural transit provider GAO interviewed, South Central Tennessee Development District (SCTDD), serves 13 counties. It offers the following services, including accessible transit services: on-demand and deviated fixed route. SCTDD received federal funding to purchase new vehicles and run its deviated fixed route services.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with SCTDD officials. | GAO-25-107455

Figure 15: Vermont Case Study Summary



Six transit providers serve Vermont’s rural areas. The Vermont rural transit provider GAO interviewed, Rural Community Transportation (RCT), serves 64 municipalities across four counties and offers the following transit services, including accessible transit services: on-demand service, regional microtransit, and deviated fixed route. RCT received federal funding for new and existing transit services. For example, RCT provides transportation to medical appointments and prescription pick-up services for eligible individuals. It also pays for critical care transportation (to obtain dialysis, chemotherapy, and radiation treatment), as well as meal site, shopping, adult day services, and basic transportation needs for older adults and people with disabilities.

Source: Base map from The National Map published and maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey and GAO review of documentation and an interview with RCT officials. | GAO-25-107455

Appendix II: List of Interviews

Table 3: List of Interviews

Federal agencies	Denali Commission
	Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living
	Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
	FTA Region 1 Office (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont)
	FTA Region 4 Office (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the United States Virgin Islands)
	FTA Region 6 Office (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas)
	FTA Region 8 Office (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming)
	FTA Region 10 Office (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington)
	National Council on Disability
Tribes and tribal organizations	Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe
	Coquille Indian Tribe
	Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
	Intertribal Transportation Association
	National Indian Council on Aging
	Native Village of Unalakleet
	North Coast Tribal Transportation Commission
State agencies	New Mexico Department of Transportation
	South Dakota Department of Transportation
	Tennessee Department of Transportation
	Vermont Agency of Transportation
Rural transit providers and community organizations	Central South Dakota Enhancement District (South Dakota)
	Independent Living Choices (South Dakota)
	North Central Regional Transit District (New Mexico)
	River Cities Public Transit (South Dakota)
	Rural Community Transportation (Vermont)
Technical assistance centers	South Central Tennessee Development District (Tennessee)
	National Aging and Disability Transportation Center/Easterseals
	National Center for Mobility Management
	National Rural Transit Assistance Program
Associations	Shared-Use Mobility Center
	AARP
	American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
	American Public Transportation Association
	Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living

Appendix II: List of Interviews

Community Transportation Association of America
National Association of Development Organizations
South Dakota AARP
USAgings

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107455

Appendix III: Printable Version of Interactive Figure 5

Figure 16: Examples of Challenges Rural and Tribal Communities Face in Providing Accessible Transit Services for Older Adults and People with Disabilities



Sources: GAO analysis of interviews with rural and tribal officials. Base map from MapInfo. | GAO-25-107455

AK challenges:

- staffing shortage
- driver's license shortage
- poor conditions of tribal roads
- climate change
- federal grant reporting requirements

AZ challenges:

- Tribes competing against each other for funding
- Tribes cannot compete for federal grants with states
- staff capacity for applying for and managing federal grants
- large size of the service area, the majority of the roads are unpaved

A—CA challenge:

- federal grant reporting requirements too labor intensive for the Tribe

B—CA challenge:

- federal grant reporting requirements too labor intensive and burdensome for the Tribe

C—CA challenges:

- poor conditions of tribal roads
- smaller Tribes do not get attention
- insufficient signage
- complex guidelines for state and federal grants
- staff capacity
- not having the capacity to sustain transit programs
- federal grant reporting requirements

MA challenges:

- aging in place in a rural island location
- federal fund braiding
- Tribes competing for federal grants
- having a ferry with an unreliable schedule when elders need medical attention off of the island
- high cost of the ferry
- too many separate federal funding sources

MN challenge:

- recruiting and retaining drivers for the Tribe

NM challenges:

- large size of the service area
- lack of pedestrian infrastructure to access transit stops
- lack of understanding that transportation is linked to health and education
- safety for drivers and passengers on transit vehicles

OR challenges:

- staffing shortage
- increasing costs to provide accessible transit services (e.g., cost of vehicles) for the tribal community
- vehicle shortage
- meeting demand
- extreme weather conditions

D—SD challenges:

- poor conditions of tribal roads
- large service area and long travel distances on tribal land
- extreme weather conditions (e.g., heavy snow, rain, and winds)
- wear and tear on transit vehicles, need for more costly all wheel drive vehicles

E—SD challenges:

- funding
- staffing shortage (e.g., driver shortage)
- increased cost of providing accessible transit services
- stigma around using public transit
- weather conditions (e.g., rain, snow, and ice) that affect road conditions and service reliability
- drivers are often elderly and cannot work longer shifts

TN challenges:

- funding
- driver shortage
- passengers' physical limitations (e.g., inability to sit up for entire trip)
- not having access to a cell phone for communicating with a dispatcher
- increased cost of transit vehicles
- specialized maintenance for transit vehicles
- increased traffic due to a growing population

VT challenges:

- funding
- meeting demand for transit to medical and food services

WI challenges:

- funding
- shortage of drivers with commercial driver's licenses
- resources to address increasingly specific needs in the tribal community (such as specialized transportation and assistance)

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Transportation



**U.S. Department of
Transportation**
Office of the Secretary
of Transportation

Assistant Secretary
for Administration

1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20590

August 15, 2025

Mr. Andrew Von Ah
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Von Ah:

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) allocates approximately \$1.3 billion annually for rural and Tribal transit through a combination of formula and competitive programs. These investments support communities across the United States—from remote Alaska and the Rockies to the Central Plains and the Eastern Seaboard—and FTA provides comprehensive technical assistance to help Tribal operators thrive. Programs like the Rural Transit Assistance Program provide funding that supports expert guidance for rural and Tribal transit operators.

Upon review of the draft report, FTA concurs with the GAO recommendation to establish a regular process to assess the effectiveness of FTA's efforts in assisting rural and Tribal communities' access to and use of funding programs in support of its objectives.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report. We will provide a detailed response to the recommendation within 180 days of the final report's issuance. Please contact Gary Middleton, Director, Audit Relations and Program Improvement, at gary.middleton@dot.gov with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Anne Byrd".

Dr. Anne Byrd
Assistant Secretary for Administration

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Andrew Von Ah, vonaha@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Nalylee Padilla (Assistant Director); Marcia Fernandez (Analyst in Charge); Estelle Bowman; Tammy Conquest; Emily Crofford; Melanie Diemel; Kathleen Drennan; Delwen Jones; Rebecca Morrow; Michael Murray; Anna Maria Ortiz; M-Cat Overcash; Kelly Rubin; Ryan Rudolph; Madeline Welter; and Alicia Wilson made key contributions to this report.

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