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# Florida's Multiple Approaches to Addressing Rural Mobility

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*The State of Florida presents many challenges to public transportation providers due to its diverse development patterns and multiple population segments. While the state is commonly thought of as dense and urbanized, Florida is also significantly influenced by rural communities. Like in other states, rural mobility is especially challenging for some residents due to longer trips, limited and declining infrastructure, and lack of available options and resources. Accessible, affordable, and reliable transportation is a critical component to community inclusion. Having access to community resources is essential to fostering independence and self-sufficiency. This article provides an overview of the mobility challenges faced by rural Floridians as well as some of the programs and approaches that the state has undertaken to address this need. Many of the initiatives highlighted below are Floridian applications of existing federal programs; thus, they can be implemented in any state to address rural residents' mobility challenges.*

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## Introduction

The State of Florida presents multiple challenges to public transportation providers due to its diverse development patterns and multiple population segments. As the nation's fourth largest (18.8 million residents) and tenth densest state, Florida is commonly thought of as highly urbanized. The reality is that the Sunshine State has a significant rural influence. Figure 1 details the counties defined as "rural" by Florida Statute (381.0406, F.S.) – "an area with a population density of less than 100 persons per square mile or an area defined by the U.S. Census as rural." Of Florida's 67 counties, 33 are currently designated as rural, with most of the remaining 34 counties having significant non-urbanized areas.

Florida's rural-urban divide has implications for transportation providers seeking to offer sufficient public transit options. The Community Transportation Association of America states that "more than one-third of America's population lives outside of urbanized areas. Nearly 40 percent of the country's transit dependent population – primarily senior citizens, persons with disabilities and low-income individuals – resides in rural areas." Rural residents, and especially those in specific transportation

dependent populations, face extra mobility challenges due to longer trips, limited and declining infrastructure, and fewer transportation options.

The current lack of access to timely, dependable and affordable transportation services across Florida was addressed in an April 2010 report focused on residents without automobiles who rely on public transportation (USF CUTR). The report found that where public transportation services are available, they often operate during confined hours and within limited service corridors. Private services, such as those provided by taxis or other carriers, often are either too expensive for regular use or do not provide routine services with handicap-accessible vehicles. This is particularly true in rural communities, where additional challenges prevent the implementation of high-quality, consistent transportation services.

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### Identifying Transportation Dependent Populations

Addressing mobility issues in rural communities requires a unified, inclusive definition of the target population in order to be effective. The Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged (FCTD), an independent state administrative body (elaborated upon below), classifies senior citizens, the disabled, and other transportation dependent residents under the broader term “Transportation Disadvantaged.” Section 411.202, Florida Statutes, defines the Transportation Disadvantaged as persons who are unable to transport themselves or purchase transportation because of physical or mental disability, income status, and/or age. These individuals, therefore, depend upon others to obtain access to health care, employment, education, shopping, social activities, or other life-sustaining activities.

### Seniors Citizens

The mobility options of senior citizens, an identified transportation dependent (or transportation disadvantaged) population, is relevant around the country, but particularly in Florida. The U.S. Census Bureau projects nationally that the senior population (age 60+) will double in size to 70 million and represent 20% of the nation’s population by 2030. Florida, known for its historic attraction to retirees, is well ahead of the rest of the country with seniors

already representing 23.6% of the state’s nearly 19 million residents. By 2030, this segment is expected to exceed one third (33.4%) of the state’s projected 26 million population. These observations are particularly important in Florida due to the dual trends of aging in place and retirement in rural communities, both of which act to increase the number of older adults living in the state’s rural areas.

These demographic shifts will have a significant impact on Florida’s rural and urban transportation networks in the coming decades. The National Center for Senior Transportation (NCST) estimates that 600,000 U.S. residents age 70 and older stop driving each year. With the current average gaps between death and the end of driving privileges at approximately 6 years for men and 10 years for women, significant numbers of seniors face many years of being unable to transport themselves. Non-driving seniors tend to make fewer trips than their driving counterparts: approximately 15% fewer for medical appointments, and 65% fewer trips for social, family, religious and other life-enhancing purposes. NCST estimates that more than 50% of non-driving seniors stay at home on any given day due to lack of mobility options.

### Persons with Disabilities

Exclusion from transportation services has serious implications for persons with disabilities as well. These individuals are often unable to participate fully in community activities because they either lack retrofitted private vehicles or are presented with insufficient public transportation options. The National Council on Disability (NCD), an independent federal agency, released its *Progress Report* in March 2009 which included special mention of the challenges faced by the disability community in rural areas: “The lack of transportation for people with disabilities, particularly in rural areas, has a great human cost – sometimes even resulting in unnecessary institutionalization” (emphasis added). Such institutionalization resulting from minimal transportation options lead to individual decisions that result in isolation, a loss of independence, and social exclusion that negatively impact not only the residents themselves, but the entire community.

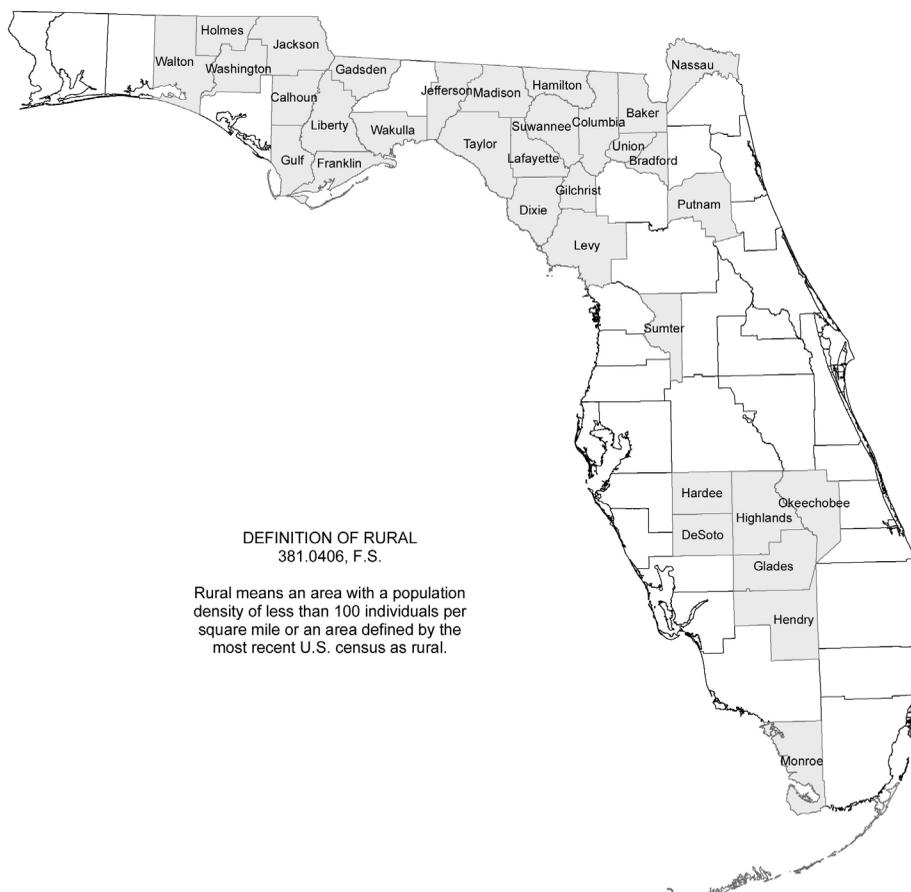


Figure 1: Rural counties in Florida. Image courtesy of Jay Goodwill.

### The Social Impacts of Transportation Exclusion

In 2008, NCD released *Keeping Track: National Disability Status and Program Performance Indicators* that specifically addressed the social

| Program Area          | Investment             | Benefit (rounded)      | Return on Investment (ROI) | Payback per Dollar Invested |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Medical               | \$128.6 million        | \$1.425 billion        | 1108%                      | \$11.08                     |
| Employment            | \$51.5 million         | \$293.9 million        | 571%                       | \$5.71                      |
| Education             | \$75.9 million         | \$444.6 million        | 586%                       | \$5.86                      |
| Nutrition             | \$50.8 million         | \$636.4 million        | 1252%                      | \$12.52                     |
| Life Sustaining/Other | \$63.8 million         | \$294.8 million        | 462%                       | \$4.62                      |
| <b>Totals</b>         | <b>\$370.7 million</b> | <b>\$3.096 billion</b> | <b>835%</b>                | <b>\$8.35</b>               |

**Table 1:** Return on Investment of Florida Transportation Disadvantaged Programs. *Recreated from the Market Institute's report entitled "Florida Transportation Disadvantaged Programs: Return on Investment Study," page 17.*

implications of limited transportation options for persons with disabilities. This document provides a set of social indicators that measure the progress of people with disabilities in key quality of life areas over time, including employment, education, health status, financial status and security, leisure and recreation, personal relationships, and crime and safety. Building upon this report with its *2009 National Disability Policy: A Progress Report*, NCD also gathered public input directly from the disability community. The distributed survey sought to capture commentary on the personal challenges of living with a disability, the success of government programs in addressing the ongoing needs of persons with disabilities, and suggestions on how existing funding sources could be used. Of note, respondents reported that the lack of transportation restricts their ability to fully participate in all aspects of community life.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence from throughout the United States suggests that this sort of isolation leads to mental and physical health issues, as well as the inability for people to find and maintain employment, participate in education and training opportunities, engage socially, and/or conduct themselves in an independent manner. Secondary implications include increased health care costs that may occur when people are unable to maintain health-related visits and other quality of life activities as well as increased reliance on federal and state economic support programs.

**Economic Benefits from Mobility Options**

Programs to increase access to transportation options have important social benefits. In addition, there are also quantifiable economic benefits when individuals are given transportation options that enable them to live independently, including:

- Decreased federal and state supplemental support required for residents who are transportation disadvantaged
- Increased access to training and educational opportunities
- Increased access to jobs and increased likelihood of

- maintaining existing employment
- Decreased incidence of and costs associated with institutionalization
- Decreased health care costs due to earlier preventative appointments and treatments.

In March 2008, the FCTD released the "Florida Transportation Disadvantaged Programs: Return on Investment Study" that outlines the return on investment (ROI) and benefits generated from the relevant programs funded by the state. As detailed in Table 1, the overall ROI was 835 percent. Put another way, researchers found that residents receive \$8.35 in benefits for every dollar of taxpayer money invested.

**Programs Used to Enhance Rural Mobility**

Recognizing the social and economic benefits of mobility, the state of Florida has adopted a proactive agenda aimed at improving transportation options for rural residents. Florida's approach is multi-faceted as the existing programs are not necessarily designed or coordinated to align with one another. From a public transportation delivery standpoint, Florida's system is complex because of the need to coordinate numerous funding streams of various federal, state, and local agencies; the existing differences between provider service hours, coverage, and the type of services available; and issues related to provider jurisdiction. These are just a few of the issues that make it difficult for agencies to implement effective public transportation in rural communities.

Despite the challenges of coordinating funding and administration of these services in rural communities, there are a number of transportation options that may be available to rural Floridians, including:

- Volunteer driver programs
- Paratransit service (traditional door-to-door or specialized curb-to-curb services)
- Public transit and fixed route services
- Taxi services
- Transportation voucher programs

The remainder of this article deals with three programs within Florida's rural transportation mobility strategy for residents without access to an automobile that facilitate the above options in rural communities. These programs run independently of one another largely as a result of separate dedicated funding streams:

- The Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged
- FDOT/FTA Grant Programs Assisting Rural Transportation
- Florida Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP)

### **The Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged**

#### ***Overview and History***

The Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged is mandated by Chapter 427, Florida Statutes, to oversee the coordination of transportation disadvantaged (TD) services in the state of Florida. The Commission mission is "to ensure the availability of efficient, cost-effective, and quality services for transportation disadvantaged persons." The Commission focuses on coordinating activities that deliver TD transportation services throughout all 67 counties in the state.

In 1979, the Florida Legislature created the Coordinating Council for the Transportation Disadvantaged as part of the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). The Council was given responsibility for coordinating TD services; ten years later, the Coordinating Council was elevated to an independent entity called the Transportation Disadvantaged Commission with dedicated funding deposited into a state trust fund. These funds may be used for administrative activities, to subsidize trips, and as capital for new transportation services provided for the TD community. Florida was the first state in the country to combine a dedicated funding source with independent commission status.

#### ***Statewide Coordination***

Coordination of TD services, the key purpose of the FCTD, is accomplished through a network of local Commission-approved official planning agencies, Community Transportation Coordinators (CTCs), local coordinating boards, and transportation operators. The official planning agencies are usually metropolitan planning organizations, county planning units, or regional planning councils, designated by the Commission. They are responsible for recommending agencies to serve as local CTCs. The 49 local CTCs statewide are responsible for coordinating TD services within their local service areas (county or multi-county area). They may be a government entity, a transit agency, private not-for-profit agency, or a for-profit company. Operationally CTCs may be a sole source provider or it may broker part or all of the trips to another transportation operator or provider.

They may negotiate coordination agreements with other transportation providers; however, they are ultimately responsible for ensuring that TD transportation services are delivered locally.

The planning agencies also appoint the staff the Local Coordinating Boards. Local Coordinating Boards include representatives appointed by the local official planning agency to provide assistance and oversight for CTCs. A local elected official chairs the Board which annually evaluates the local CTCs and mediates complaints. The benefits associated with statewide coordination of TD transportation efforts include to:

- Improve the safety, welfare and quality of life for the most vulnerable residents
- Reduce expenditures for purchasing agencies and providers
- Improve efficiency and reduce duplication/fragmentation
- Stretch limited tax dollars and improve tax dollar accountability
- Prevent fraud and abuse
- Improve local education of community transportation services
- Increase resident participation and local government support

### **FDOT/FTA Grant Programs Assisting Rural Transportation**

In addition to the FCTD approach, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) utilizes federal and state transportation funding programs that provide assistance for Florida's rural transit and planning agencies. Such USDOT programs are administered through the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

The following sections provide information on four federal funding programs that support rural public transportation, primarily those funded through FTA and codified in Chapter 49 of the United States Code (U.S.C.). Brief information is included on each program's use in Florida to specifically address rural mobility concerns. For more comprehensive information on the structure and broader use of these programs, see the "Resource Guide for Transit and Transit – Related Programs" that was prepared for FDOT by the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR). Information is also available on FTA's official website.

#### ***Formula Grants for Special Needs for Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities Program (49 U.S.C. Section 5310)***

This program provides states with per capita funding to help private nonprofit groups meet the transportation needs of seniors and persons with disabilities when existing services are unavailable or inadequate. Recipients usually use the funds to purchase transit vehicles, scheduling

systems, or handicap-supportive retrofit technology. FDOT receives federal funds and redistributes to each FDOT district office based on the area's statewide proportion of elderly and disabled populations.

***Formula Grants for Other than Urbanized Areas (49 U.S.C. Section 5311)***

This program specifically supports public transportation efforts in communities with less than 50,000 residents. In Florida, the per capita funds are allocated to district offices based on the area's proportion of non-urbanized population and may be used for capital expenses, operating assistance, state administration, and project administration expenses related to providing transportation services in rural areas. In addition, each state is usually required to utilize 15% of its annual funding to support intercity bus services.

***Job Access and Reverse Commute Program (JARC) (49 U.S.C. Section 5316)***

This program provides formula funding to urbanized areas of more than 200,000 residents in order to develop transportation services for welfare recipients and low-income individuals specifically as they commute to and from employment. In addition, the program seeks to develop "reverse commute" transportation routes between residential urban centers to suburban employment opportunities. Rural communities of 50,000 to 200,000 residents are eligible to receive JARC Program funds

through a competitive grant solicitation process. Rural residents face some of the longest commutes to work. Thus, this program is critical to expanding employment opportunities for rural residents in Florida.

Florida recipients use JARC Program funds for capital and operating costs of equipment, facilities, and associated capital maintenance items that directly relate to providing access to employment opportunities and promote reverse commute routes (such as carpools or vanpools). Agencies may specifically expend funds to promote transit use by workers with nontraditional work schedules, the use of transit vouchers, and the implementation of employer-provided transportation programs.

***New Freedom Program (49 U.S.C. Section 5317)***

This formula funding program provides funding for services for persons with disabilities that are developed beyond those required by the American Disabilities Act. Forty percent of the funds allocated to states are reserved for use in rural areas and in urbanized areas of less than 200,000 residents. In Florida, this program is administered by the FDOT and is focused on urbanized areas under 200,000 residents and rural communities.

***Florida Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP)***

The third program used by Florida to address rural mobility concerns is the Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP), a federally-developed and funded program (49 U.S.C. 5311(b)(3)) that provides each state (usually



**RTAP Training.** Transportation planners participate in a training designed to improve rural transit services. *Image courtesy of Jay Goodwill.*

through the state DOTs) with funds to support rural transit activities in four categories: training, technical assistance, research, and related support services. States develop their RTAP activities by identifying and establishing priority areas of need through the participation of both public and private rural transit operators.

FDOT utilizes Florida's federal RTAP allocation to contract with the CUTR to administer and manage the Florida RTAP Program and to provide financial support for the FCTD annual training conference and Florida RTAP's annual "Paratransit Roadeo." Specifically, RTAP funds are used to promote the safe and effective delivery of rural public transportation options through the efficient use of public and private resources, increase local capacity through informative training and technical assistance, and to facilitate peer-to-peer learning through the development of local networks of transit professionals in rural communities. To accomplish these goals, FDOT and CUTR host the following:

- *Florida RTAP Training Classes:* The Florida RTAP program delivers and coordinates a wide variety of professional development and instruction training opportunities. The classes are provided on-line, in person and at both regional and statewide workshops. The program's philosophy is a "train the trainer" focus directed toward developing local supervisors and instructors that can use the RTAP resource information at the local level.
- *Florida RTAP Bulletin:* A quarterly electronic newsletter is produced by Florida RTAP to highlight upcoming events and opportunities, highlight new training programs, providing agency news and information, and similar information.
- *Florida RTAP Resource Center:* Provides a library of publications and videos related to rural transportation. This information is available at no cost to Florida public transportation providers.

## Conclusion

Due to the multiple challenges of Florida public transportation providers such as diverse development patterns and population segments, Florida's strategy for addressing and enhancing rural mobility requires a multi-faceted yet directed approach. Each program directed toward rural mobility is not necessarily aligned to work together directly but rather complement each other in a way that achieves a common goal: providing rural Floridians with mobility options. The nation is urbanizing at a rapid pace; however, transportation planners, advocates and political figures should not ignore the detrimental effects that limited mobility options have on residents living in rural communities, especially transportation dependent populations. We must continue to find innovative ways to employ federal, state and local funding programs to ensure that all residents maintain access to community services that improve their quality of life.

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