

# **An Evaluation of the Transportation Component of the Real Choices Systems Change Grant in Montana**

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Real Choices Systems Change Grant project was a three-year effort in Montana to provide “systems change” in three areas: housing, individualized services, and transportation. This report focuses exclusively on the transportation component of the Real Choices Systems Change Grant project. The overall goal of the transportation component was to develop two coordinated transportation systems in Montana, glean lessons learned and best practices, and share that information with providers in the rest of the state, and nationally.

While there was an emphasis to ensure that the transportation changes met the specific needs of people with disabilities, it was anticipated that improved service would be available to the entire community. The project was administered on behalf of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) by the Montana Transportation Partnership (MTP). The Western Transportation Institute (WTI) provided technical support for the project.

The project began with the task of selecting two communities in the state. MTP developed a list of criteria that were used to select communities for the project. Proposals were solicited from fifteen communities in Montana, fourteen of which already had a public transportation system operating (FTA Section 5307 or 5311). After receiving several proposals, Helena and Ravalli County (Hamilton) were ultimately selected to receive funding and technical assistance.

In order to bring change to the transportation systems in Helena and Ravalli County (Hamilton), MTP had developed a list of tasks to be accomplished as the project progressed. These tasks included developing and implementing a coordination plan that provides quality and efficient service in Helena and Ravalli County and developing a statewide reporting system to collect and disseminate data on transportation services provided to persons with disabilities. The final tasks involved evaluating the system and providing sustainability reports that can be shared with other communities throughout Montana.

The general goals in Helena and Ravalli County were to assist individuals dependent on public transportation, increase the general public’s use of the transportation system and increase efficiency. In Helena, working through the Transportation Advisory Committee, many providers worked together to initiate service to a new area (East Helena/East Valley) and to increase efficiencies by combining resources and increasing coordination. In Ravalli County, these goals were met by implementing a flex route (checkpoint) service for Hamilton and the surrounding area, and changing a state law to increase the flexibility of providers to implement changes to their transportation systems so that they may better serve the needs of their clients.

The results of the Systems Change Grant project in Helena and Ravalli County are significant. In Helena, the new service to East Helena now provides over 700 rides per month. Further, a continuation of efforts may lead to further coordination, which may increase the amount of funding for transportation in the greater Helena area. This may lead to additional transit services where no service currently exists.

In comparison to Helena, the results from the Ravalli County area are yet to be fully realized. This is due in part to the fact that many of the changes planned for as part of the Systems Change Grant project in Ravalli County could not be fully implemented until a law was changed. House Bill 273, which exempted all rural public transportation providers (FTA Section 5311) from Public Service Commission oversight, and was signed by the Governor in March 2005, allowed BitterRoot Bus in Ravalli County to have the flexibility it needed to implement services that met

the needs of its customers. These needs included lower fares and the introduction of a fixed route service. However, because the law was not changed until six months before the Systems Change Grant project ended, the true effects/impacts of the project are yet to come.

There are further effects from the Systems Change Grant project that will be realized over the next few years. Passage of House Bill 273 not only affected the operation of BitterRoot Bus, but of other providers, elsewhere within Montana. In addition, the results of the Systems Change Grant project are going to be shared with transportation providers, local governments and state agencies, who will hopefully utilize the lessons learned and best practices from this three-year project.

A summary of the lessons learned and best practices include:

- A vibrant, engaged Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) is vital if changes are going to occur in a given community;
- A Transportation Advisory Committee needs to include people who are known as being “transportation disadvantaged”: persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and those with low incomes;
- Transportation providers must be willing to make changes to their services, based on plans developed with input from the TAC;
- A failure to plan is a plan to fail. While a plan doesn’t have to be voluminous or formalized, a planning process allows all options to be considered.
- Change takes time. No significant change can occur overnight, and as evidenced by the ridership figures for the East Helena route, nine months may be needed to truly establish results.
- The only thing that is constant is change. Change is going to occur whether we want it to or not. Our only decision is whether we are going to be proactive or reactive to change.
- Institutional support is necessary. While change can take place at a local level without support from state institutions, if significant progress is going to be made, support is needed at all levels, locally and on a state agency basis.

The remainder of this document provides the details of the transportation component of the Real Choices Systems Change Grant project, a three-year project that provided tangible improvements to the transportation systems in Helena, Ravalli County, and the rest of Montana.