

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A “Smart” Transit Hub in Rural Western Arkansas and Eastern Oklahoma Feasibility Study

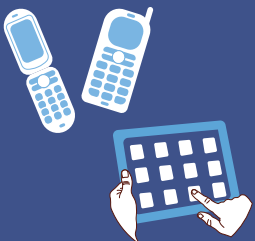
OVERVIEW

This Summary highlights the key findings and recommendations of a study to explore the feasibility of establishing a “smart” transit hub in rural western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma.

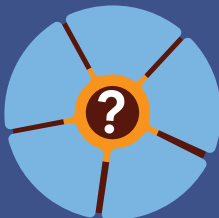
GOAL: Identify transportation technologies and programs to make healthcare, employment, and higher education opportunities more accessible for people experiencing transportation barriers in this region.

The findings of this study can be used for regional transportation planning purposes, such as:

Determining how technology can be incorporated into a transit hub



Identifying a hub model that can be implemented over time



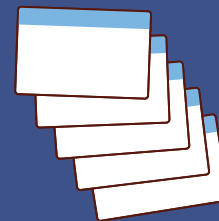
Coordinating partners such as community leaders, existing transit operators, medical providers, employers, and educational institutions



Identifying funding opportunities



Providing rural transit case studies



Analyzing existing local transportation-related planning documents

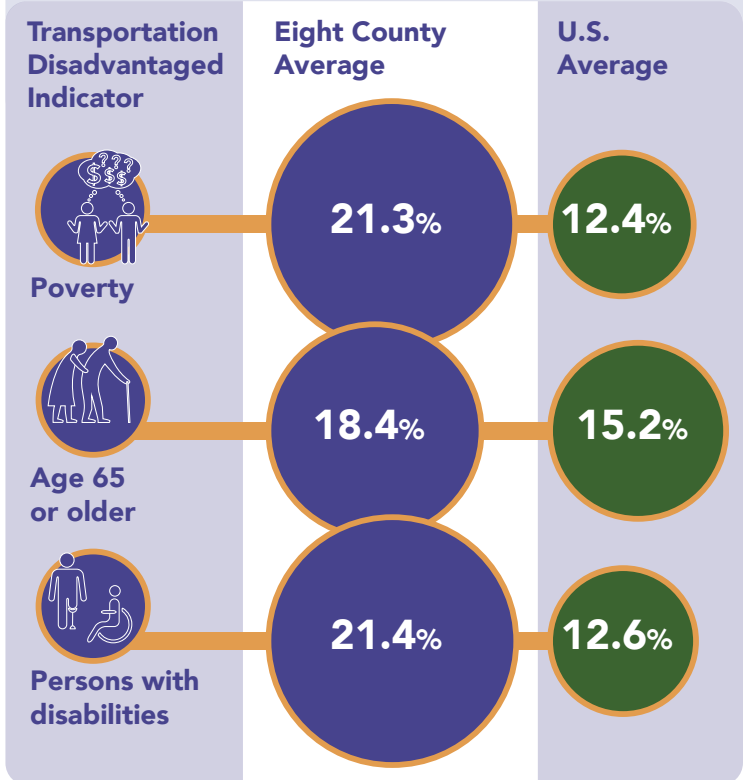


LOCATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Fort Smith, Arkansas is an urban area surrounded by eight counties that are predominantly rural. The study area consists of Crawford, Franklin, Logan, Polk, Scott, and Sebastian Counties in Arkansas and Le Flore and Sequoyah Counties in Oklahoma. While Fort Smith has nearly 90,000 people, most other communities have 5,000 people or less.



According to demographic data, the region has had higher percentages of unemployment, poverty, adults age 65 or older, and people with disabilities than the national average for at least the past twenty years. These populations are at higher risk for facing transportation barriers.



Transportation Needs

Fort Smith is a destination for many people from surrounding rural counties to access health care, higher education, and employment. Smaller communities including Booneville, Mena, Ozark, Paris, and Waldron also serve as hubs for employment, medical care, and access to learning for surrounding areas.

In interviews, one of the most frequently cited needs was access to health care and dialysis services.



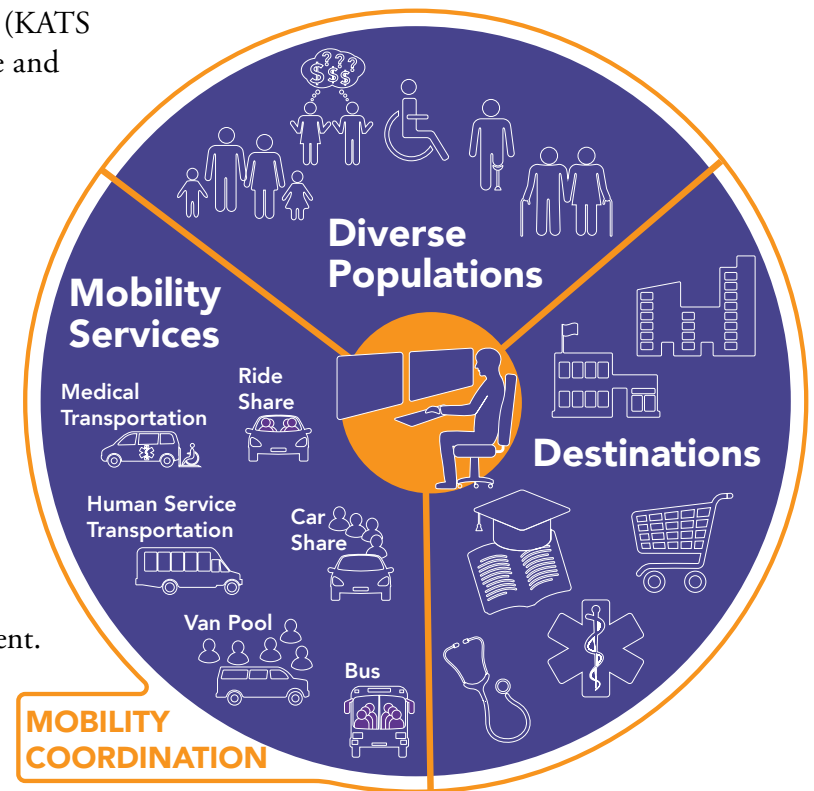
However, many residents face transportation challenges to reach these essential services. Common issues include the long travel times between small rural communities and Fort Smith, the high rate of poverty in the area, the increase in the older adult population, and the lack of reliable and affordable transportation options for vulnerable community members.

Existing Transportation Services

The region has a foundation of individual transportation options, including one fixed route transit system and numerous demand response transit systems:

- Fort Smith Transit system, the only urban system in the study area, offers fixed route and demand response.
- Western Transit System, a rural public transit system covering 11 Arkansas Counties through the Area Agency on Aging of Western Arkansas.
- Fourteen “Specialized Paratransit Systems” in the Arkansas side of the study area for seniors and individuals with disabilities.
- Several demand response systems in the Oklahoma side of the study area (KATS Ki Bois Area Transit, SoonerRide and at least 3 tribal transit systems).

A key gap is that there is no formal coordination amongst the existing transportation providers. Both the 2018 Arkansas Statewide Transit Coordination Plan and the 2012 Oklahoma Transit System Overview and Gap Analysis recommended the appointment of a regional mobility coordinator. The Arkansas Coordination Plan also identified and prioritized additional coordination strategies, some of which are under development.



POTENTIAL TRANSPORTATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL AREAS

In recent years, mobility management concepts have evolved, and new transportation technologies have emerged, presenting new opportunities for enhancing regional transportation. A main component of this study was to identify ones that are feasible, realistic, and cost-efficient to implement in a rural setting.

The research team explored mobility management concepts such as:

- Central repositories of transportation resources
- Provider portals that allow providers to update their own information
- Matching assistance systems that help customers narrow down viable options
- Trip planning assistance
- Trip booking assistance
- Direct trip booking systems

Transportation technologies, models, and programs of interest included:

- Transportation Network Companies (Lyft & Uber)
- Ridesharing (Carpooling & Vanpooling)
- Transportation Vouchers
- Community-based & Volunteer programs
- Rural Carsharing
- Shared Use Mobility, Mobility on Demand, Mobility as a Service (MaaS)

Mobility as a Service (MaaS) is a promising model that offers services focused on a rider's needs, multi-modal mobility, and integration of transport services, information, payment, and ticketing.




RECOMMENDATIONS

During initial meetings, the project team and local partners discussed the concept of a physical mobility hub – a centralized location for multimodal transportation. While common in urban areas, it was not considered feasible in this location, due to the dispersed communities, healthcare facilities, employment, and other critical services within this Arkansas/Oklahoma Transit Feasibility Study’s eight rural counties.

Mobility management overlaps the concept of a physical mobility hub in several ways. A mobility management service can inform customers of their transportation options and mobility managers can also leverage “virtual” hubs to provide specialized customer service. A “virtual” hub also has more flexibility to evolve and adapt to customer needs over time versus a physical location.

There is not a one-size-fits-all way to address mobility gaps across rural communities. The following recommendations are a starting point and may be implemented over time as local champions, partners and funding opportunities come together.



1. Hire a regional mobility manager to conduct planning, management activities and projects for improving coordination among public transportation and other transportation service providers.

2. Explore methods to connect more people with rides on the Western Transit System. WTS is a rural transit system operated by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Arkansas (AAAWA). Many people are not aware that the system is not just for older adults and people with disabilities.

3. Create a 5-year transit development plan for the AAWA’s Transportation Services (WTS and non-emergency medical transportation NEMT). Review existing service to increase efficiency and improve coordination and service for riders. Explore new software/options to coordinate with scheduling systems, such as Fort Smith Transit’s Route match.

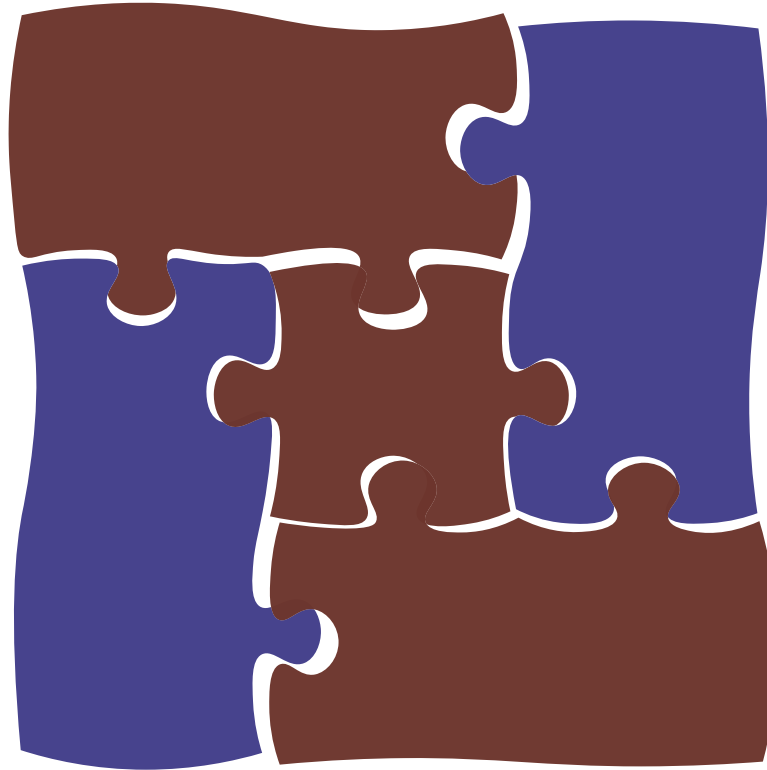
4. Pilot a new transportation program spearheaded by a mobility manager. Consider starting with one of the following:

- Public/private partnership with a TNC (Uber or Lyft) or taxi service to supplement existing transit systems to help people with early or late working hours and to reach beyond existing transit service boundaries.
- Transportation voucher program.
- Volunteer driver program.

5. Start now and build on momentum from this feasibility study. Set up an ongoing meeting to continue discussions and build relationships with partners and local champions.

CONCLUSIONS

“Smart” transportation models that depend on technology such as MaaS (Mobility as a Service) have potential to help fill gaps in rural transportation. However, technology on its own cannot solve complex transportation issues; it must be integrated into existing programs and be accompanied by local champions to ensure safe, reliable, and affordable transportation programs. A mobility manager is a critical piece of the puzzle to maintain communications among partners and lead a focused effort for improved coordination and program implementation.



For More Information

The full Feasibility Study can be found here:
<https://bit.ly/32w9Sbn>

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