



January 2020

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Enhanced Federal Information Sharing on Coordination Could Improve Rural Transit Services

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-205](#), a report to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Public transportation in rural areas is critical to connecting people to medical services, jobs, education, and shopping. FTA allocated about \$2.1 billion in formula grants over the last 3 years to support rural and tribal transit. In 2014, GAO reported that providing transit services in rural areas can be challenging and that coordination of transportation services among federal programs is limited.

GAO was asked to examine ongoing efforts and challenges of coordinating rural transit systems. This report addresses (1) factors affecting rural transit coordination and selected rural and tribal transit providers' coordination efforts and (2) the extent to which FTA facilitates coordination of rural transit services. GAO reviewed program documentation and literature on rural transit coordination. GAO also interviewed federal officials from FTA and the Department of Health and Human Services, which also funds transportation services, and rural transit stakeholders, including state transportation agencies, rural and tribal transit providers, and public transit industry groups. GAO selected states and rural and tribal transit providers based on federal-funding levels and geographic representation, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FTA develop a communication plan that will effectively share information with state and local stakeholders on coordination opportunities in an accessible and informative way. FTA partially concurred with the recommendation. As discussed in the report, GAO continues to believe the recommendation is warranted and should be fully implemented.

View [GAO-20-205](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

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Enhanced Federal Information Sharing on Coordination Could Improve Rural Transit Services

What GAO Found

Coordination of rural transportation services across geographic jurisdictions and federal- and state-funding sources has the potential to reduce costs and improve services. Such coordination by transit agencies in rural areas can lead to efficiencies. A variety of factors, however, adversely affect rural transit coordination, including the availability of resources, according to GAO's literature review and stakeholder interviews. About 70 percent of the selected stakeholders GAO interviewed, including rural and tribal transit providers, explained that it is difficult to coordinate transit services in rural communities with limited resources, such as funding, staff, and technology. For example, three rural transit providers said that program managers sometimes assume multiple duties, such as a driver and dispatcher, a practice that affects their time and ability to coordinate. Other cited factors included the extent to which different requirements of federal programs that fund rural transit are aligned to allow transit providers to coordinate trips for riders with specific needs (e.g., people with disabilities) and the availability of coordinating mechanisms, among other factors (see figure). Nonetheless, selected rural and tribal transit providers said they were engaged in various coordination efforts to improve rural transit services. The most commonly cited efforts under way included coordinating trips—for example, by establishing convenient drop-off points—and sharing resources.

Factors Affecting the Coordination of Rural Transit



Source: GAO analysis of interviews with rural transit stakeholders, discussion groups, and literature review. | GAO-20-205

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has several efforts under way to facilitate coordination, but results are mixed. At the federal level, FTA and the federal interagency Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility issued a strategic plan in October 2019, outlining their strategic goals. However, they have yet to submit to Congress a final report containing recommendations for enhancing interagency coordination. FTA officials told us they plan to submit the report by September 2020. At the state and local level, FTA has provided technical support to stakeholders to facilitate coordination. GAO, however, found limitations with FTA's current information-sharing approach. These limitations make information on coordination-related issues difficult to identify and access. Stakeholders want additional information from FTA on leading coordination practices, such as ways to coordinate with other providers. Improving communication and sharing additional coordination-related information could help rural and tribal transit providers identify additional coordination practices they could pursue to improve rural transportation services.

Contents

Letter		1
	Background	4
	Available Resources and Alignment of Program Requirements Cited among Factors Affecting Rural Transit Coordination	8
	Selected Rural Transit Providers Coordinated Trips and Shared Resources to Improve Transit Services	13
	FTA Continues to Facilitate Coordination, but Its Efforts Have Had Mixed Results	17
	Conclusions	23
	Recommendation for Executive Action	24
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	24
Appendix I	Rural Transit Stakeholders GAO Interviewed and Discussion Group Participants	26
Appendix II	Implementation Status of GAO's Recommendations to the Department of Transportation	28
Appendix III	Comments from the Department of Transportation	29
Appendix IV	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgment	31
Tables		
	Table 1: The Department of Transportation's Primary Formula- Grant Programs for Rural Transportation, Fiscal Year 2019	5
	Table 2: Examples of Rural Transit Providers' Efforts to Coordinate Trips and Schedules	14
	Table 3: Examples of Rural Transit Providers' Efforts to Share Resources	15
	Table 4: Rural Transit Stakeholders GAO Interviewed	26
	Table 5: Rural Transit Stakeholders Participating in Discussion Groups	27

Table 6: Implementation Status of Recommendations to the Department of Transportation (DOT) That Affect Rural Transit Coordination, as of October 2019	28
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Figure

Figure 1: Variety of Factors Identified as Affecting Rural Transit Coordination	8
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Abbreviations

DOT	Department of Transportation
GC211	Greater Columbia 2-1-1
FAST Act	2015 Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
NEMT	nonemergency medical transportation
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

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January 7, 2020

The Honorable Mike Crapo
Chairman
The Honorable Sherrod Brown
Ranking Member
Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
United States Senate

Public transportation can be critical to those living in rural areas. For people with limited ability to drive due to age, disabilities, or income constraints, rural public transportation offers mobility and access to jobs, education, and essential services, such as medical services and grocery shopping. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 American Community Survey found that about 62-million people live in rural areas with populations of less than 50,000 residents. We previously reported that the need for public transportation in rural areas is increasing; this increase may be due, in part, to rural hospital closures, large numbers of older adults and veterans living in rural communities, and increasing transportation needs to access opioid treatment facilities.¹

Federal funding is key for many rural and tribal transit systems to meet this need. Over the last 3 years, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), within the Department of Transportation (DOT), allocated about \$2.1 billion in formula grants to support safe, comprehensive, and coordinated public-transportation systems in rural areas, including tribal lands.² According to officials, FTA provided 38 percent of all funding, including 66 percent of all capital funding, for rural transit providers in fiscal year 2018.

Coordination of rural transportation across geographic jurisdictions and funding sources has the potential to reduce transportation cost and

¹ For example, GAO, *Rural Hospital Closures: Number and Characteristics of Affected Hospitals and Contributing Factors*, [GAO-18-634](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2018); GAO, *Opioid Use Disorders: HHS Needs Measures to Assess the Effectiveness of Efforts to Expand Access to Medication-Assisted Treatment*, [GAO-18-44](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 31, 2017); and GAO, *Older Americans Act: HHS Could Help Rural Service Providers by Centralizing Information on Promising Practices*, [GAO-19-330](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 23, 2019).

² For the purposes of the Tribal Transit Grant Program, tribal lands are American Indian Areas, Alaska Native Areas and Hawaiian Home Lands, as defined by the Bureau of Census. 49 U.S.C. § 5311(j)(1)(A)(iii).

improve services. We have found that coordination is important for rural transit systems due to the large service areas these systems cover, low population density, limited financial resources, and growing unmet needs in rural communities.³ However, we also reported that coordination of transportation services among federal programs has been limited and that providing transit services in rural areas can be challenging, despite the potential for coordination to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of transit services.⁴

You asked us to examine efforts underway to coordinate rural transit systems and challenges encountered in doing so. This report discusses

- the factors affecting rural transit coordination;
- the types of coordination efforts selected rural and tribal transit providers have underway; and
- the extent to which FTA facilitates coordination of rural transit services, including steps to address any challenges transit providers face.

To address these objectives, we reviewed key FTA documents and conducted a literature review of studies from January 2009 through April 2019 that examined rural transit coordination issues.⁵ To identify factors affecting rural transit coordination, coordination efforts under way, and any actions FTA can take to address coordination challenges, we selected and conducted semi-structured interviews with 43 stakeholders and rural transit agencies, including representatives from nine public-transit industry groups and five FTA regional offices.⁶ In addition, we interviewed officials from eight states—California, Georgia, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, and Washington—and

³ GAO, *Public Transportation: Federal Role Key to Rural and Tribal Transit*, [GAO-14-589](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 24, 2014) and GAO, *Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Federal Coordination Efforts Could Be Further Strengthened*, [GAO-12-647](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 20, 2012).

⁴ [GAO-12-647](#).

⁵ For our literature review, we searched on multiple databases that include ProQuest, Scopus, and EBSCO.

⁶ The nine public transit industry groups and experts were selected based on their work focusing on rural transportation issues. The five FTA regional offices were identified based on their work with our selected states and were included as our stakeholder to obtain a regional perspective.

21 transit providers (6 tribal and 15 rural) in those states. We selected these states on the basis of variation in the amount of FTA's rural transit funding received, geographic representation, and the ability to conduct multiple site visits in a short period of time due to the long travel distances.⁷ We also conducted three discussion groups with officials from state transportation agencies and rural and tribal transit providers during the Community Transportation Association of America's 2019 annual conference.⁸ Discussion group participants included rural transit providers and state transportation agencies that were not part of our selected interviews but had received FTA rural transit funding. Although the views of these selected stakeholders are not generalizable to those of all rural transit agencies and stakeholders, they represent a range of perspectives. See appendix I for a list of the industry groups, FTA regions, state transportation agencies, and rural and tribal transit providers we interviewed and discussion group participants.

To determine the extent to which FTA facilitates coordination of rural transit services including addressing challenges transit providers face, we reviewed agency documents and interviewed DOT and FTA officials. Specifically, we examined studies, reports, and other documents issued by FTA and the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (Coordinating Council), which is a federal interagency coordinating body. We also interviewed officials from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees Medicaid, a federal program that provides a significant amount of federal transportation funding other than FTA's programs.⁹ We assessed FTA's efforts to communicate on coordination-focused information against the Office of Management and Budget's *Circular A-130, Managing Information as a Strategic Resource* guidance pertaining to dissemination of information and *Standards for Internal Controls in the*

⁷ We also conducted site visits to four of our selected states to interview state, rural, and tribal transit officials.

⁸ Participants of the discussion groups represented two state transportation agencies, six tribal transit providers, and three rural transit providers.

⁹ According to the Coordinating Council's May 2019 inventory of federal programs, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services estimated spending about \$1.4 billion on nonemergency medical transportation in fiscal year 2018.

Federal Government—specifically, those controls related to agencies’ communication with internal and external stakeholders.¹⁰

We conducted this performance audit from December 2018 to January 2020 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 that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

According to FTA’s National Transit Database, about 1,500 rural transit providers, including tribal transit providers, supply vital mobility and connections to essential services for people living in rural communities. Rural transit providers generally have low budgets, few employees, and small vehicle fleets.¹¹ Rural transit providers provide a variety of transit services, including: demand-response, which is scheduled in response to calls from passengers; fixed-routes, which are buses operating according to a set schedule; and deviated-fixed routes, which are fixed-routes that allow for minor route deviations in response to passenger calls. Service areas for rural providers may span dozens of square miles in remote areas—with long trips and only a few riders at any given time—or be located in smaller, more developed rural areas surrounding major cities.¹²

DOT primarily supports rural transportation through formula grants, some of which require states and rural transit providers to coordinate. Specifically, these rural transportation formula grants are apportioned to state departments of transportation based on various factors, and these state agencies then allocate funding to rural transit providers as sub-grantees.¹³ Sub-grantees can be regional or local governments, non-profit organizations, or federally recognized tribes, which provide public transit

¹⁰ GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014) and Office of Management and Budget, *Circular A-130, Managing Information as a Strategic Resource* (Washington, D.C.: July 28, 2016).

¹¹ [GAO-14-589](#).

¹² [GAO-14-589](#).

¹³ Factors include rural land area and the number of “vehicle revenue miles” (i.e., miles driven providing transit services for passengers) that rural transit systems in their state drove.

services in their communities. DOT also awards rural transit program funds directly to federally recognized Indian tribes through the Tribal Transit Program.¹⁴ See table 1 for a description of the DOT's primary formula-grant programs that support rural transit.¹⁵

Table 1: The Department of Transportation's Primary Formula-Grant Programs for Rural Transportation, Fiscal Year 2019

Dollars in millions

Federal programs and apportionment	Program description and illustrative requirements
Section 5311 - Formula Grants for Rural Areas (49 U.S.C. § 5311) \$751.4	This program provides capital, planning, and operating assistance to states and federally recognized Indian tribes to support public transportation in rural areas with populations less than 50,000. State transportation agencies can use up to 10 percent of its apportioned Section 5311 funds for program administration and technical assistance, including coordination of public transportation programs. Since 2005, a portion of the Section 5311 grant program funds have been set-aside for federally recognized tribes through the Tribal Transit Program.
Section 5310 - Formula Grants for the Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities (49 U.S.C. § 5310) \$55.6	This program provides formula grants to states and eligible sub-grantees to meet the transportation needs of older adults and people with disabilities, including those living in rural and urban areas. Funds are apportioned based on each state's share of the population for the two groups. State transportation agencies have flexibility in how they select rural transit projects for funding, but selected projects must be included in a locally developed, coordinated human services transportation plan.

Source: GAO analysis of laws and Federal Transit Administration documents. | GAO-20-205

Within DOT, FTA and its 10 regional offices administer these programs; their responsibilities include:

1. grant funding, including targeted grants and contracts for coordination-related projects to enhance mobility and access nationwide;

¹⁴ 49 U.S.C. § 5311 (j). The Tribal Transit Program provides funding to federally recognized Indian tribes to provide public transportation services on and around tribal land in rural areas. The Tribal Transit Program consists of a \$30 million formula grant program and a \$5 million competitive discretionary grant program, subject to the availability of appropriations.

¹⁵ In addition to DOT's primary formula-grant program, rural and tribal transit providers can receive funding from other FTA grant programs that are not specific to rural transit.

-
2. oversight of state transportation agencies and tribal-transit program grantees through State Management Reviews and Tribal Transit Assessments;¹⁶
 3. training and technical assistance to states and rural transit providers; and
 4. policy interpretations and development to enhance mobility and access.

DOT and FTA also lead the Coordinating Council, which is charged with improving coordination across federal programs that fund transportation services for transportation-disadvantaged persons.¹⁷ The Coordinating Council consists of 11 federal agency members, namely, the departments of Agriculture, Education, HHS, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs (VA); the National Council on Disability; and the Social Security Administration. Aside from DOT, transportation is not the primary mission of these federal agencies. However, each member agency has programs that provide funding for transportation to enable program beneficiaries to access the various health and human service programs within the agencies' primary missions, such as job training, education, or medical care. For example, the HHS's Medicaid program requires assurance from states that Medicaid beneficiaries have access to necessary medical services; this medical service includes arranging and providing funding for transportation to medical appointments and other health services when beneficiaries cannot transport themselves.

In 2012, we found, among other things, that Coordinating Council member agencies were not effectively collaborating and recommended

¹⁶ FTA's State Management Reviews examine state grantees' management practices and compliance with program and administrative requirements related to financial management and capacity, technical capacity, maintenance, procurement, and civil rights. FTA contractors also conduct Tribal Transit Assessments to provide tribal government with technical assistance to address any deficiencies and enable tribes to comply with federal requirements. Tribal assessments are not scheduled regularly as State Management Reviews.

¹⁷ Exec. Order No. 13,330, 69 Fed. Reg. 9185 (Feb. 24, 2004) established the Coordinating Council to improve federal interagency coordination of transportation services for transportation-disadvantaged persons (i.e., older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals of low income). The executive order designates the Secretary of Transportation, or the Secretary's designee, to lead the Coordinating Council. The Secretary delegated leadership of the Coordinating Council to the Acting Administrator of FTA.

that the Coordinating Council strengthen its coordination efforts across federal programs.¹⁸ In 2014, we again identified the need to strengthen federal coordination efforts and recommended that the Coordinating Council develop both a strategic plan and a cost-sharing policy to promote and enhance federal, state, and local nonemergency medical transportation coordination activities.¹⁹ For a full description of our prior recommendations and their implementation status, see appendix II.

State and local stakeholders—including state transportation agencies, regional planning organizations, rural and tribal transit providers—and health and human service providers, coordinate rural transportation services when they share resources and responsibilities and plan activities to achieve common goals and for the overall benefit of the community.²⁰ Coordination of rural transportation services can occur across geographic jurisdictions, funding sources, and various local, state, and federal programs. Coordination of transportation services has the potential to reduce transportation program costs by clustering passengers, using fewer one-way trips, and sharing the use of personnel, equipment, and facilities; at the same time, people in need of transportation also often benefit from greater and higher quality services when transportation providers coordinate their operations.²¹

¹⁸ [GAO-12-647](#).

¹⁹ GAO, *Transportation Disadvantaged Populations: Nonemergency Medical Transportation Not Well Coordinated, and Additional Federal Leadership Needed*, [GAO-15-110](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 10, 2014).

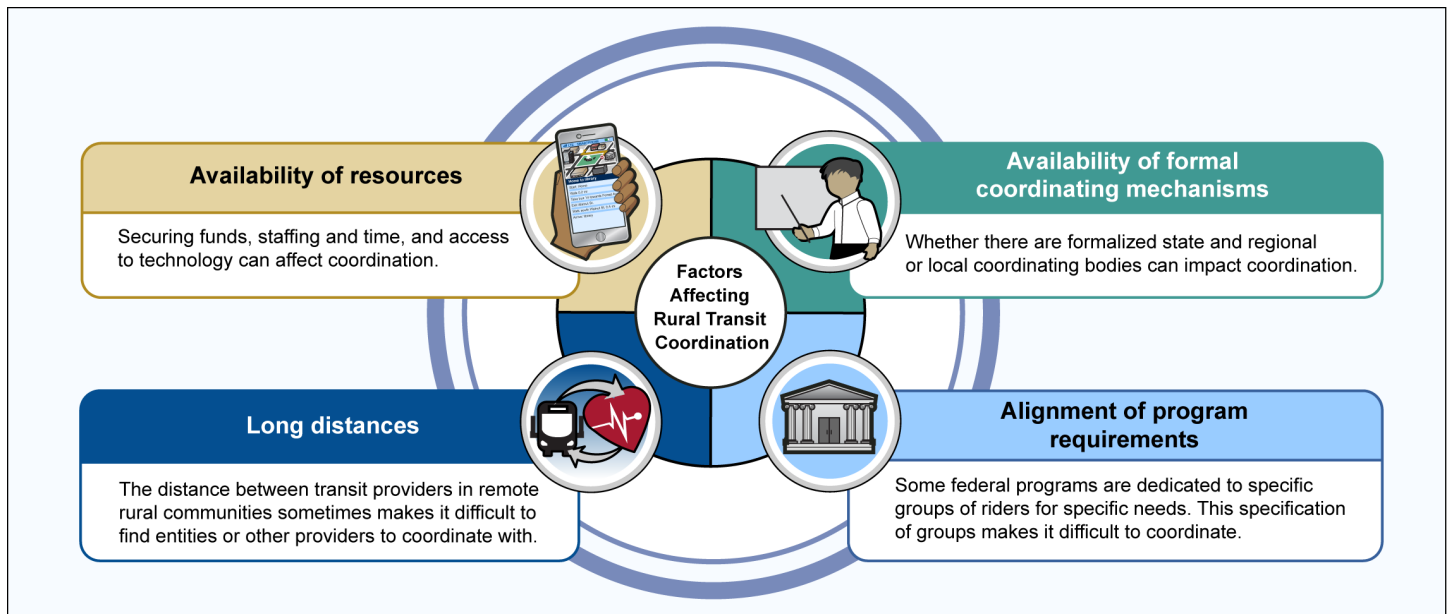
²⁰ While there is no singular definition of coordination, our prior body of work has broadly defined coordination or collaboration as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when agencies and their nonfederal partners act alone. See GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, [GAO-06-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005).

²¹ [GAO-12-647](#).

Available Resources and Alignment of Program Requirements Cited among Factors Affecting Rural Transit Coordination

Various factors affect rural transit coordination, according to stakeholders we interviewed, participants from three discussion groups, and literature we reviewed. Factors that can affect coordination include availability of resources, alignment of different federal program requirements, availability of coordinating mechanisms, and the distances between transit providers. (See fig. 1.) As discussed below, we found that these factors are often interrelated and can serve as both a motivating factor and a barrier to coordination.

Figure 1: Variety of Factors Identified as Affecting Rural Transit Coordination



Source: GAO analysis of interviews with rural transit stakeholders, discussion groups, and literature review. | GAO-20-205

Availability of Resources

The availability of resources was the most commonly cited factor affecting rural transit coordination in our literature review and interviews. Almost two-thirds of the stakeholders we spoke with (30 of 43) and participants in three discussion groups told us that it is difficult to coordinate transit services in rural communities with limited resources, such as funding, staff and time, and technology. For example, a rural transit provider told us that while it provides public transit to a neighboring national park for its visitors during the summer season, insufficient funding from the national park combined with very limited access to FTA's rural transit funds limits

the providers' ability to effectively coordinate services. We also reported in 2014 that smaller budgets and fewer employees can influence rural transit providers' ability to coordinate.²² A 2018 survey of state and local transit and health and human services providers conducted by the National Center for Mobility Management also noted that the availability of resources can be a key barrier to transportation coordination both in rural and non-rural areas.²³ Resources specifically affecting rural transit coordination include:

- **Availability of Matching Funds.** The availability of matching state and local funds can affect coordination, as rural transit providers tend to rely on a variety of funding sources to provide transit services. Federal programs generally require a share of state or local funding to match federal funds.²⁴ Approximately one-third of selected stakeholders (13 of 43) and participants in three discussion groups said that they face challenges identifying enough state or local funding to meet FTA's matching fund requirements. Some rural transit providers (4 of 21) told us they have access to funds from different sources, but others (4 of 21) said that they are challenged with securing state or local matching funds.²⁵ For example, local, regional, or state taxes provide some funding streams for public transit, including rural transit providers, in California, Georgia, New Mexico, and Washington. Although revenues from state or local taxes may be available as a funding source, rural transit providers still told us that identifying and coordinating state and local funding sources can be challenging. We previously reported that constrained state and local budgets can make securing these funds difficult as rural transit

²² [GAO-14-589](#).

²³ Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, *Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility, National Center for Mobility Management (NCMM) Survey Analysis*, (Washington, D.C.: February 2019). The National Center for Mobility Management is one of FTA's three technical assistance centers that is operated by a consortium of the American Public Transportation Association, the Community Transportation Association of America, and Easterseals, Inc.

²⁴ Since 1978, the federal government has supported rural and tribal transit services through the Formula Grants for Rural Areas Program, also known as Section 5311 grants. The federal share for Section 5311 Formula Grants for Rural Areas is 80 percent for capital projects and 50 percent for operating assistance. 49 U.S.C. § 5311.

²⁵ We did not independently verify rural transit providers' access to different funding sources.

Technology and Coordination: Greater Columbia Call-Center

People For People, a rural transit provider in Yakima, Washington, uses technology to coordinate and operate the Greater Columbia 2-1-1 (GC211) call center. GC211 maintains a statewide database of community resources, including transportation options. It is one of the state's seven regional 2-1-1 call centers that directs riders to social, health, and transportation resources.



Source: GAO analysis of People For People map.
| GAO-20-205

competes for funding with other needs within a community, such as public safety.²⁶

- **Staffing and time.** Some stakeholders (12 of 43) said that rural transit providers do not have enough staff and time to pursue or engage in coordination efforts. For example, three rural transit providers told us that staff sometimes take on multiple duties, such as bus driver and dispatcher in addition to grant and program manager, duties that affect their time and ability to coordinate. Representatives from a national transit planning association also told us that staffing constraints are an issue, particularly with rural transit providers because they are usually more understaffed than urban transit agencies.
- **Technology.** Access to technology can help coordinate trips and schedules across rural transit services. About half of the rural transit providers (11 of 21) we interviewed stated that they use software and other technology to schedule trips and operate call centers to facilitate coordination efforts.²⁷ For example, People For People, a rural transit provider in Yakima, Washington, uses technology to coordinate and operate the Greater Columbia call-center. (See sidebar). However, a handful of stakeholders (4 of 43) mentioned that access to broadband, which is needed to enable technology and scheduling software, can be limited in certain areas, especially on tribal lands. For example, an official from EBCI Transit, a tribal transit provider in North Carolina, said EBCI experienced poor cell phone service and other communication limitations, which affected its ability to schedule and coordinate trips. Our recent work on telecommunications found that tribal lands have significantly lower levels of broadband internet access relative to the country as a whole.²⁸

²⁶ [GAO-14-589](#).

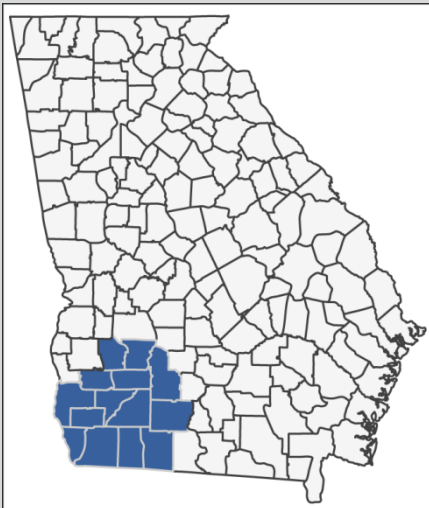
²⁷ Call centers identify transportation options and human service program information for callers. Call centers rely on scheduling software and scheduling and service providers' databases to identify and refer callers to various public and private transportation options. Call centers may also provide information on available human services programs, including service characteristics, eligibility criteria, and referrals for appropriate service providers.

²⁸ The term "broadband" commonly refers to Internet access that is high speed and provides an "always-on" connection, so users do not have to reestablish a connection each time they access the Internet. See GAO, *Broadband Internet: FCC's Data Overstate Access on Tribal Lands*, [GAO-18-630](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2018).

Availability of Formal Coordinating Mechanisms

Formal Coordinating Mechanisms: State- and Regional-Coordinating Bodies

As one of the regional coordinating bodies, the Southwest Georgia Regional Commission has played a central role in coordinating rural transit services through much of its region; it currently provides public transit services in 13 counties to the general public as well as to riders with specific needs to access health and human services in 14 counties.



Sources: GAO analysis of Southwest Georgia Regional Commission map and Map Resource. | GAO-20-205

The availability of coordinating mechanisms can facilitate information sharing and coordination. About half of the stakeholders (18 of 43) told us that they participate in some statewide, regional, or local coordinating bodies as part of a process to facilitate coordination. For example, the Georgia Department of Transportation works with regional commissions to coordinate rural transit throughout Georgia. (See sidebar). In contrast, officials from the North Carolina Department of Transportation told us that the state disbanded its coordinating council, which may be contributing to challenges in providing nonemergency medical transportation services. We previously reported that state and local transportation agencies and aging network organizations used a variety of different mechanisms, such as state-, regional-, and local-planning bodies to coordinate transportation services for older adults.²⁹ Half of the states we selected (4 of 8) have statewide-coordinating bodies. For example, participants from one discussion group said that state requirements can facilitate coordination when the state statute requires rural transit providers applying for or receiving federal, state, or local assistance to coordinate with other state agencies, including the state’s health and human services department, for funding and services. Rural transit providers also told us that they participate in regional- and local-coordinating bodies. For example, all transit providers in Montana are required to coordinate through local Transportation Advisory Committees that plan and prioritize local transportation needs.

About one-third of the stakeholders (13 of 43) and participants in three discussion groups also mentioned knowledge-sharing forums—such as conferences and training organized by state transportation agencies, transit industry associations, and FTA—as mechanisms to facilitate coordination. For example, officials from Pullman Transit told us that these forums, such as the Washington State Transit Association’s annual conference, presented opportunities to share and learn about various federal transportation programs, coordinating efforts, and information on best practices.

²⁹ GAO, *Transportation For Older Adults: Measuring Results Could Help Determine if Coordination Efforts Improve Mobility*, [GAO-15-158](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 10, 2014).

Alignment of Program Requirements

We and others have reported that transit providers, as well as health and human service providers, may encounter substantial challenges trying to coordinate services across different programs when program requirements do not align.³⁰ For our current work, about one-third of stakeholders (13 of 43) and participants in three discussion groups told us that they face a wide array of barriers coordinating across differing federal laws, regulations, and program requirements. The different federal program requirements can affect rural transit providers' ability to coordinate transit services as some federal programs are dedicated to specific groups of riders (e.g., older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income riders) with specific needs; such specification of groups makes it difficult to coordinate trips for different riders. Three rural transit providers stated that it is sometimes difficult to coordinate transportation to medical appointments for "blended riders" (i.e., senior citizens, veterans, and the general public) in one trip. For example, VA's Highly Rural Transportation Grants require rural transit providers to serve only veterans, while Medicaid's nonemergency medical transportation funds require serving only Medicaid beneficiaries. Rural transit providers—which provide service to the general public within their service areas—are sometimes challenged with providing an efficient and coordinated transit service for VA or Medicaid beneficiaries to access their programs. FTA and the Coordinating Council's 2018 Focus Group Report also identified federal program requirements, including trip purpose restrictions, as a barrier for coordination.³¹ As discussed later in the report, the Coordinating Council has been charged with addressing this barrier, among others, and is currently examining whether and how federal program requirements could be better aligned.

Long Distances

Coordination in rural areas can be both essential and challenging because rural transit passengers often need to travel long distances (e.g., 30-100 miles) to reach critical services, such as doctor appointments or grocery shopping. About a quarter of stakeholders (11 of 43) and participants in two of the discussion groups said that the long distance between transit providers in remote rural communities sometimes makes it difficult to find entities or other providers interested in or able to

³⁰ Transportation Research Board, Transit Cooperative Research Program, *Toolkit for Rural Community Coordinated Transportation Services* (Washington, D.C.: 2004) and [GAO-12-647](#); [GAO-15-158](#).

³¹ Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, *Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility, Focus Group Report*, (Washington, D.C.: 2018).

coordinate. Two rural transit providers also told us they have no neighboring transit provider to coordinate with due to the extremely remote rural locations. For example, an official from Turtle Mountain Transit in North Dakota said it is challenging to coordinate with other neighboring tribal transit providers due to the long distance to the nearest tribal transit provider in Spirit Lake, which is about 100 miles away. Turtle Mountain Transit, like a number of other tribal transit providers, often serves large and fairly remote areas. We previously reported that tribal lands can vary in size, and range from the smallest at less than one square mile to the largest, the Navajo Nation, which is more than 24,000 square miles or the size of West Virginia, and extends into the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico.³²




Selected Rural Transit Providers Coordinated Trips and Shared Resources to Improve Transit Services

Coordinated Trips and Schedules

Despite encountering some of the factors that can make coordination difficult, all rural transit providers we interviewed told us that they currently coordinate trips or schedules with other local or regional stakeholders. Such coordination efforts include establishing common drop-off points or common schedules (21 of 21), coordinating to provide access to health and human services (14 of 21) and using technologies, such as software, to facilitate coordination of transportation (11 of 21). Rural transit providers told us that they coordinate with others because coordinating may help them meet increasing rural-transit service demand and improve service. They mentioned that the benefits of their coordination efforts include: increased ridership or access, cost efficiency or reduced costs, and enhanced quality of services. Examples of coordination cited by our selected rural transit providers are summarized in table 2 below.

³² [GAO-18-630](#).

Table 2: Examples of Rural Transit Providers' Efforts to Coordinate Trips and Schedules

Coordination efforts	Specific examples of coordination ^a
<p>Establishing mutually convenient drop-off points and schedules for passengers to efficiently transfer between transit services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rocky Boy's Transit provides transportation on the Chippewa Cree Indians of the Rocky Boy's Reservation, Montana and coordinates transfer points and schedules with North Central Montana Transit to take passengers into Great Falls, Montana about 100-miles south of the reservation. This coordination provides rural tribal members with greater access to health services, colleges, and amenities, such as shopping. Jefferson Lines offers inter-city service in 14 states and coordinates its trips with rural, urban, and other inter-city public transit providers. For example, the rural transit provider, Dodger Area Rapid Transit, sells intercity bus tickets in Fort Dodge, Iowa, and provides transportation to a rest stop, where riders can take a Jefferson Lines' bus to trips across state lines, using one ticket.
	
<p>Coordinating to provide transportation access to health and human services (e.g., job training and health services)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EBCI Transit, the transit provider for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina, coordinates nonemergency medical transportation services with three nearby counties' departments of health and human services to provide transportation to regional healthcare providers, including the Cherokee Indian Hospital. Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency coordinates with state agencies, private contractors, and local officials to provide: medical trips between rural and urban areas; transportation support for employment, probation and low-income programs; and general public transportation in nine rural counties. The agency is also in talks with a local manufacturer to provide transportation for rural workers to access a new manufacturing plant in one of their counties.
	
<p>Using technologies to facilitate rural transit coordination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Swain County Transit, a rural transit provider in western North Carolina, coordinates a route to Asheville with two neighboring-county transit providers using scheduling and trip-planning software that divides the trip cost and mileage. Swain County Transit officials stated that because one of its transit partners provides this 140-mile round trip, Swain County Transit no longer needed to make the trip and was enabled it to add additional local routes to improve services. People For People, a non-profit organization that provides transportation for human services programs and the general public in central and eastern Washington State, uses mobile data terminals on its vehicles to record trip origin and destination to aid in dispatching and scheduling. This program also uses GPS tracking devices to locate vehicles and integrate with a phone application to let riders know when buses will arrive, including at transfer points to board other transit systems.
	

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with rural transit providers. | GAO-20-205




^aThese examples are testimonial information from our interviews with selected rural transit providers. We did not verify providers' efforts and their effects.

Coordinated Funding and Shared Resources

All of the rural transit providers we interviewed also told us they coordinated across various funding sources or shared other resources with nearby transit providers. The most commonly cited coordination and resource-sharing activities included pursuing funding from several programs and raising local revenue for transit (18 of 21); participating in opportunities to share knowledge, such as training (11 of 21); sharing vehicles and related resources, such as maintenance capabilities (8 of

21); and sharing staff to achieve a common goal (5 of 21). Four of our selected rural transit providers also stated that full consolidation of their transit services across multiple jurisdictions or providers resulted in cost savings. Specific examples of these activities cited by our selected rural transit providers are summarized in table 3 below.

Table 3: Examples of Rural Transit Providers' Efforts to Share Resources

Coordination efforts	Specific examples of coordination ^a
Coordinating across various funding sources, including federal and state programs and local sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People For People in Washington State is a rural transit provider that coordinates various federal, state, and private funding sources, such as from Catholic Charities and United Way, to provide transportation services. People For People told us that coordinating funds enables it to share more trips, decrease costs, and provide more access to services overall for its riders in rural communities. • North Central Regional Transit District, in New Mexico, provides rural transportation in a 10,000-square-mile service area. According to transit officials, almost 75 percent of its funding comes from local tax revenue. It also receives funding from the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) programs targeting rural, tribal and urban areas, among others. • The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation's transit service in Montana coordinates various funding sources, including tribal government funds and federal funds, such as FTA's rural transit program and the Department of Health and Human Services' Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. Additional funding comes from its contracts to provide non-emergency medical transportation, and service contracts with other tribal entities such as the tribal college.
Sharing knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whitfield County Transit, a rural transit provider in northern Georgia, provides in-house training on safety and maintenance for its drivers. This provider coordinates with the state transportation agency to facilitate a "train-the-trainer session" and invites other transit providers to attend the in-house training, including state-required and certified training. • The Morongo Band of Mission Indian's Transportation Department is currently coordinating with two nearby transit providers in southern California to learn about their experience implementing electronic fare collection. The Morongo Band's transit program is relatively new and transit officials said their staff have learned from these more experienced transit agencies.
Sharing to reduce vehicle expenses (e.g., maintenance or joint-purchasing agreements) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Souris Basin Transit provides demand-response transit service in over 10,000 square miles of central and northwest North Dakota. Souris Basin Transit repairs its neighboring transit providers' equipment (e.g., vans or wheelchair lifts) at cost and can share a vehicle, while the other transit provider's vehicle is being repaired. • Pullman Transit participates in the Washington State Transit Insurance Pool, which, according to the insurance pool's website, provides and purchases insurance coverage, and manages claims and litigation for transit providers. Twenty four other public transit providers are members of the insurance pool.

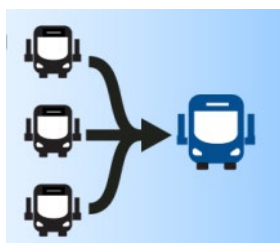
Coordination efforts

Sharing staff time and expertise to achieve a common goal

**Specific examples of coordination^a**

- A transit official with the Pueblo of Santa Clara, New Mexico, told us that North Central Regional Transit District staff applies for federal grants and submits reports, as needed, on behalf of the tribe. As a result, both organizations are awarded federal funds to provide trips for tribal members to travel throughout the region surrounding Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- Missoula Ravalli Transportation Management Association's staff assisted the Lake, Mineral, Ravalli, and Sanders County Councils on Aging in grant writing and other operational tasks. The rural transit provider's staff also coordinated with Opportunity Resources, Inc. and Community Medical Center to share drivers and vehicles, as needed, to provide service for disabled and elderly patients that would have otherwise been denied transportation services.

Consolidating transit operations to reduce administrative expenses or achieve other goals



- Madera County Transit recently consolidated its rural transit system in California's Central Valley, from four transit operators into one transit operation, while maintaining the same service levels. Madera County Transit staff told us that they expect the consolidated operation will reduce duplication in administrative services and over 5 years reduce the cost to provide comparable service by about 27 percent.
- Southwest Georgia Regional Commission operates general public, human services, and non-emergency medical transportation services in 14 counties using private transit contractors. According to regional commission officials, the consolidated, regional transit program allows more transportation across county lines, reduces costs, and shifts the cost for transit from the local to the regional level.
- Southeast Tennessee Human Resources Agency is a human services agency that provides coordinated transit services across nine rural counties and one small urban area in Tennessee. It was formed more than 30 years ago and provides general transportation and health and human services transportation for programs offering elderly support, employment training and education services, among other programs.

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with rural transit providers. | GAO-20-205

^aThese examples are testimonial information from our interviews with selected rural transit providers. We did not verify providers' efforts and their effects.

FTA Continues to Facilitate Coordination, but Its Efforts Have Had Mixed Results

FTA and the Coordinating Council Have Ongoing Efforts, but Key Deadlines Have Been Missed and Much Work Remains

As the lead agency of the Coordinating Council, FTA has taken a number of steps in recent years, including those summarized below, to work with other Coordinating Council member agencies to enhance federal interagency coordination.

- From January 2017 through June 2019, FTA and the Coordinating Council members were involved in more than 90 interagency-coordinating activities, according to the Coordinating Council's summary of recent activities posted on its website. Coordinating activities included interagency meetings, trainings, and webinars to share information and coordinate interagency efforts that support rural communities and improve transportation access to health and human services. For example, in September 2018, staff from FTA and the Department of Agriculture held a webinar for federal, state, and local officials on the opioid crisis and increasing transportation in rural areas to improve access to treatment centers, the courts, and other services in rural West Virginia.
- In 2018, FTA and Coordinating Council members engaged in significant efforts to inform the strategic direction of the Coordinating Council. From March through June 2018, FTA and some Coordinating Council members convened a series of focus groups with state and local stakeholders, including transit and health and human services providers to be informed of the current state of transportation services and identify leading practices and barriers to transportation coordination.³³ FTA also obtained input from state and local transit and health and human services stakeholders via a survey that the National Center for Mobility Management conducted from June through November 2018 to identify promising practices, barriers, and challenges around coordinated transportation.

³³ FTA and Coordinating Council members also subsequently issued the *2018 Focus Group Report* and posted it on FTA's Coordinating Council website.

-
- Working group efforts under way are addressing some of the challenges facing rural transit providers. For example, the Coordinating Council's Program Analysis Work Group, which was convened in November 2018, is currently examining all federal programs with transportation funding available and conducting program analyses to determine whether and how federal program requirements could be better aligned. FTA officials stated that the Coordinating Council plans to submit a report to Congress with some proposed changes and recommendations for improved alignment of federal requirements by September 2020.

While these coordinating activities are constructive and encouraging steps, the Coordinating Council's progress has been slow in other key areas. In 2014, we recommended that the Coordinating Council develop a strategic plan and cost-sharing policy to promote and enhance federal, state, and local nonemergency medical transportation coordination activities.³⁴ In addition, the 2015 Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act) required the Council to publish a strategic plan by December 2016 that, among other things, identifies a strategy to strengthen interagency collaboration and that develops a cost-sharing policy in compliance with applicable federal laws. The FAST Act also required the Coordinating Council to submit a final report containing the Council's final recommendations to Congress for enhancing interagency coordination.³⁵

However, the Coordinating Council did not issue the required strategic plan until October 2019, about 3 years after the 2016 deadline. We are currently evaluating this plan as part of our follow-up on the implementation status of our 2014 recommendations. Regarding the final report to Congress on interagency coordination, FTA officials told us that they plan to submit the final report to Congress by September 2020.

Additionally, we previously reported on the long-standing challenge of the Coordinating Council Executive Committee, which is tasked with providing top management direction for the Council, providing limited leadership and guidance that can have a broad effect on rural transportation.³⁶ Specifically, we reported that the Council Executive

³⁴ [GAO-15-110](#).

³⁵ Pub. L. No. 114-94, div. A, tit. III, § 3006(c), 128 Stat. 1312, 1462 (2015).

³⁶ [GAO-15-110](#).

Committee had provided limited leadership, had not met since 2007, and had not issued key guidance documents that could promote coordination. Accordingly, we recommended that the Council meet and issue guidance documents. According to FTA officials, the Executive Committee met for the first time since 2007 in October 2019 and issued the strategic plan noted above. As previously mentioned, we will continue following up on our prior recommendations (see app. II).

FTA Has Facilitated Coordination of Rural Transit Services at the State and Local Level, but the Effectiveness of FTA's Information Sharing Has Been Limited

FTA also facilitates coordination of rural transit services by engaging directly with state and local stakeholders, including transit and health and human services providers. FTA has, for example, taken the following actions:

- It created a website that provides resources and information on planning and coordinating rural transportation services.³⁷ This website includes a self-assessment toolkit for state and local transportation agencies on “Building a Coordinated Transportation System” and a link to case studies on coordination of state and regional councils.
- FTA staff provides ongoing training, resources, and technical support to state transportation agencies and transit and human services providers through its three technical assistance centers—the National Rural Transit Assistance Program, the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center, and the National Center for Mobility Management.³⁸ FTA and its three centers have been disseminating and sharing some coordination-focused information through their websites, training, and conferences. For example, FTA officials pointed us to the National Aging and Disability Transportation

³⁷ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/transportation-planning/rural-transportation-planning>

³⁸ These three centers are funded through a cooperative agreement with FTA. The National Rural Transit Assistance Program provides training and technical assistance needs of rural and tribal transit providers and supports the state Rural Transit Assistance Program. Administered by Easterseals, Inc. and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center promotes the availability and accessibility of transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, caregivers, and communities. The National Center for Mobility Management is a national technical assistance center that provides support and assistances to mobility management professionals, FTA, and other partners through trainings, dissemination of information, and customized technical assistance. FTA officials also told us that they recently developed another technical assistance center—the Rural and Small Urban Applied Technology Technical Assistance Center.

Center's webpage on "Annual Trends Report and Spotlight Series" that posted best practices information on a non-profit agency that recruits and uses volunteers to transport older adults to social outings and medical appointments.

- FTA also annually awards competitive grants for innovative, coordinated health and transportation programs.³⁹ For example, FTA awarded approximately \$9.6 million in fiscal year 2019 to 37 projects that were selected as innovative projects for the transportation of disadvantaged populations that are designed to improve the coordination of transportation services and nonemergency medical transportation services.
- FTA has also bi-annually recognized rural transit providers with an FTA Administrator's Award for outstanding rural-transit programs, selected in part based on coordination efforts. FTA officials told us that recipients of this award are expected to share their successful practices at the National Rural Transit Assistance Program conference, which is attended by many rural transit providers.

Although FTA has a number of efforts under way to facilitate coordination, we identified limitations with FTA's current communication and information sharing approach. More than a third of the stakeholders we spoke with (16 of 43) stated that communication and information sharing on coordination opportunities from FTA have been limited. FTA officials told us that they disseminate and share some coordination-focused information through its three technical assistance centers, training, conferences, and regular meetings with state transportation agencies as its direct grantees and transportation industry associations. However, about a quarter of the stakeholders (11 of 43) and participants in one discussion group told us that while they have attended FTA trainings and conferences and have used FTA's technical centers, the focus has been on grant management issues, such as compliance with drug and alcohol policy and procurement, and not on coordination opportunities. Stakeholders stated that they wanted more information on:

- ways to coordinate with other providers,
- how providers addressed coordination challenges,

³⁹ Human Services Coordination Research Program grants are funded through the Public Transportation Innovation Program, 49 U.S.C. § 5312(b). Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility Pilot Program grants are authorized under Section 3006(b) of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act, Pub. L. No 114-94, 129 Stat. 1312, 1462 (2015).

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- technologies that were used to facilitate coordination, and
 - any quantifiable data and results on coordination.

Additional information on leading coordination practices that FTA can share with stakeholders include those that we previously identified, such as defining and articulating a common outcome that agencies can engage in to sustain coordination efforts.⁴⁰

In December 2014, we recommended that FTA and the Coordinating Council collect data to track and measure progress in achieving results, including the extent of coordination efforts under way.⁴¹ FTA officials told us that the Council’s recent adoption of their strategic plan includes goals and objectives that represents progress toward measuring the extent of coordination efforts at the federal level. FTA officials also told us that the Council’s final report to Congress that will be submitted in September 2020 will report on the implementation status of the objectives in the strategic plan.

We have previously reported on the importance of information sharing on coordination across federal, regional, state, and local government entities.⁴² Office of Management and Budget guidance on using information as a “strategic resource” notes that making federal information “discoverable, accessible and useable” can fuel innovation.⁴³ Further, according to *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, agencies should communicate necessary and quality information externally so that external parties can achieve their objectives and periodically evaluate methods of communication, so that the agency

⁴⁰ Other leading coordination practices include: (1) establishing mutually reinforcing or joint strategies; (2) identifying and addressing needs by leveraging resources; (3) agreeing on roles and responsibilities; (4) establishing compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries; (5) developing mechanisms to evaluate, monitor, and report on results; (6) reinforcing agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports; and (7) reinforcing individual accountability through performance management systems. ([GAO-12-1022](#) and [GAO-06-15](#).)

⁴¹ [GAO-15-158](#).

⁴² GAO, *Bureau of Prisons: Improved Evaluations and Increased Coordination Could Improve Cell Phone Detection*, [GAO-11-893](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 6, 2011) and GAO, *Homeland Security: Effective Regional Coordination Can Enhance Emergency Preparedness*, [GAO-04-1009](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 15, 2004).

⁴³ Office of Management and Budget, *Circular A-130, Managing Information as a Strategic Resource* (Washington, D.C.: July 28, 2016).

has the appropriate tools to communicate quality information with external parties on a timely basis.

FTA, however, has not clearly communicated and conveyed information on coordination opportunities and leading practices. For example, while FTA officials told us that they rely on their website to share information with stakeholders, more than a third of the stakeholders (17 of 43) told us that information on coordination opportunities and leading coordination practices are not clearly identifiable on FTA's website or easily accessible. Two stakeholders, for example, said that while locating program requirement information, such as on procurement, was fairly easy, it was difficult to locate coordination-related information. An official from a transit industry association also commented that "stakeholders would benefit if FTA and the technical assistance centers make coordination resources and training more visible on their websites." This visibility could include "having coordination as a standalone topic and/or creating a page(s) dedicated to coordination on their websites."

We also determined that coordination-related information was fragmented on FTA's website and found it difficult to navigate FTA's website to find leading practices information on coordination. For example, FTA officials referred us to its website on FTA's Access and Mobility Partnership Grant (also known as the Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility Grant) for information on leading practices for transportation coordination.⁴⁴ In our review of this website, we found a description of projects that FTA selected for the grant, the grant amount, and how the funds will be used. We could not identify any information specifically on how these projects identified opportunities to coordinate or exhibited leading coordination practices. We also examined FTA's website that provides a self-assessment toolkit for building a coordinated transportation system, as we previously mentioned.⁴⁵ FTA officials also mentioned that they

⁴⁴ FTA's Access and Mobility Partnership Grant provides competitive grants for transportation projects that were selected based on coordination. <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/fy-2016-rides-wellness-demonstration-and-innovative-coordinated-access-and-mobility> and <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/grant-programs/access-and-mobility-partnership-grants>

⁴⁵ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/transportation-planning/rural-transportation-planning>

developed the Coordination Council's webpage to present information targeted to coordination.⁴⁶

FTA does not have a strategy for communicating and sharing information on coordination opportunities and leading coordination practices for its wide audience of rural and tribal providers, state transportation agencies, and other stakeholders. FTA officials told us that they develop individualized communication plans when they undertake any major activities and examine an approach to communicating and sharing information when they develop annual statements of work for their three technical centers and meet with stakeholders. However, FTA could not provide us with a documented strategy that outlines how it communicates and shares coordination-focused information with state and local stakeholders.

In light of the multiple means by which FTA and the Coordinating Council are attempting to communicate information about coordinating rural and tribal transit services, a comprehensive plan or strategy that assesses what information state, local, and transit providers would benefit from receiving and how that information can be effectively communicated could help FTA's information-sharing efforts have their intended effect. Without such a strategy, stakeholders are without valuable information that could aid them in identifying potential coordination opportunities, leading practices, and data to help inform and facilitate their coordination efforts.

Conclusions

Coordination is important to help state transportation agencies, rural transit providers, and human health and service providers meet the increasing needs of those who rely on rural transit systems, particularly in light of limited resources. FTA has taken a number of steps to enhance and facilitate coordination, including having interagency meetings, trainings, and webinars to coordinate interagency efforts that support rural communities and improve transportation access to health and human services. Going forward, it will be critical for the Coordinating Council's Executive Committee to implement our prior recommendations on key coordination issues. In addition, although FTA, along with its three technical centers, has developed resources to facilitate coordination, its communication efforts have fallen short. Without a communication strategy to effectively reach state and local stakeholders, FTA is missing

⁴⁶ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/coordinating-council-access-and-mobility>

opportunities to enhance communication and information sharing that can improve coordination among state transportation agencies and rural and tribal transit providers.

Recommendation for Executive Action

The Administrator of FTA should develop a communication plan that will effectively share information with state transportation agencies and rural and tribal transit providers on coordination opportunities and leading coordination practices in an accessible and informative way. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Transportation (DOT) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) for review and comment. DOT provided written comments, which are reproduced in appendix III and summarized below. DOT and HHS also separately provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

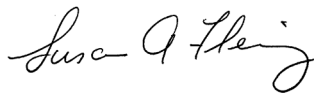
In written comments, DOT partially concurred with our recommendation. DOT provided examples of its communication efforts with stakeholders on coordination opportunities and practices and highlighted two recent initiatives to further support the coordination of rural transportation services. For example, in October 2019, DOT established the Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) initiative to enable better coordination among agencies to address underserved rural areas and to collect input from stakeholders on the benefits rural transportation offers for safety and economic outcomes. In partially concurring with our recommendation, DOT wrote that it plans to direct each of its technical assistance centers to reorganize its web pages to centralize coordination information and best practices.

We acknowledge FTA's efforts and highlighted the progress FTA has made in communicating and facilitating coordination in this report. We noted that FTA has provided ongoing training, support, and resources through its technical assistance centers. While DOT's plans to have its technical assistance centers' web pages reorganized may help in communicating coordination opportunities with stakeholders, they fall short of a comprehensive communication plan. Such a plan would define a strategy for effectively communicating and sharing information with stakeholders and ensuring that methods of communication are reaching all intended stakeholders. Among other things, FTA's plans to increase access to coordination information does not include reorganizing and centralizing coordination-related information on FTA's web pages, a

strategy that is different from these technical centers' web pages and one where many stakeholders can turn to and search for communication and information. We believe that a comprehensive communication plan that includes FTA's strategy for ongoing communication on coordination opportunities would enable FTA to ensure that coordination information is reaching intended stakeholders to inform them of opportunities to enhance rural transit services.

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

If you or your staff members have any questions regarding this report, please contact at me (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Susan A. Fleming
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues

Appendix I: Rural Transit Stakeholders GAO Interviewed and Discussion Group Participants

Table 4: Rural Transit Stakeholders GAO Interviewed

Industry groups
Community Transportation Association of America
Inter-tribal Transportation Association
Medical Transportation Access Coalition
National Association of Development Organizations
National Association of Regional Councils
National Association of Counties
National Center for Mobility Management
National Rural Transit Assistance Program
Small Urban, Rural and Tribal Center on Mobility
Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Regional Office
FTA Region IV ^
FTA Region VI
FTA Region VIII
FTA Region IX
FTA Region X
State transportation agencies
Caltrans - California Department of Transportation
Georgia Department of Transportation
Montana Department of Transportation
New Mexico Department of Transportation
North Carolina Department of Transportation
North Dakota Department of Transportation
Tennessee Department of Transportation
Washington State Department of Transportation
Rural transit providers (including tribes' names, where appropriate)
Carlsbad Municipal Transit System
CSKT Transit (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation) *
Eagle Transit
EBCI Transit (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) *^
Jefferson Lines
Kern Transit
Madera County Transportation Commission
Missoula Ravalli Transportation Management Association ^
Morongo Transportation Department (Morongo Band of Mission Indians) *
North Central Regional Transit District

**Appendix I: Rural Transit Stakeholders GAO
Interviewed and Discussion Group Participants**

People For People
Pueblo of Santa Clara, New Mexico *
Pullman Transit
Rocky Boy's Transit (Chippewa Cree Indians of the Rocky Boy's Reservation, Montana)*
Souris Basin Transit
Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency ^
Southwest Georgia Regional Commission
Swain County Transit ^
Turtle Mountain Transit (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians of North Dakota) *
Whitfield County Transit ^
Williston Council for the Aging

Legend: * = Recipient of FTA's Tribal Transit Program funding.

^ = Site visit to interview stakeholder.

Source: GAO. | GAO-20-205

Table 5: Rural Transit Stakeholders Participating in Discussion Groups

State transportation agencies
Mississippi Department of Transportation
VTrans - Vermont Agency of Transportation
Rural transit providers (including tribe names, where appropriate)
Big Woods Transit (Bois Forte Band (Nett Lake) component of Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Minnesota)
Center for Community the RIDE (Sitka Tribe of Alaska) *
Choctaw Tribal Transit (The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) *
Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency
Hualapai Transit (Hualapai Indian Tribe of the Hualapai Indian Reservation, Arizona) *
Oglala Sioux Transit (Oglala Sioux Tribe) *
Saline County Area Transit
Salt River Transit (Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community of the Salt River Reservation, Arizona) *
Seniors' Resource Center

Legend: * = Recipient of FTA's Tribal Transit Program funding.

Source: GAO. | GAO-20-205

Appendix II: Implementation Status of GAO's Recommendations to the Department of Transportation

Table 6: Implementation Status of Recommendations to the Department of Transportation (DOT) That Affect Rural Transit Coordination, as of October 2019

Product number and title	Recommendations	Status
<p>GAO-15-158 Transportation for Older Adults: Measuring Results Could Help Determine if Coordination Efforts Improve Mobility</p>	<p>The Secretary of Transportation, as the chair of the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (Coordinating Council), should convene a meeting of the Coordinating Council's agency members and report on desired outcomes and collect related data to track and measure progress in achieving results, including the extent of coordination efforts that are under way, such as improved services for older adults.</p>	<p>DOT plans to implement this recommendation by the end of December 2019.</p>
<p>GAO-15-110 Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Nonemergency Medical Transportation Not Well Coordinated, and Additional Federal Leadership Needed</p>	<p>The Secretary of Transportation, as the chair of the Coordinating Council, should convene a meeting of the Coordinating Council to complete and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish an updated strategic plan that clearly outlines a strategy for addressing how nonemergency medical transportation (NEMT) can be coordinated across federal agencies that fund NEMT services. • issue a cost-sharing policy that clearly identifies how it can be applied to programs administered by member agencies of the Coordinating Council that provide funding for NEMT. • use on-going work of the Health, Wellness, and Transportation working group to: (1) identify the challenges associated with coordinating Medicaid's and Veterans Affairs NEMT programs with other federal programs that fund NEMT; (2) develop recommendations for how these challenges can be addressed while still maintaining program integrity and fraud prevention; and (3) report these recommendations to appropriate committees of Congress. To the extent feasible, the Coordinating Council should implement those recommendations that are within its legal authority. 	<p>DOT published a strategic plan in October 2019, and we plan to evaluate it.</p> <p>We plan to evaluate the cost-sharing policy, as part of the strategic plan that was published in October 2019.</p> <p>DOT anticipates submitting the report containing the recommendations to Congress by September 2020.</p>
<p>GAO-12-647 Transportation Disadvantaged Populations: Federal Coordination Efforts Could Be Further Strengthened</p>	<p>The Secretary of Transportation, as the chair of the Coordinating Council, should meet with other Secretaries of the Coordinating Council members and should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meet and complete and publish a strategic plan for the Coordinating Council, which should, among other things, clearly outline agency roles and responsibilities and articulate a strategy to help strengthen interagency collaboration and communication • meet and report on the progress of Coordinating Council recommendations made as part of its 2005 Report to the President on implementation of Executive Order 13330 and develop a plan to address any outstanding recommendations, including the development of a cost-sharing policy endorsed by the Coordinating Council and the actions taken by member agencies to increase federal program grantees' participation in locally developed, coordinated planning processes 	<p>Implemented – The Coordinating Council developed a strategic plan (2011-2013) that articulated a strategy to help strengthen interagency collaboration</p> <p>Implemented – The Coordinating Council's 2013 progress report provided status updates on the Executive Order and 2005 recommendations</p>

Source: GAO analysis of DOT information. | GAO-20-205

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Transportation



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

1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

DEC 13 2019

Susan A. Fleming
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Fleming:

Within the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT or Department), most public transportation activities are housed within the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Further, the Office of the Secretary is involved in rural transportation through several Department-wide initiatives.

FTA provides financial and technical assistance to States, transit operators, and tribal transit systems that operate public transportation, including in rural areas. As the coordination of rural transportation across geographic jurisdictions and funding sources has been identified as an important issue, FTA communicates with its stakeholders about coordination practices and opportunities in several ways, including:

- Providing ongoing training, resources, and technical support to state transportation agencies and transit and human services providers through four FTA-funded technical assistance centers, including the National Rural Transit Assistance Center;
- Ensuring that information about competitive grant opportunities and formula programs is easily accessible on FTA's website and through webinars; and
- Making FTA staff available at industry conferences and events to discuss rural transportation coordination with stakeholders.

There are two important initiatives that touch on rural public transit that are administered Department-wide. The Secretary of Transportation chairs the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM). The CCAM is a council of eleven Federal agencies that oversee more than 130 Federal programs that provide transportation services, many of them within rural areas. The CCAM recently published a new Strategic Plan and is working on a report to Congress on additional recommendations. FTA has continually staffed the effort and has coordinated several staff-to-staff information sharing initiatives. The Secretary is committed to reinvigorating the work of CCAM; a full meeting of the Council was convened on October 29, 2019, for the first time in several years. After that meeting, the Secretary announced a Notice of Funding Opportunity for FTA's Fiscal Year 2020 Mobility for All Pilot Program, which is a \$3.5 million initiative to fund projects that enhance transportation connections to jobs, education, and health

**Appendix III: Comments from the Department
of Transportation**

services, many of which are in rural areas. Additionally, staff from the various CCAM agencies have begun to meet to develop recommendations on how to reduce legislative and regulatory barriers to coordination as well as the development of a cost sharing policy.

In October 2019, the Department launched its Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) initiative. This effort seeks to demystify government grants programs, remove roadblocks to rural applicants, and balance the award of Federal discretionary grants based on the merits that rural projects offer.

To support this effort, the Secretary has established the ROUTES Council, which is embarking upon deliberate activities to collect input from stakeholders on the benefits rural projects offer for safety and economic outcomes, provide user-friendly information to rural communities to enhance understanding about DOT's infrastructure grant options, and improve DOT's data-driven approaches to better assess needs and benefits of rural transportation infrastructure projects. DOT recently published a Request for Information on the ROUTES to seek input that enable better coordination among agencies to address underserved rural areas. Input received will shape future efforts across all modes of the Department, including public transit.

Upon review of the GAO draft report, we partially concur with the recommendation to develop a communication plan that will effectively share information with state transportation agencies and rural and tribal transit providers on coordination opportunities and leading coordination practices in an accessible and informative way. The FTA agrees that communication of coordination opportunities and practices is important. As an alternative approach to developing a communication plan, the FTA plans to increase access to coordination information for state transportation agencies and rural and tribal transit providers by directing each technical assistance center to reorganize its web pages to centralize information and best practices on coordination. FTA will provide a detailed response to the recommendation within 180 days of the final report's issuance.

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report. Please contact Madeline M. Chulumovich, Director, Audit Relations and Program Improvement, at (202) 366-6512 with any questions.

Sincerely,



Keith Washington
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgment

GAO Contacts

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Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the individuals named above, Heather MacLeod (Assistant Director); Jennifer Kim (Analyst-in-Charge); Matthew Bond; Delwen Jones; Rosa Leung; Theresa Lo; Anna Maria Ortiz; Cheryl Peterson; Malika Rice; Kelly Rubin; Pamela Snedden; Lisa Van Arsdale; and Sarah Veale made key contributions to this report.

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