

Linking Transportation and Housing Solutions for Older Adults

Safe, affordable, and accessible transportation choices are critical for older adults who wish to remain independent. Through transportation program improvements and improved coordination of housing, transportation, and land-use policy, communities can help ensure that older adults have good transportation access to needed services and amenities.

Older adults who wish to age in place must be able to meet their daily needs outside the home even if they cannot or choose not to drive. Safe, affordable, and accessible transportation options are essential for older adults to run errands, go to the doctor, or visit friends and family. Without such options, an older adult might either have to prematurely move to a supported housing arrangement or become increasingly dependent on family and friends for assistance.

Transportation Challenges for Older Adults

Since the 1950s, conventional zoning has segregated many residential communities from employment, schools, and shopping districts, making the private automobile one of the easiest and most efficient ways to get from place to place. Yet, one in five adults 65 and older does not drive.¹ For anyone living in an auto-reliant community, choosing not to drive can be associated with a dramatic lifestyle change and can produce feelings of dependence and isolation.

Nondrivers are often faced with limited transportation alternatives. Many communities have poor pedestrian infrastructure, making walking an unsafe means of getting around. A survey of older adults indicates that almost 40 percent of respondents do not have adequate

sidewalks near their homes, and nearly 47 percent cannot safely cross their community's main roads.² Another survey found that 60 percent of older adults do not live within a 10-minute walk of public transportation.³ Poor access to public transportation is even more pronounced in rural communities, where 30 percent of all households include at least one member age 65 or older.⁴

In communities that do have public transit systems, many older adults have expressed dissatisfaction with their options. One survey found that 38 percent of respondents with access to public transportation gave it a grade of D or F for reliability.⁵ Additionally, many bus and train routes are designed to connect commuters to employment centers during rush hour but do not accommodate different destinations and timeframes that nonworkers may find desirable. And many of the physical limitations that make driving difficult can also complicate accessing some forms of public transportation (e.g., getting on and off buses).⁶

Where public transit is reliable, accessible, and in demand, housing costs can be out of reach for both renters and owners with low or moderate incomes. According to one estimate, the demand for housing near transit is likely to more than double by

2025 as a result of changing demographics and housing preferences.⁷ Because housing prices typically rise with demand, it will be increasingly important for communities to ensure that affordable housing options are available for low- and moderate-income households in these desirable locations.

Two complementary approaches can be pursued to overcome these transportation challenges. First, communities can improve and expand existing transit service and develop additional transportation programs to accommodate those with special needs. Second, policymakers can coordinate housing, transportation, and land-use policies to promote the development of walkable, transit-oriented communities that allow older adults to live near public transit stops and essential services.

Transit Improvements and Alternatives for Older Adults

A range of accessible transportation options is essential for older adults to retain their independence, but as table 1 shows, options alone are not sufficient. In order to be viable for older adults, communities need to ensure that public transit alternatives are clean, safe, reliable, and user-friendly, in addition to being accessible and affordable.

There are a number of specialized transportation programs designed to meet the specific transportation needs of older adults who cannot easily access traditional public transit, either due to physical limitations or because they live in poorly served rural or suburban areas.

Paratransit

Paratransit services provide origin-to-destination trips in specialized vehicles to accommodate passengers with disabilities. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, any fixed-route public transportation agency must provide paratransit service to

Availability	Transportation exists and is available when needed.
Accessibility	Transportation can be reached and used (bus stairs can be negotiated, bus seats are high enough, bus stop is readable, van comes to the door).
Acceptability	Standards relate to conditions such as cleanliness (bus is not dirty), safety (bus stops are located in safe areas), and user-friendliness (transit operators are courteous and helpful).
Affordability	Costs (fees) are affordable, comparable to or less than driving a car, and vouchers or coupons help defray out-of-pocket expenses.
Adaptability	Transportation can be modified or adjusted to meet special needs (wheelchair can be accommodated, trip chaining is possible).
Source: Beverly Foundation. <i>Giving Up The Keys Fact Sheet</i> , 2008.	

people with disabilities who live within three-quarters of a mile from the agency's fixed routes.⁸ Although paratransit services offer an alternative for older adults with disabilities, the three-quarter-mile radius guideline and the requirement that riders have a disability leave many frail older adults, even those in urban areas, without reliable transportation.⁹

Supplemental Transportation Programs

Supplemental transportation programs (STPs) offer nontraditional transportation services for nondriving older adults and others in need of assistance. Most STPs provide door-to-door and door-through-door rides. Some STPs arrange for a driver to stay with passengers at a destination until they are ready to return home. STP sponsorship and funding vary from place to place. For example, several religious institutions in Austin, TX, formed West Austin Caregivers, which coordinates volunteer drivers to provide transportation

for the frail elderly within a 23-square-mile region.¹⁰

Human Services Transportation

Human services transportation refers to transit services operated at the state or local level geared toward “transportation disadvantaged” populations: seniors; nondrivers with disabilities; and low-income individuals without a reliable way to get to work. Government “dial-a-ride” programs that provide door-to-door transportation upon request and mileage reimbursement vouchers for volunteer drivers are examples of human services transportation programs. Many regions, including Ohio’s Miami Valley, are developing comprehensive human services transportation plans in order to coordinate the various services, increase efficiency, reduce duplication, and lower costs.¹¹

Coordinating Housing, Transportation, and Land-use Policies

In addition to improving the ability of public transit to meet the needs of older adults where they live now, communities should consider steps to increase the number of affordable housing options available to older adults near public transit and essential amenities. This can be accomplished by coordinating housing, land-use, and transportation policies to preserve and expand the availability of housing affordable to a mix of incomes in these key locations.

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD)

While the term can be defined in a number of ways, in general a transit-oriented development is a residential development within walking distance of an existing or planned transit stop, hub, or corridor. TOD can help older adults take better advantage of public transit, particularly when located no more than one-quarter mile from transit access.¹²

TOD works best when surrounding land is zoned to allow not only for a mix of uses but also for high-density residential development. For example, Arlington County, VA, adopted a comprehensive land-use plan that outlined policies and procedures to concentrate dense, mixed-use development around five subway stations to maximize walkability.

One of the challenges with TOD is that it is often expensive to build, which can result in high rents and purchase costs for new housing units. To address this challenge, many communities have taken steps to ensure that a portion of newly developed housing near public transit is affordable. For example, to supplement its comprehensive land-use plan, Arlington County expanded its density bonus provision to ensure the development of affordable housing opportunities along the transit corridor.¹³

Some of the benefits and challenges associated with TOD also apply to residential areas that are not near public transit but are still within walking distance of essential destinations (e.g., retail, health care facilities).

Preserve Affordable Housing near Transit

In many metropolitan areas, subsidized housing is located near public transit and job centers. If the market demand for housing in the area is strong or predicted to grow, owners may choose to terminate their participation in housing subsidy programs and sell or rehabilitate their housing to serve families with higher incomes. A majority of today’s privately owned, subsidized affordable housing is occupied by older adults, so the loss of affordable units puts many older adults at risk of losing their homes.¹⁴ By taking steps to preserve transit-accessible subsidized housing developments, communities can ensure that these affordable resources continue to meet the

housing and transportation needs of older adults, even as market prices increase.

AARP recommends that states provide incentives in their Low Income Housing Tax Credit Qualified Allocation Plans for rental preservation efforts in location-efficient sites. Forty-seven states currently prioritize preservation projects or set aside a portion of their tax credits for preservation efforts,¹⁵ and 28 states award points to developers that propose affordable housing projects near transit.¹⁶

Complete Streets

In addition to preserving and expanding the availability of affordable housing near public transit, AARP endorses initiatives to create “Complete Streets.” These streets are “designed and operated so they safely work for all users: pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities”.¹⁷ In July 2009, the City of Buffalo, NY, finished its first complete streets project, which now includes wider sidewalks, new streetlights, and curb extensions to slow downtown traffic.¹⁸ With improvements such as these, walking becomes a safe alternative to driving for older adults who live close to everyday destinations.

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³ AARP Public Policy Institute. *Beyond 50.05: A Report to the Nation on Livable Communities*. Washington, DC: AARP, 2005.

⁴ AARP Office of Policy Integration. *The Policy Book: AARP Public Policies 2009–2010*.

⁵ AARP Public Policy Institute. *Beyond 50.05: A Report to the Nation on Livable Communities..*

⁶ Aging in Place Initiative. *A Blueprint for Action: Developing a Livable Community for All Ages*.

⁷ Reconnecting America. *Hidden in Plain Site: Capturing the Demand For Housing Near Transit*. Oakland, CA: September 2004.

⁸ AARP Office of Policy Integration. *The Policy Book: AARP Public Policies 2009–2010*.

⁹ Kerschner, Helen, and Joan Harris. “Better Options for Older Adults.” *Public Roads* 70, no. 5 (March/April 2007). Retrieved Sept. 17, 2009, from <http://www.tfhr.gov/pubrds/07mar/03.htm>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission. “Human Services Transportation Coordination Planning: Helping Transportation Disadvantaged Residents of the Miami Valley.” Retrieved Sept. 16, 2009, from www.mvrpc.org.

¹² Harrell, Rodney, Allison Brooks, and Todd Nedwick. *Preserving Affordability and Access in Livable Communities: Subsidized Housing Opportunities near Transit and the 50+ Population*. Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute, September 2009.

¹³ Oberlink, Mia R. *Opportunities for Creating Livable Communities*. Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute, March 2008.

¹⁴ Harrell, Rodney, et al. *Preserving Affordability and Access in Livable Communities*.

¹⁵ National Housing Trust. *National Housing Trust Preservation Summary*. Washington, DC: 2008.

¹⁶ Harrell, Rodney, et al. *Preserving Affordability and Access in Livable Communities*.

¹⁷ AARP Office of Policy Integration. *The Policy Book: AARP Public Policies 2009–2010*.

¹⁸ Booth, Justin. “Buffalo’s First ‘Complete Street’ has Arrived!” *Buffalo Rising*, July 13, 2009. Retrieved Sept. 18, 2009, from www.buffalorising.com.

¹ Aging in Place Initiative. *A Blueprint for Action: Developing a Livable Community for All Ages*. Washington, DC: May 2007.

² AARP Office of Policy Integration. *The Policy Book: AARP Public Policies 2009–2010*. Washington, DC: AARP 2009.