

2021 report on

Minnesota Council on Transportation Access

January 2022



**Strengthening transportation access
for all Minnesotans**

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Legislative Request

This report is issued to comply with [Minnesota Statutes 174.285, subdivision 5.](#)

174.285 MINNESOTA COUNCIL ON TRANSPORTATION ACCESS.

Subd. 5. Report.

By January 15 of each year, beginning in 2012, the council shall report its findings, recommendations, and activities to the governor's office and to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over transportation, health, and human services, and to the legislature as provided under section 3.195.

The cost of preparing this report is \$11,395.

List of Abbreviations

- DHS.....Minnesota Department of Human Services
- DTCCC..... Dakota County Transportation Coordinating Collaborative
- MCOTA..... Minnesota Council on Transportation Access
- MnDOT.....Minnesota Department of Transportation
- MPTA.....Minnesota Public Transit Association
- NEMT.....Nonemergency Medical Transportation
- PTPP.....Public Transportation Policy Plan
- RTCC.....Regional Transportation Coordinating Council
- STS.....Special Transportation Service
- TCAP.....Twin Cities Area Transit Coordination Assistance Project
- TNC.....Transportation Network Company (e.g., Lyft, Uber, etc.)

Summary

The worldwide pandemic brought into clear focus the value of products and services that many people often can take for granted in their daily lives — the availability of food and other necessities, medical care, and transportation.

The Minnesota State Legislature has long recognized the vital role that transportation plays not only in a Minnesotan’s life, but in the overall health of the state’s economy and its communities. It realized the importance of building a foundation that would allow the many agencies, departments, programs, and regional and local providers to more efficiently and effectively coordinate their transportation services.

With that in mind, the Minnesota State Legislature formed the Minnesota Council on Transportation Access in 2010, under [Minn. Stat. 174.285](#), to “study, evaluate, oversee and make recommendations to improve the coordination, availability, accessibility, efficiency, cost-effectiveness and safety of transportation services provided to the transit public.”

As a statewide coordinating council, MCOTA forms partnerships at all levels to help remove obstacles that prevent the successful coordination of transportation programs and resources.

To gain a deep understanding of local transportation concerns and innovations, MCOTA has developed a network of Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils, which serve Greater Minnesota, and Transportation Coordination Assistance Projects in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. RTCCs and TCAPs consist of stakeholders and community members who are interested in expanding transportation options to those most in need, such as older adults, people with disabilities, low-income adults, and veterans.

These partnerships help identify opportunities for improvements, increase efficiencies, support the sharing of new approaches and best practices, and help all partners respond more quickly in crisis situations.

This annual report highlights some of the ways that MCOTA and its partners made a difference in the lives of Minnesotans during the pandemic, as well as their work to enhance volunteer driver programs, leverage technology to quantify gaps in service, and expand transportation access at the regional and local levels. Results from those efforts include:

- Specially created transportation options in throughout the state for community members with COVID to life-saving medical treatments or to return home from hospitalization, for those with COVID symptoms to reach testing sites and those with financial barriers wanting to reach vaccination sites.
- Mobile vans that brought vaccinations to hard-to-reach communities
- Delivery of food to those in need
- New legislation that supports volunteer drivers by removing several barriers
- Webinar series that looked at the importance and state of volunteer drivers in Minnesota and offered best practices in establishing volunteer driver programs
- A host of examples from RTCCs and TCAPs on the impact of their work
- Enhanced relationships through work teams and communication activities, including a new website

In 2022, MCOTA will continue its work to complete GIS mapping of public and private transportation providers; advocate for additional legislation that strengthens volunteer driver programs and enhances transportation coordination and access within the state; address the diverse barriers to transportation coordination and access within the state; offer educational and networking opportunities; support the development and sharing of ideas and information; and expand relationships and partnerships throughout the state, among other activities.

Whatever the undertaking and whatever the status of the pandemic, MCOTA and its partners will work toward a greater understanding of unmet transportation needs and design solutions that help address those needs.

Introduction

Transportation coordination in Minnesota involves a host of state agencies, public transit organizations, and regional and local transportation providers and consumers, as well as numerous national, state and local programs. At the federal level alone, eight departments through many agencies administer some 62 transit programs.

At the same time, even with significant investments in transit at the federal, state and local levels, gaps in service exist in many communities. Those gaps may result in situations where older adults can no longer remain in their homes, serve as an obstacle for people with disabilities to work, or reduce opportunities for people with low incomes.

In bringing diverse agencies and organizations together, MCOTA promotes cooperation and coordination. MCOTA offers a home base for constituencies to better understand the big picture, to reduce duplication of efforts, to find opportunities for increasing capacity, to achieve greater cost efficiencies and to share best practices.

Who is MCOTA? It includes senior leadership from 13 state agencies and organizations, listed in Appendix A: Minnesota Departments of Commerce, Education, Employment and Economic Development, Human Services, Transportation and Veterans Affairs; the Metropolitan Council; the Office of the Governor; the Minnesota Board on Aging; Minnesota Management and Budget; Minnesota State Council on Disability; and the Minnesota Public Transit Association.

MCOTA partners with RTCCs and TCAPs in the cause of improving regional and local transportation coordination and access. Together, MCOTA and its partners work toward a vision where Minnesotans benefit from access to coordinated transportation services that meet their mobility needs. To that end, MCOTA pursues three key transportation goals:

- 1) Identify and reduce transportation gaps
- 2) Develop effective and streamlined access to transportation
- 3) Provide more transportation options

The 2020-2024 Strategic Plan guides MCOTA activities. The work groups, which include MCOTA leadership team members, agency staff, content experts, and RTCC and TCAP representatives, tackle specific initiatives, such as communications, legislation and research. Thanks to the strength of its partnerships, MCOTA continues to make progress in coordinating and improving transportation access for Minnesotans. This 2021 report helps document its most recent work and accomplishments.

MCOTA Mission

The mission of MCOTA is to work together to remove obstacles that prevent the successful coordination of transportation programs and resources among their respective customers.

MCOTA Vision

Minnesotans will have access to coordinated transportation services to meet their mobility needs.

MCOTA Legislative Duties

Under [Minn. Stat. 174.285](#), the purpose of MCOTA is to “study, evaluate, oversee and make recommendations to improve the coordination, availability, accessibility, efficiency, cost-effectiveness and safety of transportation services provided to the transit public.”

To improve coordination and accessibility, the statute assigns the council 20 duties:

1. Compile information on existing transportation alternatives for the transit public, and serve as a clearinghouse for information on services, funding sources, innovations and coordination efforts.
2. Identify best practices and strategies that have been successful in Minnesota and in other states for coordination of local, regional, state and federal funding and services.
3. Recommend statewide objectives for providing public transportation services for the transit public.
4. Identify barriers prohibiting coordination and accessibility of public transportation services and aggressively pursue the elimination of those barriers.
5. Recommend policies and procedures for coordinating local, regional, state and federal funding and services for the transit public.
6. Identify stakeholders providing services for the transit public and seek input from them concerning barriers and appropriate strategies.
7. Recommend guidelines for developing transportation coordination plans throughout the state.
8. Encourage all state agencies participating in the council to purchase trips within the coordinated system.
9. Facilitate the creation and operation of transportation brokerages to match riders to the appropriate service, promote shared dispatching, compile and disseminate information on transportation options and promote regional communication.
10. Encourage volunteer driver programs and recommend legislation to address liability and insurance issues.
11. Recommend minimum performance standards for delivery of services.
12. Identify methods to eliminate fraud and abuse in special transportation services.
13. Develop a standard method for addressing liability insurance requirements for transportation services purchased, provided or coordinated.
14. Design and develop a contracting template for providing coordinated transportation services.
15. Recommend an interagency uniform contracting billing and accounting system for providing coordinated transportation services.
16. Encourage the design and development of training programs for coordinated transportation services.
17. Encourage the use of public-school transportation vehicles for the transit public.

18. Develop an allocation methodology that equitably distributes transportation funds to compensate units of government and all entities that provide coordinated transportation services.
19. Identify policies and necessary legislation to facilitate vehicle sharing.
20. Advocate for eliminating barriers to coordination, implementing coordination strategies, enacting necessary legislation and appropriating resources to achieve the council's objectives.

MCOTA 2021 Activities and Accomplishments

Since its creation in 2010, MCOTA has pursued projects and activities to improve transportation coordination in Minnesota. Below are brief descriptions of key council activities and accomplishments during 2021. The numbers referenced in Table 1 are the numbers of the duties in the statute and listed on p. 7 of this report.

Table 1: Key MCOTA 2021 activities and accomplishments

| Activity | Legislative Duties Addressed Under Minn. Stat. 174.285 |
|--|--|
| Strategic Work Team accomplishments | All |
| Partnerships facilitating COVID-19 responses | 2, 4, 5, 20 |
| Volunteer Driver Program initiatives: Legislation, webinar series | 10, 13, 20 |
| Statewide GIS mapping of public transit providers | 1, 9 |
| Local innovations and partnerships by RTCCs and TCAPs | 1-11, 13-14, 16-17, 19-20 |
| Continued stakeholder communications, including website and newsletter | 1 |
| Olmstead Plan progress monitoring | 3, 4 |

See Appendix B for a list of all initiatives grouped by legislative duty.

Strategic Accomplishments

This year, MCOTA continued to work toward the goals outlined in its [2020-2024 strategic plan](#), with the additional requirement of responding and adapting to the impacts of COVID-19. This allows the council to act on its legislatively defined duties through a clear governance structure, a focus on four key strategic priorities and by frequently assessing the council's progress.

As recommended in the strategic plan, MCOTA's organizational structure is:

1. State agency leadership meets annually to identify priorities for the council's work. The leadership team consists of member agency commissioners who set strategic direction and prioritize work plan items for the MCOTA leadership team.
2. The leadership team includes the MCOTA chair, vice chair and executive director who oversee the implementation of MCOTA initiatives, review and approve work team recommendations, approve work products and ensure coordination within the council structure.
3. The MCOTA executive director provides coordination and leadership functions to the council. This role is critical in building relationships between agencies and stakeholders and in guiding MCOTA working

teams. The MCOTA executive director receives guidance from the MCOTA leadership team, recruits work team participants, facilitates work group meetings and shepherds groups toward successful outcomes.

4. MCOTA work teams include MCOTA members, agency staff, content experts and RTCC/TCAP. Team members work on specific initiatives identified by MCOTA including communications, convening virtual learning forums, legislation, research and topic development, for example the volunteer-driver programs. The three current teams are Volunteer Driver, Communications and Operations.
5. Minnesota's RTCCs and TCAPs conduct mobility management and transportation coordination at the county and regional level. RTCCs and TCAPs are a critical link in informing MCOTA's statewide perspective and the operations of local providers.

MCOTA is focusing on four key strategies to improve transportation coordination in Minnesota:

1. Provide support and technical assistance to local partners
2. Share best practices and build coalitions
3. Identify and respond to research needs
4. Engage in responsible education, communication and advocacy activities

Work Team Accomplishments

MCOTA work teams continued to advance MCOTA's strategic goals this year.

Volunteer Driver Program Initiatives

This year the work team focused on strengthening volunteer driver programs, reducing legislative barriers, industry collaboration, networking and professional development. In partnership with the Volunteer Driver Coalition, the team planned and delivered a monthly series of webinars on volunteer driver programs (see p. 17 for more information), planned materials to communicate the recently passed state legislation impacting volunteer driver programs, and conducted a survey to learn about future training, best practices and networking needs among the volunteer driver program community.

Communications

This work team produced the MCOTA annual legislative report, quarterly newsletter, website (including RTCC and TCAP sections) and created a MCOTA member guide.

Operations

This work team concentrated on performance measures and indicators, including the development of logic models for use in RTCC Phase 4 and TCAP work plans. The logic model's long-term outcome aligns with the various MCOTA, TCAP, and RTCC plans and fits well with MCOTA's vision: Minnesotans will have access to coordinated transportation services to meet their mobility needs.

Logic Model: A road map to changes and outcomes

Jeff Niblack, Minnesota Management and Budget, and Michelle Lichtig, MnDOT, provided expertise in guiding the operations work team to determine a cohesive framework to identify progress for 2021-2023 TCAPs and RTCCs in their Phase 4 work plans. The team decided to proceed with development of the logic model, best

sued to measure progression toward change and outcomes. MnDOT staff established the work plan criteria, with Jeff and Michelle leading instructional sessions on the logic model for the TCAPs and RTCCs in preparation of work plan submission.

The follow seven focus areas are being addressed in 2021-2022:

1. **Transportation guidance/consultation:** to inform people in the community about existing services
2. **Vehicle sharing:** to maximize utilization of existing vehicles used by organizations including FTA Section 5310 providers
3. **Private nonprofit and for-profit providers engagement:** to engage private for-profit and nonprofit organizations as stakeholders
4. **Volunteer driver programs:** to have supportive resources to develop and sustain volunteer driver programs
5. **Staff training:** RTCC staff gain expertise as a regional transportation resource
6. **Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plans (FTA Section 5310):** to identify viable FTA Section 5310 eligible projects (capital projects)
7. **Emergency preparedness facilitation:** to facilitate networking as an information resource with all emergency response units and all transportation providers within the region.

Powerful Partnerships Support Communities Through COVID Pandemic

The pandemic crisis generated an even greater need for transportation services throughout Minnesota. In response, government agencies and private organizations delivered — in many ways.

Joining Forces to Fill Transportation Gaps During a Pandemic

During the pandemic, some Minnesotans tested positive for COVID-19, yet still needed transportation to life-saving medical treatments, such as dialysis. Some suspected they had COVID-19 but couldn't reach a testing site. Hospitalized for COVID-19, others lacked transportation to return home when released. And during a peak time for emergencies, some called ambulances to transport them in non-emergency situations.

“Transportation can be a big barrier,” said Tom Gottfried, MCOTA executive director and program director for mobility management with the MnDOT Office of Transit and Active Transportation. “People just didn't know who to call, and they wondered what to do.”

In searching for a solution, the COVID Community Coordinators from the Minnesota Department of Health collaborated with MCOTA and MnDOT to launch the Non-Emergency COVID-19 Positive Client Transportation project. The coordinators focus their efforts on helping hard-to-reach and disadvantaged communities with needs that arise from COVID-19. They identified the transportation challenges in Greater Minnesota and turned to MCOTA and MnDOT for a solution.

“It was important for us to set up transportation services for non-emergency COVID-19 situations that offered safe access to medical services,” Gottfried said. MnDOT moved quickly after receiving \$750,000 through the Federal Coronavirus Relief Fund in August, sending a request for proposals to launch the service in September and awarding a contract to Semcac Transportation in early October 2020.

Semcac Transportation served as the transportation coordinator, soliciting the transportation providers who delivered the service throughout 80 Greater Minnesota counties. They started with six providers and within two weeks that number rose to 15 providers and ultimately to 17 providers. Semcac established a 1-800 number for Minnesotans to request rides, and the MDH COVID Community Coordinators and MnDOT helped spread the word about the free transportation service to communities.

The project ran for 78 days, ending on Dec. 30, 2020, and resulting in 910 trip requests throughout Greater Minnesota. “Nobody else was out there doing this,” Gottfried said, except for ambulances that needed relief from non-emergency transports. “The feedback was absolutely positive.”

In the seven-county metropolitan area, the Metropolitan Council provides transportation to symptomatic individuals needing safe transportation to and from test sites as well as critical medical appointments. The Metropolitan Council entered into an agreement with Transportation Services, Inc. to provide a subsidized ride using taxis with specially equipped vehicles and drivers with PPE and focused training. This program was also used to transport individuals with financial barriers to vaccination sites.

For individuals experiencing financial hardship, the Metropolitan Council partnered with Department of Human Services, COVID Community Coordinators and Metro Area Transit Coordination Assistance Projects to provide the service at no cost. The service began in March 2020 and will continue to be available through at least 2021.

Non-Emergency COVID-Positive Client Transportation

- 1** transportation coordinator
- 17** transportation providers
- 80** counties
- 910** trips
- 40%** of riders that required ADA accessibility
- 78** days
- 0** COVID infections in drivers

Leveraging Partnerships to Transport Meals for Those in Need

Instead of driving seniors to the grocery store, during the pandemic Newtrax found itself delivering meals to them and others who depended on those deliveries.

Newtrax operates the TCAP for Ramsey County, focusing on creating partnerships with community organizations that serve seniors and residential providers of adults with disabilities that need transportation assistance.

In the early days of the pandemic, MCOTA connected TCAPs, such as Newtrax, and RTCCs with the state food security task force and



Newtrax' Scott Olson with driver picking up meals for delivery

Minnesota’s State Emergency Operations Center. Those connections resulted in new ways to meet the growing need for food by community members and families.

Washington County organized its Food Security Unit in late March 2020 in partnership with the Metropolitan Council using Transit Link vehicles and drivers. On April 22, it sent its first set of emergency food boxes to community members and Transit Link continued to provide this service through September 2020. Newtrax first started transporting meals a few days a week in Washington County in October 2020, expanding to five days a week. Between April 22, 2020, and September 1, 2021, approximately 20,000 community members from about 6,600 households received emergency food boxes.

In another collaboration, Newtrax worked with Loaves and Fishes to deliver 800,000 meals to families impacted by the pandemic through 28 YMCAs. Then another idea was born.

Scott Olson, transportation coordinator for Newtrax, wondered about the possibility of delivering prepared meals to both support struggling restaurants and provide meals for seniors in need. It proved a popular idea.

With financial support from the cities of White Bear Lake, Mahtomedi, Vadnais Heights, Gem Lake and White Bear Lake Township, as well as from local community foundations, 14 restaurants — guaranteed a profitable price per meal — participated in the program. Newtrax also partnered with the school district to help students and their families.

In the program’s first month, Newtrax transported more than 1,250 meals and expanded to serve an additional 455 meals to families in the school district who faced financial hardships.

Collaborating to Deliver Metropolitan Council Transit Services in New Ways

As COVID significantly reduced transit ridership, the Metropolitan Council has adjusted its activities, responding to the new needs that the pandemic brought.

Metro Mobility and Transit Link provided grocery and goods delivery, as well as food shelf delivery, while Metro Mobility marshaled its resources for the region’s frontline healthcare workers to provide trips to and from work.

“Curbside” service was offered allowing customers to conduct business while the vehicle waited for up to 20 minutes. This allowed customers to fill prescriptions and fulfill other essential needs while reducing their potential exposure to COVID-19.

Through June 2021, Metro Mobility and Transit Link completed nearly 44,000 food shelf deliveries, 2,700 grocery store deliveries, and 161,000 health care and other essential worker trips. Those services continued through the first half of 2021, with all food shelf trips transitioning to Transit Link and essential health care worker trips ending in August 2021. Metro Mobility will continue grocery delivery and curbside services for the foreseeable future.

Metro Transit Services Deliver

(through June 2021)

2,700 grocery store deliveries

44,000 food shelf deliveries

161,000 health care and other essential worker trips

Source: Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities

MCOTA Members Work Together to Bring Vaccinations to Communities

By 2021, the pandemic landscape had changed again. As vaccines began to increase in availability, transportation needs shifted once again to address the barrier of access. And one solution involved buses with the words “Roll Up Your Sleeves Minnesota” on their sides.



Photo: Minnesota Department of Health

In spring 2021, the MDH, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, the Metropolitan Council and MnDOT joined forces to bring mobile COVID-19 vaccination clinics to communities throughout the state.

Part of a highly targeted vaccine distribution strategy, the mobile clinics were designed to reach people who would otherwise have a hard time getting vaccinated because they didn't have transportation to vaccination sites, because they lacked the technology to make appointments, or because geography made it difficult to reach vaccination sites.

The mobile clinics consisted of six underutilized ADA-accessible transit buses that Metro Transit transformed into vaccination clinics by removing seating and installing new equipment. Each mobile clinic had the potential to vaccinate around 100 people each day, depending on travel time. All vaccinations were free with no identification or insurance required.

The buses rolled out in April. By the end of May, the mobile vaccination clinics hosted 70 events and provided 2,500 vaccines to Minnesotans in sites that include low-income and multifamily housing, homeless service providers, disability service providers, community centers, faith centers, farms and agricultural sites, food assistance sites and cultural markets.

“Minnesota has led the country in distributing vaccine quickly, and appointments are now widely available for any eligible Minnesotan who wants to be vaccinated,” Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan said at a May event. “But we also know that barriers to vaccination still exist for communities across the state. I’m grateful to all the partners who have made these mobile vaccination events happen.

Mobile Vaccination Clinics at Work

According to the state’s community partners as of May 2021:

48 percent of the mobile clinics serve persons experiencing homelessness.

43 percent of the mobile clinics serve newer immigrant and refugee communities.

52 percent of the mobile clinics serve persons with disabilities.

100 percent of the mobile clinics serve people in their community who would not otherwise have access to the COVID 19 vaccine.

100 percent of the mobile clinics report that the mobile vaccination clinic “helped fill a gap to access to COVID 19 vaccines.”

Together, we're making sure everyone in Minnesota has the opportunity to be vaccinated by bringing the vaccine right to them."

And the buses continued to succeed in their mission throughout the summer. From April through August, the six-unit fleet of mobile vaccination buses administered more than 7,200 doses of vaccine during 170 clinics in 42 counties. And the wheels of two units will keep rolling, as the state decided in September to extend the mobile vaccination project.

"We are excited to see that communities are using this resource, and we are thrilled to continue serving Minnesotans with this unique program," said Jan Malcolm, MDH commissioner. "Working toward equitable COVID-19 vaccination rates has been at the core of our work, and the mobile vaccination units have helped fill a gap in being able to bring vaccines directly to people who might not otherwise have the chance to get vaccinated."

MCOTA Emphasizes Critical Role of Volunteer Drivers to Legislators

Throughout the state, thousands of volunteers play important roles in the lives of Minnesotans by offering them access through transportation and in some cases through friendship. As one of its legislative mandates, MCOTA works to support the health of Minnesota's volunteer driver programs.

Addressing Barriers by Advocating for Legislation

In 2021, volunteer drivers and volunteer driver programs throughout Minnesota benefited from the advocacy of MCOTA, the Volunteer Driver Coalition, and many state and local supporters when the Minnesota State Legislature passed new legislation to help encourage the growth of the state's volunteer driver pool.

Over the last few years, the barriers to volunteer drivers seem to be increasing, said Sherry Munyon, president of Capital Access Inc. who spoke as part of the Minnesota's Road to Volunteer Drivers Virtual Forum Series that took place from November 2020 through June 2021. MnDOT and MCOTA sponsored the forums in partnership with the Volunteer Driver Coalition (*see page 17*).

For example, drivers face insurance rate increases simply for being a volunteer. "Sometimes this is due to a view that volunteers who receive reimbursement are a paid-for-hire carrier," she said. "In addition to that, they face another financial difficulty in some cases, and that is being required to pay taxes on their mileage reimbursement."



In 2020, MCOTA senior agency leadership, including member agency commissioners, approved state and federal legislative proposals to resolve financial disincentives. The [Volunteer Driver Coalition](#) developed a website to share updates and inspire advocacy for legislation. At a MnDOT and MCOTA-sponsored volunteer drivers series forum, Munyon and state Sen. Jeff Howe encouraged supporters of volunteer drivers and the 80,000 Minnesotans they serve each year to advocate for two bills that were introduced in early 2021.



Sen. Jeff Howe

The efforts of Howe and advocates of the legislation helped lead to the passing of a bill that clearly defined a volunteer driver in law as “not-for-hire,” and another bill that created a state income tax subtraction for volunteer drivers to reduce their tax liability in Minnesota.

The estimated \$30,000 cost of the state income tax subtraction is well recouped by the impact of volunteer drivers, said Dawn Simonson, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging (now known as Trellis) and forum participant.

“We can serve many thousands of adults and get them to health care and keep them in their homes for about \$30,000 a year,” she said. By contrast, assisted living for an individual costs about \$48,000 a year, and nursing home care averages \$90,000 a year.

“Volunteer driver programs are not only essential to people and their well-being,” Simonson said, “they are an essential part of our public policy and the way that we work as a state to curb the cost of our growing budget devoted to long-term care services.”

While the new legislation helps, more policy work remains to change mileage reimbursement rates from 14 cents per mile closer to a rate that reflects the actual cost of owning and driving a personal vehicle for charitable purposes. In addition, legislation is needed to protect volunteer drivers from increased insurance rates and to cap the liability of nonprofit organizations that offer volunteer driver services at \$1.5 million.

Facing Growing Shortage of Drivers and Increasing Need

As John Doan, MCOTA member representing the Minnesota Board on Aging, looks at the road ahead for volunteer driver programs, he sees a clear supply-and-demand issue.

“We have demand that is increasing dramatically as 10,000 Americans are retiring each day between now and 2030,” Doan said at a forum session. “On the supply side, volunteer drivers are shrinking. The pool is now at an average age of 74 years old, and we need to tap new markets and a new supply of volunteer drivers.”

Expanding that pool may involve innovations, such as more public and private partnerships and for-profit companies with social missions that enhance capacity, he said.

Making a Difference in Communities Throughout Minnesota

As a volunteer driver for the Stephen Living at Home/Block Nurse Program in Stephen, Minn., Mike Schendel sees firsthand the difference transportation makes and the impacts when they can't meet demand.

"Our greatest need is for transportation to medical appointments," said Schendel, who also serves as a board member for the program and for the Living at Home Network. The closest clinics, both small, are 25 miles away, and three larger clinics are between 45 and 50 miles away from Stephen. "If volunteer drivers are not available, and because they need to continue their medical care, older adults often found it necessary to move out of their familiar home community to the city where they can more readily access medical care."



Joyce Rife and Jean Tiedt with CARE (Community Action Respecting Elders) in Foley, Minnesota

Schendel shared his experiences in a video that is available for viewing on the MCOTA website. A series of four videos on the site help tell the story of volunteer drivers' value. In another video, Jean Tiedt, who receives services from Community Action Respecting Elders, explains that for her, transportation means the ability to live on her own.

"They arrange rides for my doctor appointments, for my groceries, anything I need they always have a driver for me," said Tiedt, who also formed a friendship with her driver. "She's awesome, and I don't know what I would do without her."

By providing rides to medical appointments, grocery stores, church and social activities, volunteer driver programs also help reduce the isolation or loneliness that can accompany a loss of independence.

"The volunteer driver programs bridge the gap for older adults to remain connected to their community and necessary resources," said Lori Vrolson, executive director of the Central Minnesota Council on Aging, at the forum.

"Access to transportation has a direct impact on access to health care, and access to health care is a major determinant of overall health. The American Hospital Association estimates that 3.6 million people in the United States do not obtain essential medical care due to a lack of transportation and other transportation issues."

And concern continues to grow. In a 2017 MCOTA study, a large majority of providers indicated they did not have enough volunteers, with half cancelling trips because of volunteer shortages, said Vrolson, and COVID has only exacerbated the problem.

"Volunteer drivers are the backbone for so many communities, particularly in Greater Minnesota, and we need to support volunteer drivers," Doan said. "Demand is so high, and the supply is so low, that we need to throw all the supply we have at this problem in order to even move the needle to address some of the challenges and offerings that are out there in the world for seniors and people with disabilities who do not drive."

Promoting Solutions and Offering Best Practices

In another initiative to support volunteer drivers, MnDOT and MCOTA sponsored Minnesota's Road to Volunteer Drivers Virtual Forum Series, coordinated by the RTCCs in partnership with the Minnesota Volunteer Driver Coalition.



The series highlighted the current state of volunteer driver programs, examined key policy issues, explored research on volunteer drivers in rural Minnesota, offered volunteer driver recruitment tips and guidance on starting a volunteer driver program and provided training sessions on key topics for volunteer drivers.

With a total of 14 sessions, each live and recorded forum drew an average of 110 participants from nearly 300 registrants, who represented every Minnesota county, tribal nations in Minnesota and Montana, and other parts of the United States.

Many participants expressed appreciation for the information, particularly because of its usefulness in support of the services they provide. "The information was well organized and plainly stated," one participant shared, echoing the comments of several others. "It was really applicable to my rural community."



Viewing Series Recordings

The following series recordings are available for on-demand viewing and include captions and ASL interpretation.

Policy and Legislation

- [Current State and a Look into the Future of Volunteer Drivers \(Nov. 2020\)](#)
- [Policy Issues and Real-Life Stories \(Dec. 2020\)](#)

Nuts and Bolts of Volunteer Driver Programs

- [Volunteer Driver Recruitment and Promotion \(Jan. 2021\)](#)
- [How to Start a Volunteer Driver Program \(Feb. 2021\)](#)

Person-Centered, Cultural Diversity and Equity Training

- [Person-centered Practices and Disability Etiquette for Volunteer Drivers \(March 2021\)](#)
- [Cultural Diversity and Equity Training \(March 2021\)](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care Training \(April 2021\)](#)
- [Providing Community Education About People Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing \(April 2021\)](#)

Best Practices Training for Volunteer Drivers

- [Module 1 — Safety & Security \(May 2021\)](#)
- [Module 2 — Emergency Preparedness \(May 2021\)](#)
- [Module 3 — Passenger Assistance & Safety \(May 2021\)](#)
- [Module 4 — Dealing with Difficult Customers and Self Care \(June 2021\)](#)
- [Module 5 — Ethics and Boundaries \(June 2021\)](#)
- [Module 6 — Best Practices & Summary \(June 2021\)](#)

Volunteer driver program activities relate to MCOTA legislative duties 10, 13 and 20 by identifying barriers to volunteer driver programs and recommending steps, including legislation and advocacy, to address barriers such as liability and insurance issues.

GIS Mapping Provides Clearer Picture of Gaps in Transportation Access

When transportation providers serve a region, does that mean everyone can access rides? The answer may well be no.

For example, an RTCC may serve an entire county, but transportation services may only be provided within three miles of the county's largest city to maximize the number of trips. In other cases, trips may be available to communities, though not always on all days.

But data is playing a role in helping MCOTA and its partners better coordinate access to transportation throughout the state.

MnDOT GIS capabilities and MCOTA partnerships offer a winning combination when it comes to producing new data-based mapping that will show the gaps in transportation access, one important step in ultimately improving that access to Minnesotans who lack it.

"Transportation providers anecdotally may know of Minnesotans who can't find the rides they need but understanding the whole picture of transportation access is much more complex," said MCOTA executive director Tom Gottfried.

RTCCs and transportation providers know routes but managing all that data and information centrally and putting it into context presents a much larger task.

Enter MnDOT GIS. A system that manages, analyzes and maps all types of data, GIS connects data to a map, integrating location data — Minnesota communities, with descriptive data — where transportation providers go.

"There is a lot of data in Minnesota," Gottfried said. "GIS offers a database system that has the ability to take that data and identify where our problems are."

Ultimately the project will result in a graphic representation of current transportation route lines, visually showing the gaps and helping quantify current capacity limits in a way not possible before. As the first project

of its kind for Minnesota and one of the first in the nation, it represents a cutting-edge way to better understand the problems of transportation access in Minnesota.

“That understanding also makes it possible to figure out more workable and efficient solutions to meet those needs,” Gottfried said.

Currently, the GIS project has integrated more than 60 percent of the data — mostly data on public services. Collaboration with RTCC coordinators will help in collecting additional data, particularly from non-public providers. By next year, or possibly sooner, MnDOT hopes to produce the first comprehensive map of what is available now.

“Not only will this project help us in the short term, but its future impact is also highly important,” said Shelly Pflaum, program coordinator at the United Community Action Partnership in Marshall, Minnesota. “The more we understand about the reach of current routes throughout the state, the easier it will be to identify the path forward to efficiently and cost effectively reach all in need.”

Regional Coordination Progress

In Greater Minnesota, MCOTA works with local governments and organizations throughout the state to create and support Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils and the Metro Area Transit Coordination Assistance Projects. RTCCs and TCAPs include stakeholders and public members interested in improving mobility for those with limited transportation options such as older adults, people with disabilities, low-income individuals and veterans.

RTCCs and TCAPs build on the service delivery foundation of public transit systems, and layer on mobility management to expand service options and to provide transportation across service boundaries.

Each RTCC and TCAP has, or will have, a formalized coordination plan among providers and service agencies to achieve three outcomes:

1. Identify and reduce transportation gaps
2. Streamline access to transportation
3. Provide more transportation options

Figure 1: Map of Minnesota with RTCCs as of September 2021

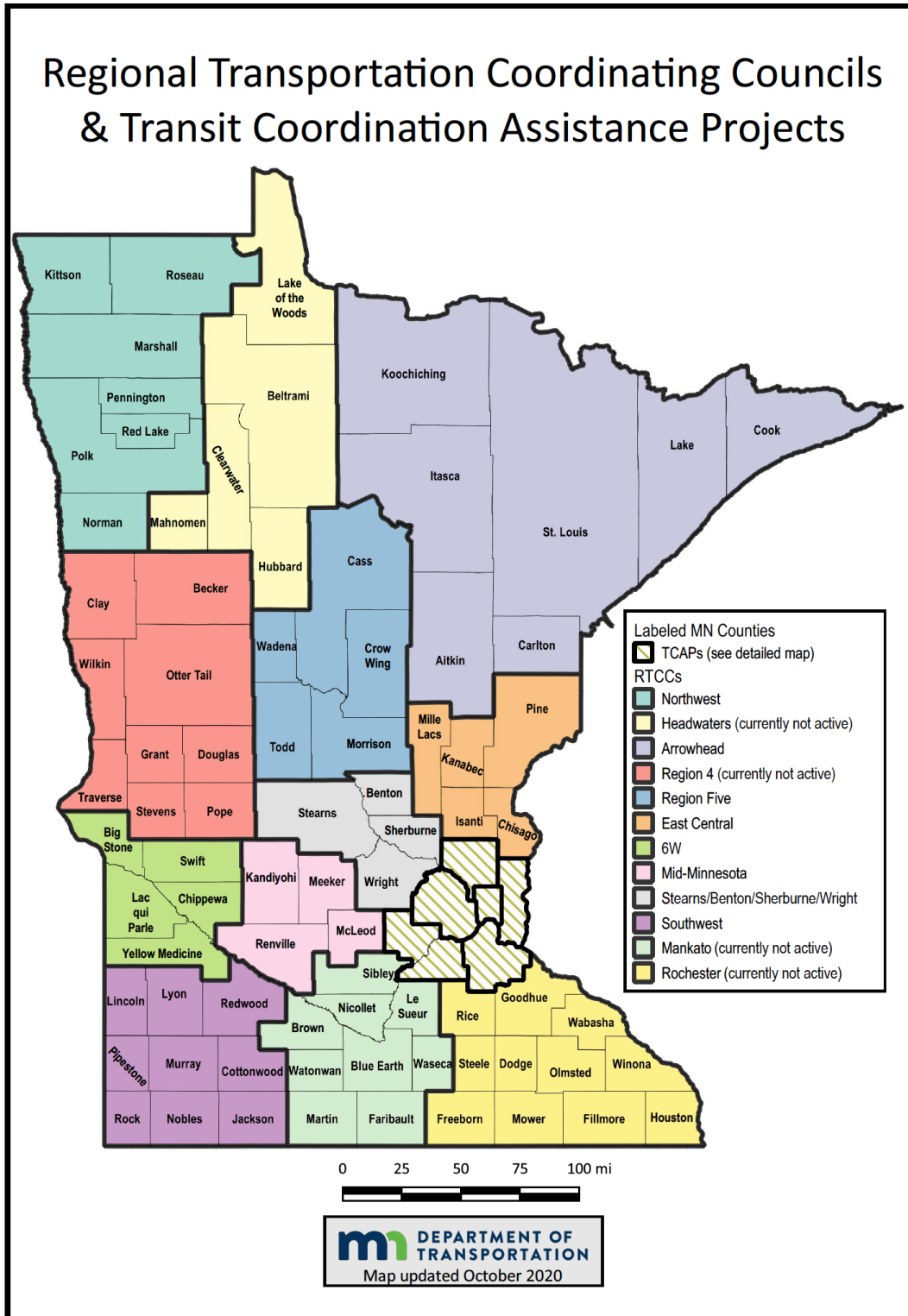


Figure 2: Map of Minnesota with Twin Cities Area Transit Coordination Assistance Programs (TCAPs) as of September 2021



Current Status of RTCCs as of July 1, 2021

Currently eight RTCCs are in the planning or implementation phases:

- Phase 1: Organizational Plan: Includes tasks identifying an entity to carry out the implementation of the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils. All RTCCs have completed Phase 1.
- Phase 2: Operational Implementation Plan: For applicants engaged in tasks outlined in Greater Minnesota regions. During this phase RTCCs formally establish councils, proceed with gaps analysis and create a transportation providers' inventory. Phase Two: Stearns, Benton, Sherburne and Wright RTCC and 6W RTCC
- Phase 3: Implementation of Comprehensive Work Plan: Continued stakeholder engagement which may involve development of committees. Publish, distribute transportation directory establish relationships with transportation providers, health care organizations and consumers. Identify and support collaborative efforts. Phase 3: Southwest RTCC
- Phase 4: Continue Implementation of Comprehensive Work Plan: To include focus on transportation guidance and consultation, vehicle sharing, private nonprofit and for-profit providers engagement, volunteer drivers programs, emergency preparedness facilitation and local human service transit coordination plans (FTA Section 5310). Phase 4: Arrowhead RTCC, Region Five RTCC, Northwest RTCC, East Central RTCC and Mid Minnesota RTCC

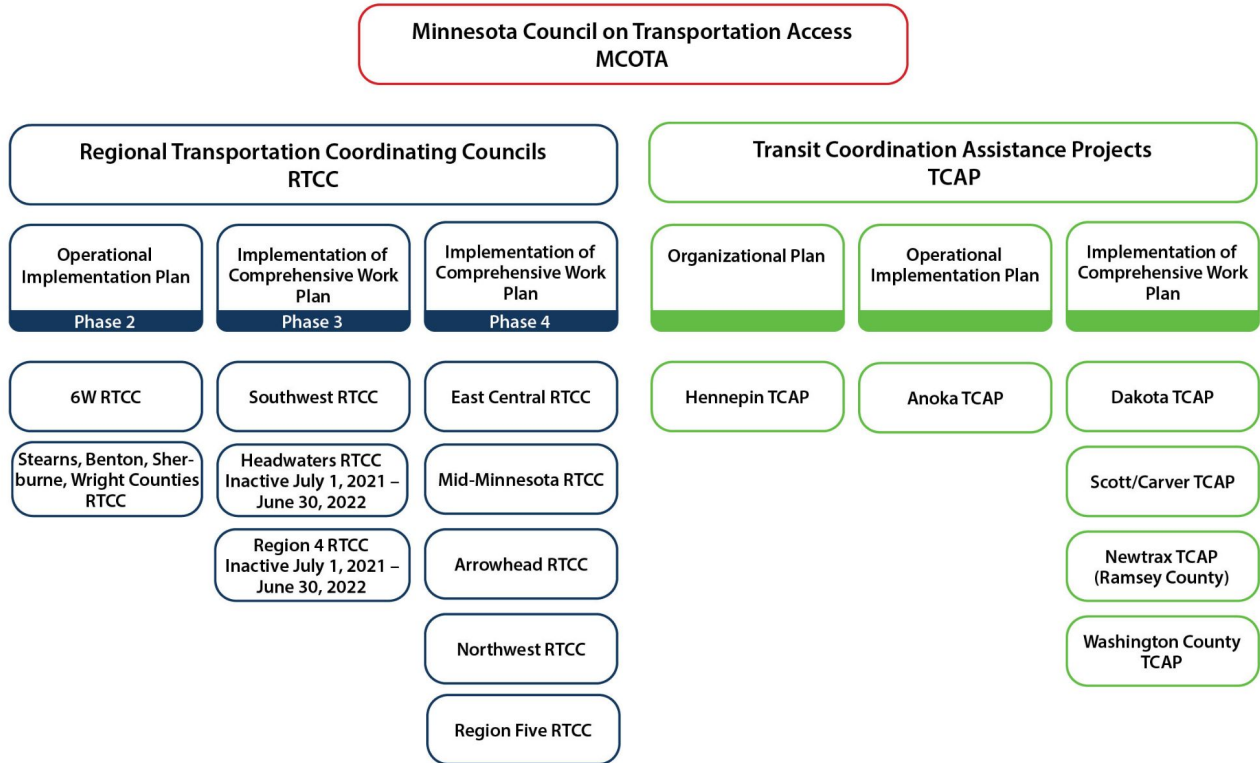
Current Status of TCAPs as of July 1, 2021

Currently six TCAPs are involved in the planning or implementation phases:

- Phase 1: Organizational Plan: Involves tasks including identifying an entity to carry out the implementation of transit coordination assistance projects through the planning process. One TCAP, Hennepin County, is in Phase 1.
- Phase 2: Operational Implementation Plan: For applicants who are working on the tasks in the metro area. During this phase TCAPs formally establish councils, proceed with gaps analysis and create a transportation providers' inventory. One TCAP, Anoka County, is in Phase 2.
- Phase 4: Continue Implementation of Comprehensive Work Plan: Four TCAPs are in Phase 4, Washington County, Dakota County, Carver/Scott Counties and Ramsey County/Newtrax.

Figure 3: Chart showing status of RTCCs and TCAPs as of September 1, 2021

Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils and Transit Coordination Assistance Projects
Phase Status as of September 1, 2021



Coordination and Collaboration: Making New Innovations Possible

The following highlights of RTCCs and TCAPs illustrate their innovative local partnerships and collaborations. Find links to all [regional transportation coordinating organizations in Minnesota](#) on the MCOTA website.

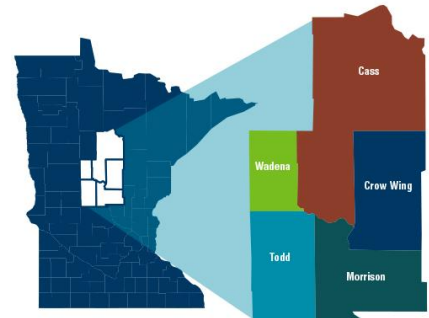
Region 5 RTCC: Promoting the Value of Volunteer Drivers and Regional Transportation Connections

The Region Five RTCC produced two new videos to help recruit volunteer drivers and increase awareness of regional transportation connections.

Stakeholders contributed to both video projects. “Stakeholder involvement was key in getting the right information in the videos since they have firsthand experience with both video topics,” said Matt Kallroos, regional development planner.

The [volunteer driver recruitment video](#) focuses on encouraging more people to either sign up or return to volunteer driving with the advance of COVID-19 vaccines. “The Region Five RTCC region is unique because of Cass County, which has no public transportation,” he said. “This is a major need in the region as volunteer driver programs are heavily leaned on.”

The [second video](#) looks at regional transportation connections and shows the ways community members in the region can make use of multiple transportation options to reach their destination. “This idea was seen as another step toward a Transportation Management Coordination Center by stakeholders,” Kallroos said.



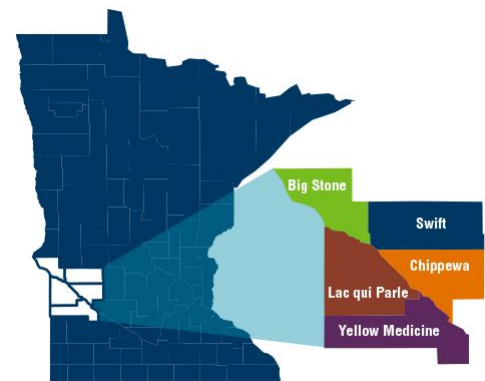
Region 6W RTCC: Building and Strengthening Partnerships in Rural Areas

To build partnerships with organizations in the region, Emily Castaneda, regional transportation coordinator, reached out to learn more about their services and operations, as well as their experiences with transportation.

She contacted many providers of transportation and community services to explain her role in the RTCC and learn more about their roles in their communities.

“To create new partnerships and maintain current ones, it is important to understand the various perspectives and individual needs of each entity,” Castaneda said. “Additionally, this contact encouraged interest and participation in the RTCC and has ensured that it is evolving in a direction that best serves their communities.”

“Another positive outcome has resulted from the formation of new partnerships: Relationships between once-competitive transit providers are now collaborative,” she said.



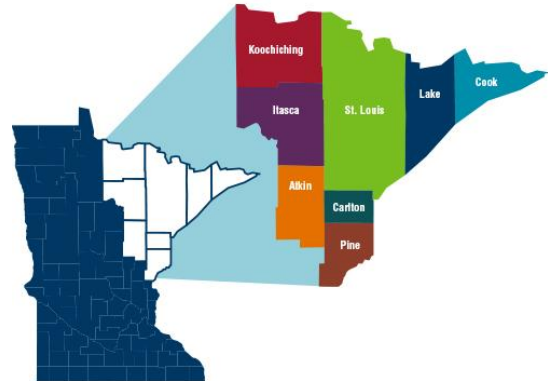
“RTCC participants are more aware that each transit provider brings unique services to the region that meet the varying needs of passengers.” The RTCC highlights these services in brochures and on its website to help educate passengers and requesting agencies on the region’s available transportation options.

“It also brings providers together, helping them to understand each other’s features and limitations, and to begin to collaborate on the larger objective of making sure passengers in the region have access to the transportation they need.”

Arrowhead RTCC: Bringing Stakeholders Together to Share and Respond

Arrowhead RTCC meetings provided a platform for traditional and non-traditional transportation stakeholders to share agency updates, challenges and resources. During the pandemic, meetings helped the participants to communicate best practices and resources for safety, rider trust and agency collaboration.

Thanks to its partnerships, the RTCC also shared vital information about transportation options with communities. It distributed its transportation provider directory to health care agencies in the region, helping them identify active transportation providers during the pandemic, as well as 2,000 copies of the RTCC’s *DTA How to Ride a Bus Guide* to agencies in the region.



A focus group with members from Arc Northland’s People First inspired the guide when they talked about their first experiences with transit and their thoughts on essential information for new transit riders. The DTA provided photos and general information on using their buses.

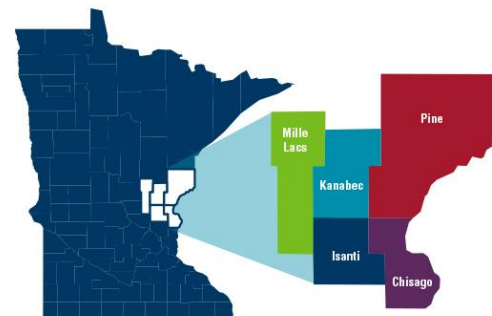
In another initiative to communicate the region’s transportation options, Arrowhead RTCC also launched a website — www.arrowheadrtcc.org — that includes a comprehensive transportation provider directory, transportation resources, information on volunteer drivers, park-and-ride locations and active transportation resources.

East Central RTCC: Improving Access Through Information

Before Minnesotans can access transportation, they need access to information about transportation options.

To make that task easier, the East Central Regional Transportation Coordinating Council, which covers the counties of Pine, Isanti, Chisago, Kanabec and Mille Lacs, is taking a number of steps.

The ECRTCC worked with a local marketing professional to develop a visual identity that helps community members quickly recognize the council. “The look is informative, direct, unique, fun, simple and catchy,” said Karen Onan of the ECRTCC. “Whoever we correspond



with, whether emails, letters or reports, wherever we are seen as ECRTCC in public, whether county fairs, expos or conferences, we use our marketing tools.”

The ECRTCC also launched a new web portal — EastCentralTransit.com — that ECRTCC staff can easily update. “It’s a simple name, which makes finding information about our region’s traveling opportunities intuitive,” Onan said.

Other efforts to reach out to the region’s population include broadcasting on a popular regional radio station, promoting volunteer driver programs and sharing the web portal for ease in finding transportation information.

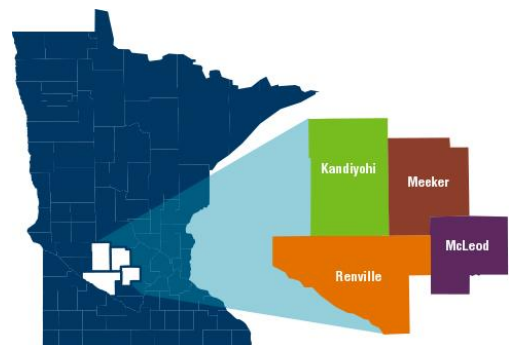
In addition, the radio station offers the ECRTCC 15-minute interviews every other Friday at 8:45 AM with a local radio celebrity. “During the interviews, we share relevant information about the ECRTCC and the statewide RTCCs,” she said, “and to add more interest, we include guests who provide insight from their perspective on transportation.”

Interviews featured include the region’s three public transit managers or directors (Arrowhead Transit, Timber Trails Transit and Tri-CAP Transit), the community liaison for Jefferson Lines, the transit manager for Groome Airport Transportation, the region’s RTCC chair who also is the executive director of PHASE/Industries (DT & H provider), the region’s veteran service providers, Ken Bueller of the Northern Lights Express (NLX) Advisory Board, and Tom Gottfried, MCOTA executive director, and others.

“We are so excited about the future of transportation in Minnesota,” Onan said. “Our goal in marketing is to infect others with our enthusiasm!”

Mid-Minnesota RTCC: Launching a Campaign to Attract Volunteer Drivers

Sharing the benefits of volunteer driving offers another way to help grow the pool of the state’s volunteer drivers. Terry Smith, transportation coordinator for the Mid-Minnesota Rural Transportation Coordinating Council, developed two multimedia campaigns to promote the advantages of driving occupations and the opportunity to register for a local volunteer driver program.



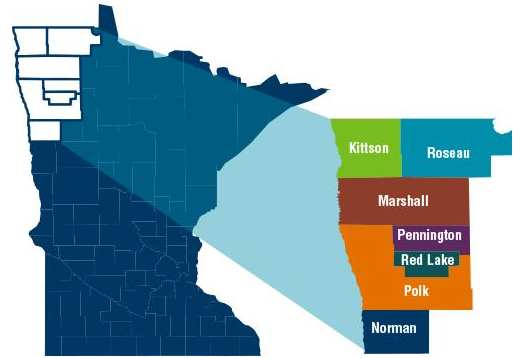
He also took his message to the region’s largest radio broadcast company, as well as to smaller AM stations, Minnesota Public Radio and local newspapers. The ads direct listeners and readers to the council’s Ride Resources web page.

Smith also raises awareness in other ways, including a front-page story in the region’s largest newspaper, a report on a local public television station, and presentations. When contacted, he screens potential volunteers for locations and interests and then directs them to an appropriate service provider.

Northwest RTCC: Understanding Barriers

By attending meetings of the Alliance for Mental Health Initiative, Lynnell Simonson Popowski learns more about the transportation barriers that community members in the seven-county region face. The alliance brings together the directors of social services and other providers of mental health services under the direction of Shannon Abrahamson of Alumina, formerly Northwest Mental Health Center.

The alliance was planning an event that involved a 5K walk/run, E-Race the Stigma, and speakers for September Suicide Prevention and Awareness month. The event ended at 9 PM, but buses quit running at 8:30 PM.



“I brought the need to Tri-Valley Transportation Program contact, Marcia Haglund, who offered to keep the buses running an extra hour to be sure people could get home from the event,” said Simonson Popowski, regional transportation coordinator, Northwest Regional Development Commission. “The organization then offered to provide the rides to and from the event, for free. This benefit was advertised throughout the area with the marketing materials.”

When it appeared no one took advantage of the offer, it prompted an important discussion about the barriers that prevent those who most need to participate from using public transit.

“We talked about the need for travel training and the options currently available through Tri-Valley Transit,” she said. “I found that even though this might look like a less-than-successful effort, we used it as a learning opportunity. I think the group was pleased that we could dig deeper into the real needs of their clients and provide resources they did not know were available. We will be arranging travel training opportunities in each county this year and tracking any new transit riders by providing them with a special bus pass.”

Anoka County TCAP: Identifying Current and Future Transit Needs

The Anoka County Transit Unit worked with a consultant to study current and future transit needs in the county. The Transit Needs Study involved an analysis of existing demographic and transportation system data, as well as input from transit consumers and providers. The study focused on people who rely on transit the most, such as older adults and people with disabilities.

Its goals included improving coordination among transportation providers, consumers and other stakeholders, increasing the efficiency of services delivered, saving money by reducing duplication of services and better addressing the needs of current and future transit users.

The study identified eight recommendations and next steps, said Mark Schermerhorn, transit planning assistant for Anoka County. The county initially will focus on the recommendations that call for establishing goals and objectives for the Anoka County Transit Unit, improving internal and external coordination with Human Service and Metro Transit staff and expanding outreach and travel training efforts.

Dakota County TCAP: Expanding the Partnership with Lyft to Reduce Barriers

Lack of transportation has long been a barrier for Dakota County residents with disabilities and older adults in preventing them from getting where they need and want to go.

“Limited days and hours of service, general service areas, various eligibility requirements, and the necessity for significant pre-planning make the current transportation options difficult for individuals getting around the region,” said Robyn Bernardy, transportation coordinator for Dakota County Social Services.



A partnership that began in March 2019 is helping reduce those barriers.

In 2021, Dakota County and Lyft continued their collaboration to offer another transportation option for those receiving case management services through the county. Home and Community Based Service Waivers, such as brain injury, CADI and DD waivers, and AC/EW, provide transportation as a billable service. Under this program, the county bills the individual’s Medicaid waiver directly for the total monthly amount of the individual’s Lyft services.

The program launched with 23 riders, and that number has increased each month. “In July 2021, more than 750 individuals were a part of the program,” Bernardy said. “Riders take on average 19 rides each month to work, and community access locations like the grocery store, friends’ homes and the gym.”

Feedback from riders has been overwhelmingly positive, she said, with 81 percent of riders reporting riding with Lyft has reduced their transportation barriers. In May 2021, Dakota County signed a new contract with Lyft, which will allow for wheelchair accessible vehicles to be a part of the Lyft platform. “This option allows individuals who use mobility devices the same spontaneous travel abilities as individuals who don’t use mobility devices and will ensure more equitable transportation service,” she said.

In addition to the Lyft Program for individuals with disabilities and older adults, Dakota County also uses Lyft services in other ways — Lyft Concierge for Jail Releases when other transportation isn’t available and transportation for individuals transitioning out of shelter, for example. “Overall, the partnership with Lyft has diminished transportation barriers that Dakota County residents have faced,” Bernardy said.

Scott County TCAP: Introducing ‘Hop Scott!’ from SmartLink

The SmartLink Mobility Management team recognized the need for additional transportation options in Scott County’s more rural communities for older adults and the disabled and developed a new transit service option — Hop Scott! — as a result.



A Live Well at Home grant through MDH funded community vans to transport seniors and/or disabled community members, helping them remain in their homes longer.

“Often, transportation is a barrier for older adults or those with disabilities who can no longer drive, aren’t comfortable driving, or who don’t have the ability to drive themselves,” said Dakota County mobility management supervisor Alan Herrmann. “Accessing medical appointments, essential groceries and goods, social gatherings, and other appointments is needed for these individuals to stay active and engaged. Using volunteer drivers in these accessible minivans also makes the service more affordable and sustainable.”

In anticipation of launching the program, the team began to recruit volunteer drivers using print ads, radio ads and social media to create awareness of the program and call for volunteers. “The response to our appeal for ‘hometown heroes’ was enthusiastic with many inquiries and 11 individuals signing on to become volunteer drivers,” Herrmann said. “With the addition of Hop Scott and the concept of using volunteer drivers based in these smaller towns in Scott County, we hope to add to a meaningful quality of life that results in building and maintaining independence for many individuals where transportation had previously been a challenge.”

Washington County Community Services and Public Health Departments: Collaborating for the Well-Being of Families

What began as a pilot to support the well-being of families has turned into a program that has expanded its reach to serve others in need.

Pre-COVID, Washington County residents with children in child protection, those receiving adult mental health services, and others often struggled to attend court hearings, to strengthen their bonds with children in foster care, and to participate in recovery services. County social workers often provided transportation, taking time away from supporting others in their caseloads.

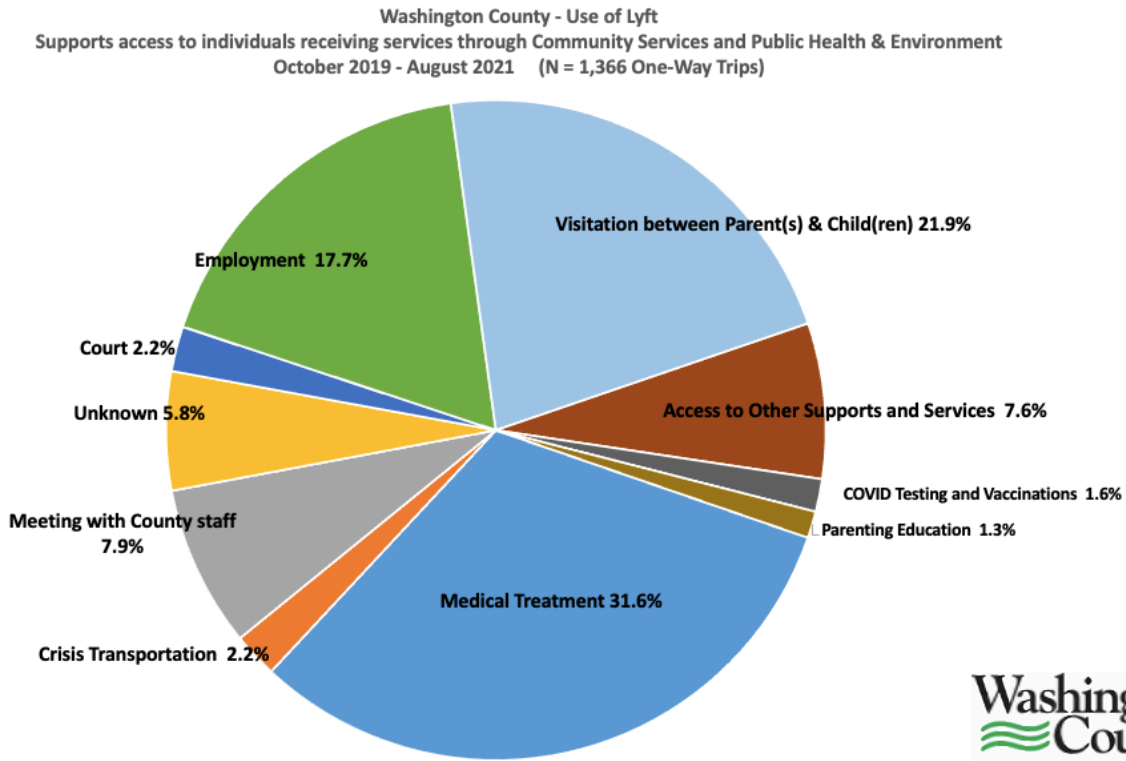
Launched in October 2019, the pilot involved using Lyft to change that situation. As part of the pilot, social workers could choose to use Lyft or another alternative or drive residents. They selected Lyft for 54 rides through December 2019 at an average cost of \$20.53.

“Many of these initial trips were used to link non-custodial parents to their children and/or to parenting education classes, both effective interventions that support the well-being of families,” said Sheila Holbrook-White, mobility manager for Washington County. “Social workers and passengers reported significant satisfaction with the ease of setting up trips, the quality of the ride and the relative spontaneity that Lyft afforded.”

In January 2020, the pilot-now-program expanded substantially with the addition of Adult Mental Health, Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Crisis Response Services, Shelter and Workforce Development staff. Seeking to connect individuals to COVID testing and vaccination, the County’s Public Health and Environment Department joined the program in 2021. Since its initial soft launch, authorized county staff have deployed Lyft for an additional 1,282 trips.

Statistics show the diversity in trips. Medical treatment, including access to behavioral health services, substance use disorder treatment and recovery services, and for parents to accompany their non-custodial children to doctor’s visits, was the main reason for most trips. Visitation between parent(s) and children comprised one in five trips (21.9%). One in six trips (17%) helped residents with employment-related transportation challenges, such as cars breaking down or locations not easily accessible through public transportation.

“This approach has resulted in significant benefits to the county and its residents,” Holbrook-White said. Between October 2019 and August 2021, social workers were able to divert 581 hours of what would have



been driving time — a diversion that yielded \$26,139 in value-added services to individuals, families and the county.

“Building on these promising outputs, Washington County anticipates expanding the Lyft program in an ongoing collaboration with Public Health and Environment staff in late 2021,” Holbrook-White said.

Olmstead Plan Progress Updates — [will update or delete]

Minnesota's Olmstead Plan greatly influences the work of MCOTA, including the development of regional coordination organizations, which are important mechanisms for advancing Olmstead's goals. MCOTA was updated about the progress on implementation, goals and measures of the Olmstead Plan at each meeting.

The Olmstead Plan was revised with public comment and listening sessions held around the state. All goals were on track to being met. MnDOT's infrastructure goals were met and exceeded while MnDOT's two transit-related measures were anticipated to be met.

1. **Number of annual service hours.** The goal is 1.7 million annual service hours in Greater Minnesota by 2025. The current level is 1,444,652 hours, an increase of 242,652 from the baseline.
2. **Transit systems on-time performance.** The goal is for all transit systems statewide to be at a 90 percent or greater on-time performance. For 2017, Greater Minnesota transit systems' on-time performance was 78 percent, an increase of 2 percent from the baseline.

This activity fulfills some of the MCOTA legislative duties in 1-11, 13, 14, 16, 19 and 20 by identifying stakeholders that provide services for the transit public, seeking their input about appropriate strategies, identifying best practices, recommending statewide objectives, identifying barriers and ways to eliminate barriers and advocating for implementation of recommendations to enhance coordination throughout the state.

Stakeholder Communications

Website

MCOTA, led by the Communications work team, refreshed the design, content and back-end functionality of the CoordinateMNTransit.org website, including highlighting the each of the RTCCs and TCAPs.

Stakeholder Newsletter

MCOTA also continued to produce a quarterly email newsletter that began in 2017 in response to requests from stakeholders.

The distribution list includes people who were invited to, or attended the workshops, transit stakeholders and those who self-register on the CoordinateMNTransit.org website.

The newsletter included updates from the Volunteer Driver Forum series, new resources, highlights from individual RTCCs and TCAPs, and upcoming events. The readership statistics are shown in Table 2.



Table 2: MCOTA newsletter readership statistics

| | October 2020 | December 2020 | March 2021 | June 2021 |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Recipients | 532 | 573 | 710 | 712 |
| Open rate | 23.3% | 19.2% | 20.1% | 21.0% |
| Unique click-through rate | 6.1% | 3.1% | 2.3% | 4.6% |

These communications tasks relate to MCOTA’s first legislative duty of sharing information with stakeholders on state coordination efforts.

2022 Priorities

Looking forward, MCOTA expects that the continued presence of COVID-19 will establish a new normal for agencies and transit organizations, prompting a need to be flexible, proactive and to plan for a range of scenarios. MCOTA's structure facilitates responsiveness and flexibility in coordinating state and local agencies to provide access to services and goods, especially medical services, jobs and food.

New Initiatives

At MCOTA's Senior Leadership Meeting held on October 1, 2021, members and senior leaders identified and ranked their top transportation challenges and opportunities, which fell into six themes, listed in Table 3. MCOTA will lead a process to determine ways to address these challenges, which may include elevating particular issues to other agencies or groups, and will identify which ones for MCOTA to address in its 2022-23 work plan. See Appendix C for the full list of challenges and opportunities under each theme.

Table 3: Top Challenges and Opportunities, as ranked by MCOTA senior leaders and members

| Rank | Theme |
|------|---|
| 1 | Transportation accessibility and availability |
| 2 | Driver shortages |
| 3 | Public transit |
| 4 | Legal, regulatory or policy barriers |
| 5 | Insurance |
| 6 | Climate change |

See Appendix C for a list of all suggested challenges and opportunities grouped by theme.

Continued Initiatives

Specific initiatives MCOTA intends to continue in 2022 include the following:

- Statewide GIS mapping of public transit providers, and adding non-public transportation providers
- Develop FTA Section 5310 Local Human Services Transit Coordination Plans in Greater Minnesota
- Volunteer driver program work team:
 - Advocate for legislation to strengthen volunteer driver programs
 - Strengthen and continue educational and networking opportunities
 - Finalize and distribute a volunteer driver fact sheet or brochure

- Communications work team:
 - Publish stakeholder newsletter
 - Make ongoing content updates to the [CoordinateMNTransit.org website](https://CoordinateMNTransit.org)
 - Create a resource on the website with materials relevant to RTCC and TCAP stakeholders
 - Guide the development of the annual legislative report
 - Update member guide
- Operations work team:
 - Identify and advocate for legislation to enhance transportation coordination and access
 - Identify research to conduct and best practices to implement throughout the state.
 - Ongoing development of performance measures for RTCCs and TCAPs and MCOTA

Conclusion

The year 2021 presented significant challenges. The impact of the pandemic continued, and, thanks to the collaboration that MCOTA supports, members agencies, transit providers, RTCCs, and TCAPs innovated, pivoted and responded to quickly changing needs. They transported essential workers, offered rides to community members for COVID-19 testing, COVID-19 treatment and the return home following hospitalization for COVID-19, and delivered food to those in need. MCOTA, the Volunteer Driver Coalition, other organizations and individuals also advocated for legislation to reduce some of the barriers that volunteer drivers face. That legislation passed in 2021.

All these activities demonstrate, first, the importance of transportation access for all Minnesotans and, second, the power of a partnerships and coordinated networks in improving that access for all Minnesotans.

Even with these successes, the reality is that work remains to be done.

Looking forward to 2022, MCOTA will build on these efforts by addressing the most pressing concerns to improve transportation access for all Minnesotans. The state faces driver shortages in many areas, and encouraging the approval of additional legislation to increase mileage reimbursement and reduce the insurance burden, as well as exploring new ways to increase the number of drivers, are important next steps.

Other key issues include identifying funding for rural transportation and diversifying funding options for transit operations; looking at strategies to reduce transportation barriers for people who need to access health care and other essential needs, including just-in-time service; and examining the legal, regulatory, or policy barriers that hinder coordination.

While the challenges are many, MCOTA's foundation of collaboration makes it possible to pursue solutions, enhance efficiencies and better meet the transportation needs of all Minnesotans.

Appendix A: MCOTA Members During 2021

Tim Henkel, Chair
Minnesota Department of Transportation

Diogo Reis, Vice Chair
Minnesota Department of Human Services

At-Large Representative: Victoria Nill
Minnesota Department of Transportation

Rachel Dame (since September 2021)
Office of the Governor

Alexis Donath (March 2021 through August 2021)
Office of the Governor

Suzanne Sobotka (through February 2021)
Office of the Governor

David Fenley
Minnesota State Council on Disability

Gerri Sutton
Metropolitan Council

John Doan
Minnesota Board on Aging

Peter Brickwedde
Minnesota Department of Commerce

Kelly Garvey
Minnesota Department of Education

Jodi Yanda
Minnesota Department of Employment and
Economic Development

Susan Bishop
Minnesota Department of Health

Rolando Sotolongo
Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs

Nick Lardinois (since September 2021)
Minnesota Management and Budget

Elizabeth Connor (May 2021 through August 2021)
Minnesota Management and Budget

Shawn Kremer (through May 2021)
Minnesota Management and Budget

Tiffany Collins
Minnesota Public Transit Association

Appendix B: MCOTA Legislative Duties and Accomplishments Since Inception

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2011-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #1 |
| Compile information on existing transportation alternatives for the transit public and serve as a clearinghouse for information on services, funding sources, innovations and coordination efforts. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minnesota coordination website • Economic cost-benefit studies • Transportation section of Minnesotahelp.info • NEMT Advisory Committee support • NEMT Coordination Study • Local Transit Coordination Case Studies • Primer of funding sources for “transit public” in Minnesota • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Study of economic benefits of Minnesota volunteer driver programs • Study of public-private partnerships in transit • Periodic stakeholder e-mail communication • Volunteer Driver Program Forum • Study on best practices in youth employment transportation |

| Year(s) |
|--|
| 2011-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #2 |
| Identify best practices and strategies that have been successful in Minnesota and in other states for coordination of local, regional, state and federal funding and services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEMT Advisory Committee support • NEMT Coordination Study • Vehicle-sharing Study • Successful Local Transit Coordination Case Studies • Minnesota mobility management case studies • Strategic planning • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Volunteer transportation programs inventory and survey • Study of economic benefits of Minnesota volunteer driver programs • Study of public-private partnerships in transit • Volunteer Driver Program Forum • Study on best practices in youth employment transportation |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2012-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #3 |
| Recommend statewide objectives for providing public transportation services for the transit public. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEMT Advisory Committee support • NEMT Coordination Study • Definition of coordination • Strategic planning • Olmstead Plan goals and measures • Homelessness and transportation services • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2011-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #4 |
| Identify barriers prohibiting coordination and accessibility of public transportation services and aggressively pursue the elimination of those barriers. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEMT Advisory Committee support • NEMT Study • Synthesis of 2011 Greater MN regional transportation coordination plans • Planning guidance for the 2011 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plans in Minnesota • Maps of human service transportation providers' areas of service in MN • Strategic planning • Olmstead Plan goals and measures • Homelessness and transportation services • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Ways to increase vehicle sharing in Minnesota • Study of public-private partnerships in transit • Study on best practices in youth employment transportation |

| Year(s) |
|--|
| 2011-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #5 |
| Recommend policies and procedures for coordinating local, regional, state, and federal funding and services for the transit public. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis of 2011 Greater MN regional transportation coordination plans • Successful Local Transit Coordination Case Studies • Primer of funding sources for "transit public" in Minnesota • Strategic planning • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Study of public-private partnerships in transit |

| |
|---|
| Year(s) |
| 2011, 2014-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #6 |
| Identify stakeholders in providing services for the transit public and seek input from them concerning barriers and appropriate strategies. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis of 2011 Greater MN regional transportation coordination plans • Participation in the MN State Council on Disability’s annual Town Hall Mtg. • Data collection and analysis of vehicle sharing • Strategic planning • Homelessness and transportation services • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Ways to increase vehicle sharing in Minnesota • Volunteer transportation programs inventory and survey |

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| Year(s) |
| 2011-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #7 |
| Recommend guidelines for developing transportation coordination plans throughout the state. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis of 2011 Greater MN regional transportation coordination plans • Planning guidance for the 2011 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plans in Minnesota • Successful Local Transit Coordination case studies • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

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| Year(s) |
| None of the years between 2011-2021 |
| Legislative Duty #8 |
| Encourage all state agencies participating in the council to purchase trips within the coordinated system. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This model of centralized purchasing is not in place in Minnesota. |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2011-2012, 2014-2021 |
| Legislative Duty #9 |
| Facilitate the creation and operation of transportation brokerages to match riders to the appropriate service, promote shared dispatching, compile and disseminate information on transportation options, and promote regional communication. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility management webinars • Planning guidance for the 2011 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plans in Minnesota • Successful Local Transit Coordination case studies • Minnesota mobility management case studies • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2011, 2015-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #10 |
| Encourage volunteer driver programs and recommend legislation to address liability and insurance issues. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful local transit coordination case studies • A survey and selected case studies of volunteer driver programs in MN, including faith-based programs • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Volunteer transportation programs inventory and survey • Study of economic benefits of Minnesota volunteer driver programs • Volunteer driver insurance and reimbursement issues and education • Volunteer Driver Program Forum • Volunteer Driver Program resolution, brochure |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2016-2021, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #11 |
| Recommend minimum performance standards for delivery of services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|--|
| None of the years between 2011-2021 |
| Legislative Duty #12 |
| Identify methods to eliminate fraud and abuse in special transportation services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be addressed in future work plans |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2013, 2015-2021 expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #13 |
| Develop a standard method for addressing liability insurance requirements for transportation services purchased, provided, or coordinated. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vehicle-sharing Study RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance Ways to increase vehicle sharing in Minnesota Volunteer driver insurance and reimbursement issues and education Volunteer Driver Program resolution, brochure |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2011-2012 |
| Legislative Duty #14 |
| Design and develop a contracting template for providing coordinated transportation services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of contract template RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|--|
| 2011, 2014-2021 expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #15 |
| Recommend an interagency uniform contracting and billing and accounting system for providing coordinated transportation services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration on development of a Unified Transit Data Center pilot project in Scott and Carver counties • Common standards for financial records • RTCC organizing and implementation |

| Year(s) |
|--|
| 2012-2021 expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #16 |
| Encourage the design and development of training programs for coordinated transportation services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEMT Advisory Committee support • NEMT Study • Mobility management webinars • Minnesota mobility management case studies • Minnesota Mobility Management Handbook • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2016, expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #17 |
| Encourage the use of public school transportation vehicles for the transit public. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|--|
| 2014-2015 expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #18 |
| Develop an allocation methodology that equitably distributes transportation funds to compensate units of government and all entities that provide coordinated transportation services. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common standards for financial records • RTCC organizing and implementation |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2013, 2015, 2016 expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #19 |
| Identify policies and necessary legislation to facilitate vehicle sharing. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vehicle-sharing study • Data collection and analysis of vehicle sharing • Maps of human service transportation providers' areas of service in Minnesota • Outreach to providers about options and benefits of vehicle sharing • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance |

| Year(s) |
|---|
| 2012-2021 expect to continue the Supporting Activities in 2022 |
| Legislative Duty #20 |
| Advocate aggressively for eliminating barriers to coordination, implementing coordination strategies, enacting necessary legislation, and appropriating resources to achieve the council's objectives. |
| Supporting Activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEMT Advisory Committee support • Transportation section of Minnesotahelp.info • Primer of funding sources for "transit public" in Minnesota • Strategic planning • RTCC development, stakeholder engagement, guidance and website assistance • Volunteer driver insurance and reimbursement issues and education • Volunteer Driver Program resolution, brochure |

Appendix C: Top Challenges and Opportunities of Members

10/01/2021 MCOTA Senior Leadership Meeting: Top Challenges and Opportunities, as ranked by senior leaders and members

#1 Theme: Transportation accessibility and availability

1. **Sufficient and affordable transportation** throughout the state (DHS, MDVA)
2. Remove transportation barriers for people to **access health care and other essential needs** (social, groceries) that contribute to well-being (DHS, MDH)
 - MCOTA's role: Encourage state agencies that fund transportation for Minnesotans to offer flexible transportation funding options. i.e., Dakota County developing contract with Lyft to transport people with disabilities to and from the workplace. (DEED)
3. Remove barriers to enable **safe and accessible pedestrian facilities** for all users (MDH)
 - Greater compliance with ADA requirements for bus stops is needed
4. **Buy-in at all levels of government** that **ADA compliance AND accessibility and usability** are **essential** for all projects, programs & services, including requiring that Transportation Network Companies such as **Lyft and Uber offer accessible vehicles and be accessible** for people with disabilities. (MCD, MDVA)
5. Ease of connecting to rides for "**just-in-time service**" (MDH)
6. **Equity initiative**: potential state-wide adoption of [Transit Assistance Program \(TAP\)](#) modeled after the Council's program. (Met Council)
7. **Waiver Transportation Pilot** (Met Council)

#2 Theme: Driver shortages

1. **Driver shortages** for public transit and other transportation (Met Council)
2. We need more **volunteer drivers** due to fewer available people and increasing demand for senior transportation, including wheelchair accessibility. (Bd on Aging, MDVA)
 - MCOTA's role: MPTA would like MCOTA and MnDOT to carry the lead on the Volunteer Driver Program. Specifically, we are requesting that your federal liaison work directly with congressional staff with hopes of raising the IRS charitable mileage reimbursement rate to match the federal business rate.
3. **Low mileage reimbursement rate** and tax liabilities are barriers for **volunteer drivers**. (Bd on Aging, MPTA)
 - MCOTA's role: MPTA would like MCOTA and MnDOT to carry the lead on the Volunteer Driver Program. Specifically, we are requesting that your federal liaison work directly with congressional staff with hopes of raising the IRS charitable mileage reimbursement rate to match the federal business rate.
4. **School bus driver shortage** (Education)
5. **Limited/costly insurance** is a barrier for **volunteer drivers**. (Bd on Aging)

- MCOTA's role: Carry the lead on the Volunteer Driver Program. Specifically, working on reducing insurance rates for volunteer drivers and volunteer driver programs.

#3 Theme: Public transit

1. **Additional funding and diversification of funding sources for rural transportation** (MPTA)
2. Rebuild **passenger confidence in safety** of transit service in the pandemic environment. (MnDOT)
3. Change in 5310 recipients' services require smaller vehicles to be flexible and responsive to serve more community-based jobs and bring more effective services to customers. Change program to enable smaller vehicles. (MnDOT)

#4 Theme: Legal, regulatory or policy barriers

1. Challenge with **long-term resource capacity** to support MCOTA, RTCC and TCAP programs (MnDOT)
2. Transportation providers serve Minnesotans in multiple programs and must meet **duplicative standards**. (DHS)
3. Service collaborations face **legal, regulatory or policy barriers** that make it very complex and difficult to coordinate. (MnDOT)
4. **Inability to share data** between state agencies is a barrier to collaboration and coordination. (Met Council)
5. In partnering with multiple state agencies and counties to help people with employment, **each has distinctions in eligibility and methods**. (DEED)

#5 Theme: Insurance

1. **Limited/costly insurance** is a barrier for **volunteer drivers**. (Bd on Aging)
2. Opportunities and challenges with automobile **insurance** in an **evolving personal transportation environment** (Commerce)

#6 Theme: Climate change

1. **Climate resiliency and adaptation** will impact transportation and transit choices and options such as electric vehicles. (Commerce)