

United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

(202) 224-5364

April 26, 2023

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We write concerning access to rural and tribal transit services for older adults and people with disabilities. In 2021, President Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA),¹ which authorized up to \$108 billion for public transportation through new and existing programs.² Evidence suggests there may be a particular need to support transit in rural and tribal communities. Roughly one quarter of all older adults live in rural areas, and rural communities have higher incidences of people with disabilities.³ Older adults and people with disabilities are more reliant on public transportation to socialize, shop, and access critical services, such as health care. We seek your assistance to understand how rural and tribal communities are expanding access to transit for those populations, and the challenges they face to doing so.

Demographic and geographic realities highlight the need for rural and tribal transit. Over the past four decades, the population of older adults has increased disproportionately in rural areas compared to urban areas.⁴ The vast majority of older adults wish to age in place, yet they typically outlive their ability to drive.⁵ Rural counties, meanwhile, have the highest incidences of

¹ PL 117-58.

² “Bipartisan Infrastructure Law,” Federal Transit Administration, last updated June 7, 2022 [hereinafter “FTA Infrastructure Law Website”], <https://www.transit.dot.gov/BIL>.

³ “Mobility & Aging in Rural America: The Role for Innovation,” Grantmakers in Aging, 2018, at 2 [hereinafter “Mobility & Aging”], https://www.giaging.org/documents/180509_GIA_Rural_Mobility_Funding_Guide_FF.pdf; Jeremy Mattson and Dilip Mistry, “Rural Transit Fact Book 2022,” North Dakota State University, Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute, April 2022, at 12 [hereinafter “Rural Transit Fact Book”], <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/surtcom22-11.pdf>.

⁴ United States Census Bureau, *The Older Population in Rural America: 2012–2016, American Community Survey Reports*, Amy Symens Smith and Edward Trevelyan, ACS-42, (September 2019), at 2, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/acs/acs-41.pdf>. For data up to 2021, see “American Community Survey: S010 Age and Sex,” United States Census Bureau, last accessed March 9, 2023, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=age%20rural&g=0100043US&tid=ACSST1Y2021.S0101>.

⁵ *Improving Transportation Options in Rural States and Tribal Areas Under MAP-21, Before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs*, 113th Congress, at 47, 2013, statement of Sarah Jennings, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg80696/pdf/CHRG-113shrg80696.pdf>; Daniel J. Foley, Harley K. Heimovitz, Jack M. Guralnik, and Dwight B. Brock, “Driving Life Expectancy of Persons Aged 70 Years and Older in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 92, 8 (August 2002), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447231/>.

people with disabilities in the United States.⁶ Rural transit that is accessible for older adults and people with disabilities can therefore provide a vital link for maintaining the mobility of those populations.

Without transportation options, older adults in rural and tribal communities may not receive medical care and are at risk of social isolation, depression, and malnutrition.⁷ For example, roughly 15 percent of tribal members must travel over 100 miles to access basic services, making transit essential for older American Indians and American Indians with disabilities who cannot drive.⁸ Likewise, people with disabilities in rural communities view health care and other services as less accessible compared to their urban counterparts.⁹

In light of those facts, it is unsurprising that many rural and tribal communities are seeking to expand their transit services. One Pennsylvania transit service has implemented micro transit that can be used via an online app, or by calling in for service.¹⁰ A tribal transit service in Arizona, meanwhile, told Congress in 2019 that it would like to add more routes, but that it was challenged by the funding system.¹¹ Transit providers also are interested in developing “same day” shared ride services for older adults and people with disabilities. This approach could help people with disabilities, as they will often schedule a trip when they feel healthy, only to cancel when they feel ill the day of the trip.¹² Other states have expressed a similar need for expanded access to rural transit services. In Georgia, for example, annual investments of \$158 million are needed to meet the state’s rural transit demand and eliminate an annual unmet rural trip need of 5.8 million trips.¹³ It is important to understand how federal policy can support these local attempts to expand and innovate.

The IIJA increased funding for rural transit to more than \$4.58 billion through the Rural Area Formula Grants program.¹⁴ That includes increased funding for the Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Program and the Appalachian Development Public Transportation

⁶ *Supra*, note 3, Rural Transit Fact Book, at 12-13.

⁷ *Supra*, note 3, Mobility & Aging, at 2.

⁸ *Tribal Transportation: Paving the Way for Jobs, Infrastructure, and Safety in Native Communities*, Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, 112th Congress, at 26, 2011, statement of Jefferson Keel, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg73248/pdf/CHRG-112shrg73248.pdf>.

⁹ “Older Adults and People with Disabilities,” Health Resources and Services Administration, last reviewed June 4, 2019, <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/transportation/4/population-considerations/older-adults-people-with-disabilities>.

¹⁰ Chris Morelli, “Centre Area Transportation Launches New Microtransit Program,” *The Express*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.lockhaven.com/news/local-news/2020/01/centre-area-transportation-launches-new-microtransit-program/>. See also “CATAGO!” Centre Area Transportation Authority, last accessed March 10, 2023, <https://catabus.com/go/>.

¹¹ *Enhancing Tribal Self-Governance and Safety of Indian Roads*, Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, 116th Congress, at 16-17, 2019, statement of Stephen Roe Lewis, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116shrg36243/pdf/CHRG-116shrg36243.pdf>.

¹² Several transit providers in Pennsylvania described an interest in same day scheduling for shared ride services during calls with Aging Committee staff.

¹³ “Georgia Statewide Transit Plan,” Georgia Department of Transportation, May 2020, at ES-10, <https://www.dot.ga.gov/InvestSmart/Transit/Documents/TransitPlan/2020%20SWTRP%20Plan/1%20SWTRP%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Supra*, note 2, FTA Infrastructure Law Website.

Assistance Program.¹⁵ The Department of Transportation (DOT) plans to use IJJA funding to improve transit for communities that have historically had more limited access.¹⁶ As DOT begins to distribute this funding, we seek your assistance in identifying the gaps that exist in rural and tribal transit service for seniors and people with disabilities. We also seek your assistance in identifying additional actions Congress and the federal government should take to shore up those gaps. Therefore, we request that the Government Accountability Office examine and report on the following issues:

1. What types of transportation are available to rural communities, including communities on tribal and Native lands and other communities of greatest social and economic need, as defined by the Older Americans Act?¹⁷ To what extent do those communities face challenges in ensuring that people with disabilities and older adults have access to transit, including challenges related to affordability, comprehensiveness, and reliability? What new challenges for providing those services do those communities anticipate over the next decade?
2. What strategies and innovative solutions have rural and tribal communities used to address challenges and meet the accessible transit needs of seniors and people with disabilities? To what extent do those communities promote cooperation between governments and across agencies, including with local Area Agencies on Aging, to meet those needs?
3. What are the primary funding sources through the federal government, including the IJJA, to improve the accessibility of transit services in rural and tribal areas for older adults and people with disabilities? What challenges do rural and tribal communities face in accessing these federal funds, or using them to expand accessible transit? Has federal support for other types of infrastructure, such as rural broadband, benefited rural and tribal transit services, including support through the IJJA?
4. To what extent has DOT effectively communicated these opportunities to rural and tribal communities and established policies to ensure these funds equitably serve people with disabilities and older adults in those communities?
5. How do rural and tribal communities measure the success of local transit programs that benefit older adults and people with disabilities? Do their measures contrast with how the federal and state governments measure success for the same programs?
6. The Older Americans Act requires state governments that receive certain federal funds to develop State Plans on Aging.¹⁸ How often do State Plans on Aging address rural transportation services for older adults, including those with disabilities? How often do

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

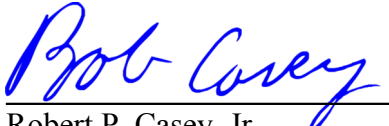
¹⁷ 42 U.S.C. § 3002(23) and 42 U.S.C. § 3002(24).

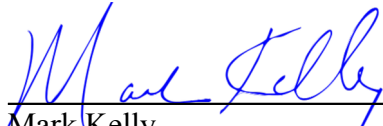
¹⁸ 42 U.S.C. § 3027.

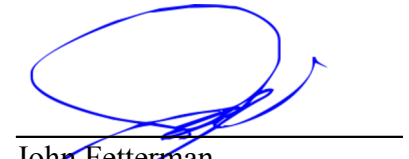
those State Plans address the role of accessible transit in supporting family caregivers for older adults?

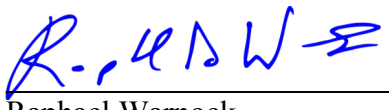
We appreciate your attention to this request. Should you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Senate Special Committee on Aging at 202-224-5364.


Sincerely,

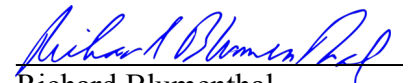

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator
Chairman, Special Committee
on Aging

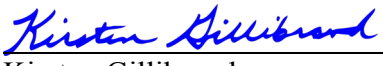

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