

# Supporting Mobility Options in Meigs County, OH

## Final Report for the USDA Rural Business Development Grant *Technical Assistance for Rural Transportation Systems: Connecting Rural Transportation with Economic Opportunity*

A Project Funded by the USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service & Coordinated by the National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation in Partnership with Montana State University's Western Transportation Institute



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## About the Western Transportation Institute

The Western Transportation Institute (WTI) was founded in 1994 by the Montana and California Departments of Transportation, in cooperation with Montana State University. WTI concentrates on rural transportation research; as stewards and champions of rural America, WTI also has a strong interest in sustainability. WTI research groups create solutions that work for clients, sponsors, and rural transportation research partners. WTI Research Centers include the Montana Local Technical Assistance Program, the National Center for Rural Road Safety, the Small Urban, Rural and Tribal Center on Mobility, the Federal-Public Lands Transportation Institute, and the West Region Transportation Workforce Center.

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## 1 Introduction and Overview

The primary purpose of this project was to provide Meigs County, OH, and the Buckeye Hills Regional Council (BHRC) with technical assistance to support its multimodal transportation and economic development planning efforts, with an emphasis on supporting mobility options in Meigs County, OH. This project was also an opportunity to compile and share resources on the connections between mobility and economic resilience as well as substance use disorder, which may serve as a helpful reference for rural communities throughout the U.S.

The primary motivation for this project was the confluence of challenges surrounding limited mobility options, economic decline, and high rates of poverty and substance abuse in the predominantly rural area of southeast Ohio, coupled with limited local and county staff capacity to develop and consider strategies to effectively address these complex and multifaceted issues (MCHD 2023).<sup>1</sup> This project occurs within the context of the national opioid epidemic and spike in drug overdose deaths, which have quintupled since 1999 and increased by nearly 30% between 2019 and 2020 (NCIPC 2023),<sup>2</sup> and benefits from the increased understanding and attention afforded to substance use disorder in recent years.

This project was impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which limited travel opportunities to safely conduct site visits to the study area, as well as turnover in several key partner staffing positions that impacted project continuity and engagement. Notwithstanding these unforeseen developments and related challenges, the project team worked to establish and maintain open communication with key partners and to develop practical resources and recommendations with transferable relevance to rural communities facing similar transportation, economic, and health challenges. **Figure 1** summarizes the timeline for this project, from the kickoff in the spring of 2021 to the completion in fall of 2023.



*Figure 1. Project Timeline*

<sup>1</sup> The Meigs County 2023-2026 Community Health Assessment describes challenges in the region, including “a poor economy, high rates of poverty, chronic illness, high rates of substance abuse, and an overall need for priority on health and well-being of residents” (MCHD 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control provides information about opioid overdose epidemic at: <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.

## 2 Key Concepts and Resources

This section provides a brief overview of key concepts that serve as the focus of this multimodal transportation and economic development project: mobility management, economic resilience, and substance use disorder. It is intended to create a working foundation and practical vocabulary to support understanding of the resources and recommendations discussed in the subsequent sections of the report. In addition, key resources accompany the discussion of each concept, to provide opportunities for further familiarization and learning.

### 2.1 Coordination and Mobility Management

Coordination of public transportation programs and services entails comprehensive planning and organization of modes and services, and has long been appreciated as an important strategy to enhance overall performance (see, e.g., Rivasplata, Iseki, and Smith 2012). In recent years, the term “mobility management” has become the focus of a specific type of coordination – those where coordinating efforts are focused on public and human services transportation. The National Center for Mobility Management defines mobility management as “a two-part endeavor” to connect people to the best transportation options to get them to their destinations, and to work with partners to understand people’s transportation needs and create responsive new services (NCMM 2023).

The National Rural Transit Assistance Program’s Transit Manager’s Toolkit devotes a chapter to Coordination and Mobility Management, and describes mobility management as “a term that has come to represent a transportation strategy that focuses more on the customers and their needs, and the meeting of these needs through the coordinated use of a variety of providers” (NRTAP 2022, p. 89). The chapter also covers successful approaches to mobility management, funding, case studies, and further resources.

The Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility was established by E.O. 13330 on Human Service Transportation Coordination of February 24, 2004, and is “a Federal interagency council that works to coordinate funding and provide expertise on human services transportation for three targeted populations: people with disabilities, older adults, and individuals of low income” (CCAM 2022). CCAM published a Program Inventory in 2019 that identified 130 federal programs authorized to fund transportation services for these targeted populations (CCAM 2019), and a Federal Fund Braiding Guide in 2020 “to enable Federal agencies and Federal grant recipients to more effectively manage Federal funds and coordinate human service transportation” (CCAM 2020). CCAM’s Mobility Management brochure describes the multifaceted role of mobility managers as:

- **Policy coordinators** who lead in the development of coordination plans, programs, policies, and local partnerships, and promote land-use policies favorable to public transportation and pedestrian access;
- **Operations** service brokers who coordinate services among customer groups, service providers, and funders; and
- **Travel navigators** who work with human service agencies and/or workforce centers on travel and trip planning needs of individuals receiving human services program assistance (CCAM 2018).

FTA notes that “the purpose of mobility management is to improve coordination among existing public transportation providers and other transportation service providers in order to expand the availability of transportation options” and “is eligible as a capital expense and can be used to coordinate new mobility services with traditional public transportation and other alternative services” under multiple FTA programs (FTA 2023).

The following organizations provide practical guidance on mobility management:

- Federal Transit Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation: <https://www.transit.dot.gov/ccam/about/transportation-coordination>
- Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM): <https://www.transit.dot.gov/coordinating-council-access-and-mobility>
- National Center for Mobility Management (NCMM): <https://nationalcenterformobilitymanagement.org/>
- National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC): <https://www.nadtc.org/>
- National Rural Transit Assistance Program (NRTAP): <https://www.nationalrtap.org/>
- Transportation Technical Assistance Coordination Library: <https://transportation-tacl.org/>
- Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT): <https://www.transportation.ohio.gov/programs/transit/transit-funding-resources/mobility-management>

In addition, coordination and mobility management have been the focus of several research projects funded through the Transportation Research Board’s Cooperative Research Programs, including those highlighted in **Table 1**.

*Table 1. TRB Cooperative Research Program Projects With a Focus on Mobility Management and Coordination*

<b>Project Number</b>	<b>Project Title</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Year(s)</b>
TCRP H-15A	Welfare to Work: Integration and Coordination of Transportation and Social Services	Complete (TCRP Report 64 Parts A and B, TCRP Web Document 16)	1998-2000
TCRP H-30	Strategies to Increase Coordination of Transportation Services for the Transportation Disadvantaged	Complete (TCRP Report 105)	2002-2004
Transit IDEA J-04/IDEA 50	Developing Regional Mobility Management Centers	Completed (Final Report)	2012
NCHRP 20-65/Task 60	The National Mobility Management Initiative: State DOTs Connecting Users and Rides for Specialized Transportation	Completed (NCHRP Report 832, Volumes 1 and 2)	2014-2016
TCRP B-44	Examining the Effects of Separate Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) Brokerages on Transportation Coordination	Completed (TCRP Report 202)	2014-2018
NCHRP 20-65/Task 68	Successful Mobility Management Practices for Improving Transportation Services in Small Urban and Rural Areas	Completed (Contractor’s Report)	2016-2018

**Source:** Compiled in August 2023 using keyword searches for mobility management and coordination in the TRB project database (available online: <https://www.trb.org/Projects/FindaProject.aspx>).

A 2018 report for NCHRP 20-65/Task 68 devoted to mobility management in small urban and rural areas notes that “the customized approach of mobility management means no two programs are exactly alike” – however, common elements include:

- Partnerships between multiple agencies and organizations;
- A customer-driven approach featuring a variety of transportation options and individualized trip planning; and
- Coordinated travel information and trip planning (NCHRP 2018).

In terms of resources available for southeast Ohio, the Buckeye Hills Regional Council “is committed to identifying and removing barriers to employment, social service, health care, and overall mobility for citizens of southeast Ohio, including individuals with disabilities, older adults, low-income individuals, and other socially isolated individuals” and provides an overview of Mobility Management resources and staff across the region (BHRC 2023).

According to BHRC, the Mobility Manager’s job is to:

- Assist individuals with accessing transportation options;
- Increase awareness of community transportation needs; and
- Integrate transportation into planning and programming (BHRC 2023).

## 2.2 Economic Resilience

The etymology of resilience suggests a close association with the ability to rebound, recover, or “bounce back” from a disturbance or shock; resilience has a long conceptual history in the field of ecology, but its use has grown in recent decades in regional science and related fields, such as community and economic development (see, e.g., Simmie and Martin 2010). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rural communities have faced significant tests of their resilience, including the demographic and economic turbulence accompanying the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson, 2022, 2023). These shocks have important implications for “contemporary policy making intended to increase the viability of rural communities and enhance their contribution to the nation’s material, environmental, and social well-being” (Johnson 2022).

The centering of economic resilience within the rural wealth creation project is an outgrowth of the growing consensus in recent decades around critiques of the traditional approach to economic development, which has narrowly focused on economic activities, shorter-term planning, and strategies to create “business friendly” environments through tax incentives to attract or retain employers and reduce labor costs that could lead to higher rates of turnover and extraction from the community. In contrast, alternative approaches to community and economic development (e.g., Asset-Based Community Development, the Community Capitals Framework, and the rural wealth creation framework formalized as WealthWorks) have emerged in recent decades to broaden development efforts to include all facets of the community, including economic, social, cultural, and environmental elements and activities. These alternative frameworks have tended to incorporate a broader set of goals and longer-term emphasis on lasting wealth creation, more local control, and greater emphasis on measures such as quality of life and sense of place. Rural wealth creation incorporates and builds upon insights from Asset-Based Community Development and the Community Capitals Framework, and seeks to operate at the intersection of

community and economic development principles and practices – it is motivated by the desire to develop a sustainable economic development strategy for rural communities, especially given the persistent poverty and outflows of wealth experienced by rural areas (Ratner and Markley 2014). This work is about broadening the conceptualization of wealth, identifying and developing underutilized assets, and leveraging market forces – as Ratner summarizes, “flexibility enables resiliency” and the WealthWorks framework for rural wealth creation emphasizes flexibility through its focus on iterative, adaptable, place-based opportunities as well as measurements to continuously learn and adapt (Ratner 2020). Transportation may be one of many targeted investments to connect jobs and workers, and more broadly to connect underutilized resources to the mainstream economy. In this way, transportation can play a vital role in rural wealth creation by ensuring that investments build resilient communities and wealth, and not just income.

The following organizations provide practical guidance on economic resilience and related frameworks (including Asset-Based Community Development, the Community Capitals Framework, WealthWorks, and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework) (see also, e.g., Emery and Flora 2006, Emery, Fey, and Flora 2006, Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2016, Pender, Weber, Johnson, and Fannin 2014, Ratner and Markley 2014, Ratner 2020, Kissel 2016, 2019, and Weinstein, Hicks, and Wornell 2020):

- Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Steans Center for Community-Based Service Learning & Community Service, DePaul University: <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx>
- WealthWorks: <https://www.wealthworks.org/>
- Rural Policy Research Institute, College of Public Health, University of Iowa: <https://rupri.org/about-rupri/key-frameworks/>

### 2.3 Substance Use Disorder

The connections between transportation and substance use disorder, drug overdoses, and related issues, are receiving increased attention as the nation copes with the opioid epidemic. For example, the Transportation Research Board’s Transit Cooperative Research Program is currently funding a synthesis project on the *Impacts of Substance Abuse and Fentanyl Use on Transit*, in recognition of drug use and overdoses in transit vehicles and stations (TCRP 2023). Rural communities in particular face limited resources for prevention, treatment, and recovery, and transportation may be a contributing factor to the higher rates of overdose death (CDC 2017, RHIH 2023).

Smith’s (2022) social work capstone project focused on *Opioid Addiction in Rural America: The Transportation Need for Treatment Adherence* and identified transportation as one of the most significant treatment barriers in rural areas. Smith identified accessibility treatment barriers relating to the cost of travel as well as the distance to providers and service agencies, and availability barriers relating to a lack of providers in rural areas. These barriers (along with higher rates of poverty and lower rates of health insurance) lead to missed appointments, medication noncompliance, and worse health outcomes, causing “rural patients to be less likely to sustain abstinence resulting in unsuccessful recovery and continued higher rates of mortality” (Smith 2022, p. 72). Smith’s recommendations included transportation strategic planning to improve transportation options for addiction treatment services.



The Rural Health Information Hub (RHIH) is a federally funded national clearinghouse that provides information on rural health issues, including a topical overview of transportation to support rural healthcare as well as a modular toolkit focused on transportation issues. RHIH identified several models to fill healthcare transportation gaps that may be relevant for rural communities interested in addressing the transportation challenges relating to substance use disorder and treatment:

- Care Coordination & Transportation Planning/Mobility Management Services
- Mobile Clinics & House Calls/Community Health Worker Visits
- Ridesharing & Public Transportation Services
- School-Based Services
- Taxi Subsidies & Voucher Programs
- Virtual Services/Telehealth/Telemedicine
- Volunteer Driver Programs

The following organizations provide helpful resources on substance use disorder, including several resources focused on rural communities:

- Rural Health Information Hub: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/substance-use>, <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/transportation>, and <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/transportation>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: <https://www.samhsa.gov/rural-behavioral-health>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: <https://www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth/drug-overdose/index.html>, <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/index.html>, and <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/>
- National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: <https://nida.nih.gov/>
- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services: <https://mha.ohio.gov/>
- Ohio Department of Health: <https://odh.ohio.gov/know-our-programs/violence-injury-prevention-program/drug-overdose/>

### 3 Existing Conditions

This section provides an overview of the existing conditions in Meigs County, with an emphasis on transportation, economic issues, and community health.

#### 3.1 Sociodemographic, Economic, and Health Indicators

Meigs County is located in southeast Ohio on the border with West Virginia, and has a land area of 430.1 square miles (Census Bureau 2023a). Like many predominantly rural areas, the county has been experiencing population loss, with a population count of 23,770 for the 2010 Decennial Census compared to a population count of 22,210 for the 2020 Decennial Census (a decline in population of 1,560, or about 6.6%) (Census Bureau 2023a). In contrast, Ohio as a whole grew by about 2.3% between 2010 and 2020. As summarized by Headwaters Economics, “population growth is generally an indication of a health economy” and a population decline generally occurs “when an area is struggling” (Headwaters Economics 2023a). These trends in population align with key economic indicators. The per capita (\$24,812) and median household (\$44,113) incomes in Meigs County are below the Ohio averages (\$34,526 and \$61,938, respectively), while the share of people in poverty (20.1%) and share of households receiving food stamp/SNAP assistance (22.6%) are above the Ohio averages (13.4% and 12.4% respectively) (Headwaters Economics 2022a). The annual unemployment rate in Meigs County was 5.8% in 2022, which was also above Ohio’s rate of 4.0% (Headwaters Economics 2023b). In addition, the share of people with disabilities is 22.4% in Meigs County, compared to 13.9% for Ohio overall (Headwaters Economics 2023c). More people are without health insurance (7.9%)<sup>3</sup> in Meigs County, compared to in Ohio (6.3%) overall (Headwaters Economics 2023c).

In terms of transportation, approximately 7.9%<sup>4</sup> of households in Meigs County have no private vehicle, compared to 7.5% for Ohio overall (Headwaters Economics 2023c). As summarized by Headwaters Economics, access to a car has important impacts on earnings and financial stability, as well as measurable benefits for those receiving public assistance and during emergencies and extreme weather (Headwaters Economics 2023c). Indeed, navigating most U.S. communities without a car poses many challenges, and relates to what King, Smart, and Manville (2022) called “the poverty of the carless” (see also, e.g., Klein 2020, Coren, Lowe, and Barajas 2022, and Klein, Basu, and Smart 2023).

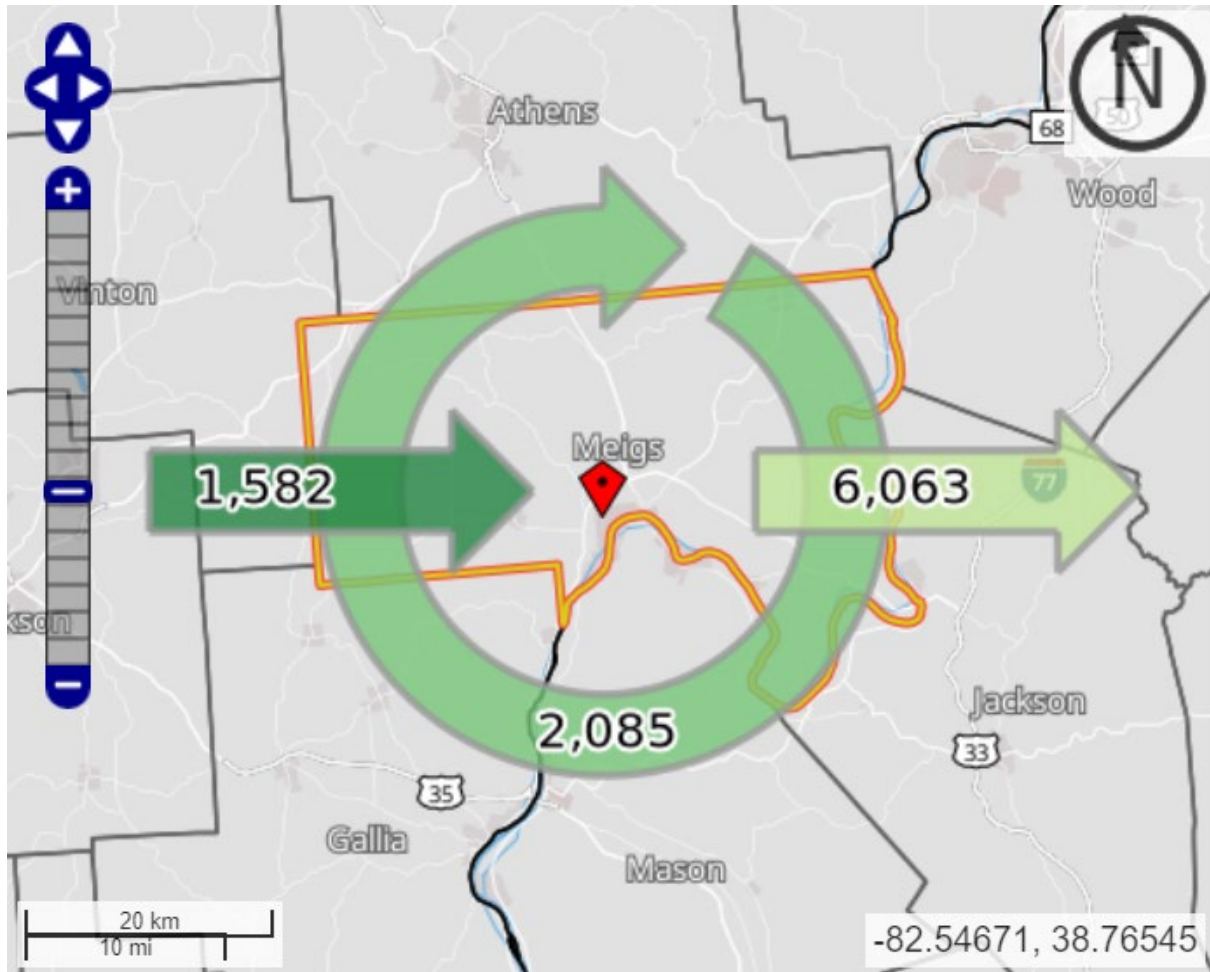
The personal income outflow of earnings from Meigs County has significantly declined in recent decades, from \$114,124 in 1990 to \$27,286 in 2010 and \$23,871 in 2021 (for a decline of about 79.1% between 1990 and 2021) (Headwaters Economics 2023d). Meanwhile, the personal income inflow of earnings to Meigs County has grown, from \$164,304 in 1990 to \$287,070 in 2010 and \$303,944 in 2021 (for an increase of about 85% between 1990 and 2021) (Headwaters Economics 2023d). This led to a net residential adjustment (inflow minus outflow) of \$280,073 in 2021, which represented 27.1% of the \$1,035,112 in total personal income for Meigs County (up from 8.0% in 1990) (Headwaters Economics 2023d). As summarized in **Figure 2**, the U.S.

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<sup>3</sup> The sampling error for this 2017-2021 ACS 5-Year Estimate is large enough to suggest this estimate should be interpreted with caution.

<sup>4</sup> The sampling error for this 2017-2021 ACS 5-Year Estimate is large enough to suggest this estimate should be interpreted with caution.

Census Bureau's OnTheMap Inflow/Outflow Analysis indicates that most (74.4%) workers living in Meigs County work elsewhere (a count of 6,063), while about 56.9% of those working in Meigs County are also residents (a count of 2,085) (Census Bureau 2023b). Overall, these flows suggest that Meigs County is attracting fewer workers from neighboring counties and that more of its workers need to commute to neighboring counties.



**Source:** Image generated by the OnTheMap webtool from the U.S. Census Bureau, using the Inflow/Outflow Analysis for all jobs in 2020 based on where workers live (Census Bureau 2023b).

*Figure 2. Inflow/Outflow Analysis for Meigs County (2020, All Jobs, Workers Home)*

### 3.2 Community Health Assessment

The Community Health Assessment (CHA) process is an important contribution to community health improvement efforts, and helps identify priorities, develop strategies, and establish measures toward progress. The 2020-2023 CHA for Meigs County (MCHD 2020) identified five health priorities:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health (Together)
- Poverty/Economy (Includes Social/Economic Determinants of Health)
- Health Promotion/Chronic Disease
- Access to Care (Multiple Factors)

- Transportation (Includes Communication Factors and Other Challenges of Geographic Diffusion)

At the time of the 2020-2023 CHA’s publication, Meigs County had no public transportation system and transportation was a barrier for many residents, leading many residents to have difficulties with travel for employment, medical care, food, and other needs (MCHD 2020, p. 33). Focus group sessions indicated substance abuse and related impacts to be a significant problem (MCHD 2020, p. 37). The following health problems were identified by respondents as among the top three facing the community in the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment (CTSA) survey (MCHD 2020, p. 46, 62):

- Drug and/or alcohol abuse (77.9%)
- Poor healthy behaviors (e.g., smoking, poor diet, limited exercise) (70.9%)
- Economic challenges (50.0%)

The most recent CHA was completed for the 2023-2026 timeframe (MCHD 2023), and identified three health priorities:

- Access to Care
- Mental and Behavioral Health
- Health Promotion/Lack of and Access to Physical Activity

Transportation has the potential to support each of these priorities, and the newly established public transit service in Meigs County (see further discussion in **Section 3.3** below) was recognized in the portion of the CHA discussing the Forces of Change Assessment as a “great addition to the County that provides workforce and access to care” and a service that should be expanded over time (MCHD 2023, p. 58).

Several organizations are supporting community health in Meigs County, including:

- Meigs County Health Department: <https://meigs-health.com/>
- Meigs County Prevention Coalition: <https://meigsprevention.com/>
- Meigs County Jobs & Family Services: <https://meigsdjfs.net/>

### 3.3 Transportation Planning and Services

The Coordinated Transportation Plan (CTP) is an important contribution to the public transit and human services transportation improvement process, and helps assess available services, needs, and gaps, and identifies goals and priorities to improve transportation. The 2020 Meigs County Coordinated Transportation Plan (MCJFS 2020) was produced by a dedicated Planning Committee that consisted of stakeholders and representatives from a variety of organizations, and included a robust public outreach process with a public survey and series of virtual roundtable meetings. The 2020 Plan summarized gaps in transportation services present at the time of publication, including a lack of publicly available, accessible, countywide and inter-county, affordable transportation services, as well as the need for coordinated, accessible, countywide services and built environment improvements (MCJFS 2020, p. 59). The Plan also described the effort by the Meigs County Job & Family Services and Ohio Department of Transportation to launch the Meigs County Mobility Management project in January 2020 (MCJFS 2020, p. 38), and efforts to coordinate the Mobility Management project with

Emergency Management planning (MCJFS 2020, p. 41). The Plan identified nine strategies for improving transportation in Meigs County (MCJFS 2020, pp. 57-67):

- Apply for and receive funding for a Meigs County transit system
- Analyze information for affordable fares on the new Meigs County transit system
- Improve knowledge and understanding about transportation options via a strong Meigs County Mobility Manager
- Support implementation of the Meigs County Active Transportation Plan
- Support inter-county travel beyond Meigs County
- Assist operators to ensure compliance with the ADA
- Improve communication about multimodal transportation options available in Meigs County
- Conduct sidewalk audits to ensure ADA compliance and safety
- Increase coordination of efforts and services

In April 2021, Meigs County submitted a Section 5339 Bus and Bus Facilities Grant Program application to the Ohio Department of Transportation for vehicle and computer hardware/software capital funding.<sup>5</sup> The application described how the private pay options for non-Medicaid trips with available Non-Emergency Medical Transportation providers were not affordable, and how a public transit system in Meigs County would “alleviate the hardship on many residents who cannot get to the doctor, work, grocery store, pharmacy, local stores, and/or social events” and “greatly assist health, wellness, and employment within the county.”

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<sup>5</sup> A copy of the application was provided to this project team by request.

## 4 Project Activities and Recommendations

During the course of this project, a Dial-a-Ride demand response public transit system was launched in Meigs County and is being run by staff from the Meigs County Job & Family Services. Our project team offered technical assistance to support the new transit system in several ways, including information and expertise covering the following areas:

- Marketing
- Website development
- Public outreach
- Peer network sharing
- Public transit policies and procedures
- Fares

Several resources from the National Rural Transit Assistance Program are relevant to these efforts, including:

- Website Builder: <https://www.nationalrtap.org/Technology-Tools/Website-Builder>
- GTFS Builder: <https://www.nationalrtap.org/Technology-Tools/GTFS-Builder>
- Transit Manager's Toolkit: <https://www.nationalrtap.org/Toolkits/Transit-Managers-Toolkit/Welcome>
- Find Anything Toolkit: <https://www.nationalrtap.org/Toolkits/Find-Anything-Toolkit/Welcome>
- Hot Topics guides, including one dedicated to Marketing: <https://www.nationalrtap.org/Toolkits/Find-Anything-Toolkit/Hot-Topics#Marketing>

In addition, during the course of this project, Meigs County Job & Family Services staff took advantage of resources and training provided by the Ohio Department of Transportation, including the robust offerings compiled for new transit managers through the Transit Academy: <https://www.transportation.ohio.gov/programs/transit/transit-training/transit-academy>.

Looking ahead, we offer the following recommendations to support further investments and improvements in public and human services transportation in Meigs County:

- Expand the information available online about the new Meigs County transit system, and consider adopting dedicated branding and a dedicated website, to build upon what is currently available at: <https://meigsdjfs.net/transportation/>
- Review peer case studies from rural communities that have adopted on-demand flexible transit services, such as microtransit, to inform whether a microtransit pilot could improve upon the flexibility and convenience of the current Dial-a-Ride system
- Build public support for improved and expanded transportation options through efforts such as public convenings, community surveys, and performance tracking
- Devote attention to transportation options to support treatment and recovery, and dedicate resources to track transportation contributions to improved health outcomes
- Pursue rural wealth creation strategies to improve regional economic resilience

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