

JOHN T. GORMAN

Moving Toward Solutions

ADDRESSING THE TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES OF MAINE FAMILIES



FROM THE JOHN T. GORMAN FOUNDATION

Maine's jagged coastline, rugged forests, and rural landscapes make it a beautiful place to live, but a difficult place to navigate. Getting from points A to B usually involves a long drive that winds through points C, D, and E along the way.

For many Mainers, transportation challenges are more than a mere inconvenience. An estimated 40,000 Maine households do not have a vehicle. And existing public transit systems only meet 11% of the total need. Families in this gap face significant obstacles getting to work, pursuing education, accessing childcare, and connecting to other critical services. These limitations not only hinder their pursuit of greater prosperity and well-being, but also undermine our state's workforce and economy.

The John T. Gorman Foundation works to strengthen the well-being of Maine families, using two-generation approaches that serve children and their caregivers simultaneously. Through our partnerships, we have seen transportation frequently arise as a barrier to families who are working to solidify their financial footing and create future opportunities. Even a small setback – a flat tire, a misaligned bus schedule, or a canceled ride – can be enough to prevent or threaten the progress of families who are living on razor-thin margins.

While the John T. Gorman Foundation has worked with partners to support targeted strategies for expanding transportation options, this statewide problem demands a systemic approach. This report offers a possible roadmap. Prepared with the latest data and extensive research, it details the extent of Maine's transportation access issues, highlights promising strategies, and explores new models of investment.

Like housing and childcare, transportation access deserves our full attention. To build a stronger future for the state's families and economy, we need a system that works better for all Mainers. Achieving this will require collaboration, innovation, and new approaches - but working together, we can get there.

Sincerely,

Nicole Witherbee President & CEO

John T. Gorman Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reliable transportation is a lifeline to economic stability and opportunity, yet thousands of Maine families lack access to a dependable vehicle. This challenge is particularly acute in rural areas, where public transit is scarce and cars are often the only practical option. For many families with low incomes, the cost of maintaining a vehicle - often exceeding \$1,000 per month - is simply unaffordable. As a result, an estimated 40,000 Maine households do not have a vehicle and face daily struggles reaching work, school, medical appointments, and other critical destinations. Meanwhile, it is estimated that Maine's public transit system meets only 11% of demand, leaving many without viable alternatives.

Maine people of all ages and backgrounds face the challenges created by transportation insecurity. For working families, it limits job opportunities. One recent survey showed that about 10,500 Mainers are unemployed due to a lack of transportation. Rural households face longer, more expensive commutes. Young Mainers struggle to afford driver's education and their first car, delaying their entry into the workforce. Older adults find themselves isolated as they age out of driving. Immigrants and communities of color face additional barriers due to systemic disparities.

To address these challenges, this report explores two key strategies: immediate interventions to expand transportation options for families who lack them and long-term policy shifts to create a more equitable transportation system. In the short term, car repair and donation programs, travel reimbursement initiatives, and e-bike subsidies can help individuals maintain mobility. Community-based solutions, such as car-sharing, ride-sharing, microtransit, and traditional public transit can help in more densely populated places. However, Maine also needs systemic changes to create a transportation network that supports all families. Historically, public investments have prioritized roads and bridges over public transit. To address the underlying issues, we will need to shift these priorities and better coordinate existing services and investments.

Solving the transportation challenges of Maine families will require a multi-pronged approach that balances immediate relief with long-term policy reform. No one provider or funder can solve this problem alone. Progress will require new collaborations and partnerships, innovative transportation models, and smarter public investments.

Practical insights from transportation providers point to three key principles for this work: 1) Recognize transportation as essential to economic independence and opportunity. 2) Support families in overcoming immediate transportation obstacles. 3) Drive long-term change by placing families at the heart of transportation investments and adopting a more holistic approach to transportation planning and coordination.

Introduction



Thousands of Maine people lack reliable access to transportation - a vital link to work, education, and more.

In 2022, 1 in 3 Maine households with children (32%) did not have incomes high enough to cover essential living costs in their area – including housing, childcare, food, and transportation.² Among these costs, transportation stands out. An estimated 40,000 Maine households do not have a vehicle.3 Without one, families often struggle to access work, childcare, education, appointments, and other social supports and services they need to thrive.

Maine's highly rural population makes accessible transportation options even more important - and harder to come by.

Since the mid-20th century, public policies and transportation investments have favored personal vehicles over mass transit, making the freedom to travel dependent on having the means to purchase, maintain, and operate a car. This disparity is even more apparent in areas outside of Maine's urban centers, where families with low incomes often migrate in search of affordable housing.

This report examines the transportation needs of Maine families and highlights potential solutions.

It reflects a review of current data and insights from interviews with over 25 professionals in Maine and beyond, highlighting innovative programs and promising approaches. It examines two equally important pathways for increasing access to transportation. The first focuses on addressing families' immediate challenges, through initiatives like car repair and car donation programs, and enhanced public transportation. The second explores transportation investments to create a more efficient and sustainable system that supports long-term solutions for more Maine families.

1 in 3

Maine households with children did not have incomes high enough to cover essential living costs

40,000

Maine households do not have a vehicle

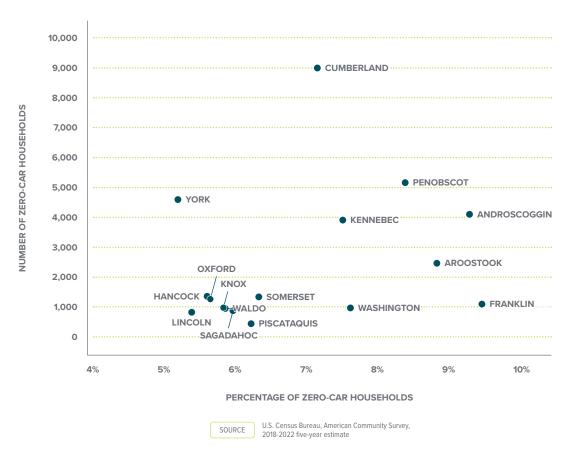
The Need

Lack of transportation lies at the heart of many families' challenges, especially in rural places where households rely on personal vehicles.

Nearly 40,000 Maine households do not have reliable access to a vehicle.⁴ This represents approximately 50,000 individuals for whom getting to work, the grocery store, or a medical appointment requires walking, biking, public transit, or a ride from family or friends. An estimated 15,000 employed workers lack a vehicle and another 52,000 live in households where the number of workers exceeds the number of vehicles.

Statewide, the share of zero-car households ranges from 5% in York County to 9% in Franklin County. The biggest concentrations are in counties with large population centers: Cumberland (Portland), Penobscot (Bangor), York (Biddeford-Saco and Sanford), Androscoggin (Lewiston-Auburn), and Kennebec (Augusta). These places tend to have large rental housing stocks and larger populations of households with low incomes, New Mainers, and young people who lack vehicles. They are also somewhat easier communities to live in for households that lack vehicles – they have some walkable neighborhoods, limited public transportation services, and some access to ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft.

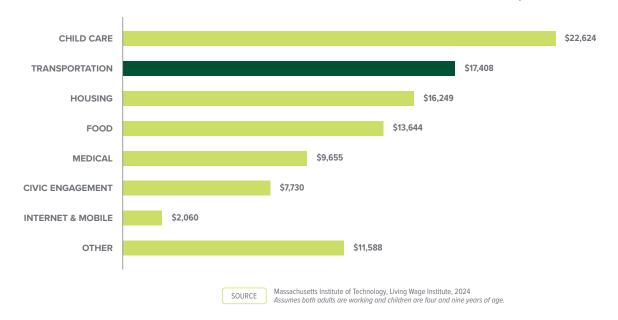
13 COUNTIES HAVE MORE THAN 1,000 ZERO-CAR HOUSEHOLDS; 5 HAVE MORE THAN 3,000



Cost is a significant barrier to licensure and vehicle ownership for families.

Basic transportation expenses for most Maine households exceed \$1,000 per month, even accounting for the use of public transportation where available.5 This includes the cost to purchase, maintain, operate, and insure a vehicle. For many families, this exceeds the cost of other budget items such as food or housing.6

"BASIC NEEDS" BUDGET FOR MAINE FAMILY OF FOUR, 2023



For some Maine residents, especially young people, even getting a driver's license is prohibitively expensive. Driver's education classes are generally \$500 to \$600 and those under age 21 must log 70 hours of practice with a more experienced driver. These financial and logistical hurdles can be difficult or impossible for families with low incomes that lack a vehicle or have a vehicle but lack the time to use it for practice driving. Today, nearly 90,000 Maine residents age 16 and older do not hold a driver's license.⁷ They include over 15,000 people in their 20s – a critical time for accessing the education and employment needed to secure a prosperous future.

Thousands of Mainers rely on public transportation, but current services are unable to meet most households' needs.

A conservative estimate suggests that current transit providers meet only 11% of Maine's total need – 3 million out of 28 million trips per year needed by households without vehicles - and a high share of these are rides for MaineCare recipients going to medical appointments. (See "How Large is the Need?") Approximately 3,000 Mainers regularly commute using public transportation, but these trips are often long and inconvenient – one in four spend 60 minutes or more on their one-way journey to work.8



We have to be realistic that in many places in Maine you have to have a personal vehicle to participate in society, and the cost is prohibitively high."

Zoe Miller, Executive Director Moving Maine Network

CALCULATING UNMET NEED

Individuals in households without cars often forgo trips that they would have taken if they had a vehicle. This could mean a parent not taking a better job in a neighboring town, a child not participating in afterschool activities, or a young person not taking classes at community college. The Transportation Research Board (TRB) created a methodology for estimating the number of trips not taken by people in households without cars. It provides a yardstick by which to measure the adequacy of Maine's current public transportation options.

The table at right suggests that the total trips not taken by Maine's zero-car households is over 28 million. The 3.3 million trips provided by Maine transit providers in 2022 correspond to about 11% of estimated trip need.

This is likely an underestimate of total need because even some households with cars would utilize and benefit from public transportation. These include households where the number of workers exceeds the number of vehicles, households with low incomes that would prefer a cheaper alternative to personal vehicles, older residents, and people with mobility limitations. It is also important to note that the current trips are likely meeting far more than 11% of need for some populations (such as MaineCare recipients and cancer patients) and far less than 11% for other populations (such as workers without vehicles and people in recovery).

CALCULATION OF ANNUAL TRIPS NEEDED BY ZERO-CAR HOUSEHOLDS

COUNTY	ZERO-CAR HOUSE- HOLDS	DAILY TRIPS NOT TAKEN PER HOUSE- HOLD (VARIES BY REGION)**	ANNUAL NEED (TRIPS)
ANDROSCOGGIN	4,130	2.5	3,768,625
AROOSTOOK	2,510	1.4	1,282,610
CUMBERLAND	8,988	2.2	7,217,364
FRANKLIN	1,126	1.4	575,386
HANCOCK	1,374	1.4	702,114
KENNEBEC	3,926	1.4	2,006,186
KNOX	1,028	1.4	525,308
LINCOLN	850	1.4	434,350
OXFORD	1,300	1.4	664,300
PENOBSCOT	5,200	2.5	4,745,000
PISCATAQUIS	470	1.4	240,170
SAGADAHOC	939	2.2	754,017
SOMERSET	1,378	1.4	704,158
WALDO	1,000	1.4	511,000
WASHINGTON	1,012	1.4	517,132
YORK	4,636	2.2	3,722,708
TOTAL			28,370,428

SOURCE

*U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018-2022 five-year average **Author's calculations based on TRB methodology and data from the 2017 National Highway Transportation Survey.

PERCENT OF ANNUAL NEEDED TRIPS SERVED BY PUBLIC TRANSIT

100% OF TRIP NEED (2018-2022 AVERAGE)

TRIPS PROVIDED BY MAINE'S PUBLIC TRANSPORT PROVIDERS (2022)9

PERCENT OF NEED BEING MET BY CURRENT TRIPS (2018-2022)

28.370.428

3.251.703

11%

Author's calculations based on TRB methodology and data from the NHTS, ACS, and NTD.

Challenges for Specific Groups

WORKING FAMILIES

For working families who lack reliable vehicle access, transportation challenges can create a cascade of difficulties. Getting to work can become a constant struggle, and missing shifts due to unreliable transportation can result in reduced income or even job loss. One recent survey showed that about 10,500 Mainers are unemployed due to a lack of transportation.¹⁰ Even where public transit exists, it often falls short in meeting the needs of working families – many services are restricted to certain populations, such as elderly residents or MaineCare recipients going to medical appointments, and bus routes and schedules rarely align with work or daycare hours and locations. Sometimes, these options are just not viable. For example, taking a bus to bring a child to daycare, dropping them off, and then waiting an hour for the next bus to go to work can turn a morning commute into an hours-long journey that must be repeated in reverse later in the day.

Maine Equal Justice (MEJ) found transportation to be a top challenge for parents with low incomes enrolled in the Higher Opportunity Pathways for Education program, ahead of many other needs such as utilities and expenses. Eighty-five percent of participants said transportation expenses were "regularly difficult to cover."11 According to MEJ, participants rely "...almost solely on their car not only to get to their educational program but to also bring their children to school, appointments, therapy, and to shop for food, clothing and other necessities. Without a car, most are stuck, especially the 60% of survey respondents who live in rural and semi-rural areas."12

RURAL MAINERS

Mainers in search of affordable housing oftengravitate to outlying areas, but there's a tradeoff. Longer commutes mean higher gas and maintenance costs. Without reliable transportation, many rural residents are effectively cut off from job prospects, educational resources, and social engagement. The scarcity of

public transit options in these areas leaves many individuals isolated and unable to participate fully in their communities.

Studies show higher transportation costs in Maine's rural counties, and lower costs in more populated areas with at least some level of public transportation. In 2023, the estimated annual expenses of a family of four in rural Oxford or Franklin counties were 9-10% (\$1,600) above the state average and nearly 20% (\$3,000) more than a family in more urban Androscoggin County.13

"BASIC NEEDS" TRANSPORTATION **BUDGET FOR 2 ADULTS & 2 CHILDREN,** BY COUNTY (LOWEST TO HIGHEST), 2023

	ANNUAL COST	COMPARISON TO STATE AVERAGE
ANDROSCOGGIN	\$15,921	-9%
PENOBSCOT	\$16,718	-4%
KENNEBEC	\$16,802	-3%
AROOSTOOK	\$16,817	-3%
CUMBERLAND	\$17,072	-2%
WASHINGTON	\$17,279	-1%
MAINE	\$17,408	-
KNOX	\$17,460	.3%
SOMERSET	\$17,511	1%
PISCATAQUIS	\$17,882	3%
LINCOLN	\$17,915	3%
WALDO	\$18,030	4%
HANCOCK	\$18,204	5%
YORK	\$18,369	6%
SAGADAHOC	\$18,376	6%
OXFORD	\$19,058	9%
FRANKLIN	\$19,081	10%

SOURCE

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Living Wage Institute, 2024

YOUNG MAINERS

Young people face significant transportation challenges as they navigate the transition to independence. Obtaining a driver's license can be prohibitively expensive, with driver's education classes usually exceeding \$500. For families without a car, or with one car that is needed for commuting, logging the 70 hours of practice driving time can also be difficult. In Maine today, approximately 15,200 people in their 20s do not have a driver's license, roughly equal to the 14,600 people age 75 and older who lack a license.¹⁴ Older individuals have access to volunteer driver networks in some communities, but these are often age-restricted and not available to younger Mainers, or only available for occasional rides to medical appointments or for necessities such as groceries, not regular commutes to jobs or classes.15

For young people able to secure a license, the high cost of purchasing, insuring, and maintaining a car presents a major hurdle. Without reliable transportation, their access to jobs, schooling, and social activities becomes limited, creating additional barriers to building a stable, independent life.

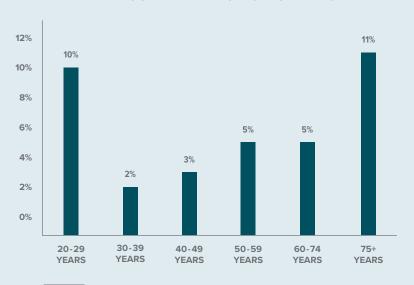
OLDER MAINERS

About 9% of Maine householders age 65 and older do not have a vehicle (compared to 7% of the overall population).16 This represents about 17,000 households for which transportation is a critical factor in maintaining health and independence. The share of residents age 65 and older is projected to grow from 21% in 2020 to 30% in 2040.17 In some places it will be even higher – in Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Piscataguis, and Sagadahoc counties, more than one in three people will be age 65 or older. Based on these projections, the number of zero-car households in Maine is likely to grow from about 40,000 in 2018-2022 to 46,000 in 2040 simply due to the aging of the population.

PERCENTAGE OF MAINE RESIDENTS WITHOUT A DRIVER'S LICENSE BY AGE

You would be surprised how difficult it is for some students to commute to their community college. "

Sheri Wilkens, Program Manager, **Higher Opportunity for Pathways** to Employment (Maine DHHS)



Author's calculation based on data form State of Maine, Bureau of Motor Vehicles; U.S. Census Bureau; SOURCE and National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.



[Homes of families with low incomes are] way out there because those are the only affordable rents.... And then they have vehicles that are held together with duct tape and prayers because that's the only vehicle that they can afford. They're traveling great distances and they have to factor in gas (more gas than a lot of people) and more maintenance and more time."

Sheri Wilkens, Program Manager Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (Maine DHHS)

MAINERS OF COLOR

There are racial and ethnic disparities in vehicle availability. In 2020, about 7% of White non-Hispanic householders lacked a vehicle.¹⁸ They account for the majority of zero-car households, but householders of other races and ethnicities were more likely to lack a vehicle on a percentage basis. This ranged from 10% of Asian householders to 20% of Native American householders.¹⁹ These disparities underscore systemic challenges, as limited vehicle access can exacerbate economic and social inequities.

MAINE HOUSEHOLDS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY OF HOUSEHOLDER						
		NO VEHICLE				
	TOTAL	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE			
WHITE	506,586	37,776	7.5%			
HISPANIC OR LATINO	2,267	262	11.6%			
WHITE ALONE, NOT HISPANIC OR LATINO	504,979	37,590	7.4%			
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN ALONE	1,952	275	14.1%			
AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE ALONE	2,735	542	19.8%			
ASIAN ALONE	2,191	219	10.0%			
NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER ALONE	88	15	17.0%			
OTHER RACE ALONE	647	86	13.3%			
TWO OR MORE RACES	4,001	552	13.8%			

SOURCE

*U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2020

Mainers across all racial and ethnic identities who have recently arrived from other countries often face additional barriers that compound the usual challenges of obtaining a driver's license and a car. Language and cultural differences can make it difficult to navigate the licensing process and use public transit. These barriers limit access to employment, education, healthcare, and community resources, making it harder for recent immigrants to establish stable, productive lives.

Exploring Solutions

Helping Maine families overcome transportation barriers requires two equally important strategies. The first is finding immediate solutions to urgent household needs, such as parents getting to work and children getting to daycare. This could mean helping with car repairs, mileage reimbursement, or expanded access to public transit. There is no single solution to this challenge. Addressing it will require a variety of approaches tailored to each community's unique needs and resources. The second strategy requires changing policy and funding practices to better meet the needs of all households, not just those with a reliable car. This section focuses on solutions with the most potential to help families in Maine communities, many of which are rural and sparsely populated.





HOUSEHOLD STRATEGIES

Studies show that true economic mobility requires more than just a ride to work – it means having reliable transportation for all aspects of life, from travel to jobs and medical appointments to parent-teacher conferences and social events. One analysis found that having a car increases an individual's likelihood of being employed in one year by 10% and their predicted earnings by 31%.²⁰ Only in the 5% of U.S. neighborhoods with "truly excellent transit service" are individuals in zero-car households able to match these results. 21 The following programs aim to give households the freedom to travel when and where they need, without relying on public transit.

CAR REPAIR

DESCRIPTION

For families with older, less reliable cars, a costly repair can be devastating, potentially leaving them without a usable vehicle. Car repair programs offer crucial support in these situations.

EXAMPLE

In rural Western Maine, United Way of the Tri-Valley Area (UWTVA) operates Don't Despair Car Repair, a program that provides families with low incomes with one-time grants of up to \$1,000 for repairs needed to pass inspection.

CONSIDERATIONS

Car repairs provide immediate solutions to families in crisis, but they are often still left with an old car that may need repairs again. For this reason, UWTVA counsels its grantees on ways to save for a new car.

UWTVA has partnerships with several garages and sometimes works with a local vocational school's automotive program, which can do repairs without charging for labor. One barrier they have found is that some garages are reluctant to do an estimate (required for the application process) if they think the car's owner may not be able to pay for the repair.

"We recognized that there are a lot of people who have vehicles but can't drive them because they can't afford to fix them... They become part of the transportation 'problem' but they have an easily fixed situation." Nichole Ernest, Director of Marketing and Communications, United Way of the Tri-Valley Area

CAR DONATION

DESCRIPTION

Car donation programs connect individuals who want to donate their used vehicles - often to receive a tax deduction - with households in need of reliable transportation. The program prioritizes dependable, low-maintenance vehicles that can meet a family's needs for a specific period, such as two years or 24,000 miles. Donated cars requiring minor repairs to reach this standard are fixed. Others, such as luxury models or cars in need of major repairs, are sold or auctioned with proceeds supporting the program's operations.

EXAMPLES

Vehicles for Change (VFC) is a car donation program in Maryland. Its recipients are referred by sponsoring agencies that include state, county, and non-profit social services. Families must pay \$950 for the cars, with VFC covering the rest through grants and operating revenue from sales of donated cars. Its operation includes a sales lot and garage, where people leaving incarceration can train as auto mechanics. According to VFC, within one year of receiving a car, 75% of recipients have a better job, their earnings have increased \$7,000 on average, and their commute time is 90 minutes less on average.²²

In Vermont and Massachusetts, Good News Garage (GNG) operates a similar program that accepts vehicle donations from across New England and Eastern New York. It also accepts donations of non-car vehicles such as boats and campers, which it sells to support its programs. Car recipients are participants of state social services and receive cars for free, although they take on the significant long-term costs of vehicle ownership.

CONSIDERATIONS

According to both VFC and GNG, finding an adequate, reliable source of cars is their top challenge, especially since 2021 when used-car prices rose sharply. Both programs report unsuccessful attempts to expand into new markets due to lack of marketing capacity and/or competition from other car donation programs. They are most successful in places where they have wellestablished programs that have operated for over twenty years. Both programs stress the importance of partnerships with car suppliers (e.g., state or local governments that can donate fleet cars as they retire) and marketing partners (e.g., public radio).

TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT

DESCRIPTION

Families that have a car but struggle to pay for fuel or maintenance can benefit from a travel cost reimbursement program. These are generally for travel for a specific purpose, such as work, career development, or health care.

EXAMPLES

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) Transitional Transportation program assists parents with low incomes with work-related travel for up to 18 months. The current reimbursement rate is \$0.54 per mile, up to \$20 per day.²³

DHHS's Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE) program reimburses parents pursing postsecondary education \$0.54 per mile for travel to daycare, work, and school, up to \$140 per week.

CONSIDERATIONS

These programs help reduce transportation costs for families with cars. They are less helpful for those without cars but can allow them to reimburse others for rides. Depending on program rules, participants may need to track and report each trip, adding an administrative task. Utilization of these programs is highly dependent on recipients' knowledge of them.

ELECTRIC BIKES ("E-BIKES")

DESCRIPTION

E-bikes offer a cost-effective substitute for cars, requiring less money to buy and maintain while reducing emissions and traffic congestion. Some organizations are working to make them accessible to individuals with low incomes.

EXAMPLE

The City of Denver issues vouchers for residents to purchase e-bikes from local shops. They range from \$300-\$1,200 based on income eligibility, with an additional \$200 for cargo e-bikes capable of transporting heavy loads or children. The vouchers have proven to be very popular, being claimed within minutes of becoming available online every few months. The city has issued over 9,000 vouchers since 2022.24 They are funded through a voter-approved \$0.25 local sales tax that supports the city's Climate Protection Fund.

CONSIDERATIONS

E-bikes work best for short trips in cities and suburbs with well-developed bike lanes. A study of Denver's program found the average ride was 3.3 miles, with 84% of trips under 5 miles.25 However, they typically carry only one adult and are not ideal in bad weather.

MATCHED SAVINGS

DESCRIPTION

For families struggling to pay everyday expenses, saving for an unexpected car repair or purchasing a more reliable vehicle can feel out of reach. Savings programs provide matching funds as an incentive for those who save, helping them meet urgent transportation challenges. These programs typically have income restrictions and include financial education and coaching requirements.

EXAMPLE

New Ventures Maine's (NVM) Matched Savings Program helps households with low incomes prepare for emergency expenses, such as a car repair. After saving for at least four months, their balance is matched dollar-for-dollar, up to \$400, when an emergency need arises. NVM's Family Development Accounts are a longer-term savings tool that can be used for car repairs or purchases. After working and saving for at least six months, families receive a 4-to-1 match, up to \$4,000.

CONSIDERATIONS

The impact of financing programs extends beyond the matched funds. They encourage participants to build a habit of saving consistently, demonstrating that setting money aside is achievable despite daily financial pressures. Additionally, they offer financial coaching and instruction on budgeting and saving strategies.



COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

The following programs provide alternatives to personal vehicle ownership. While cars offer the most mobility in today's transportation system, these options can still help people get where they need to go occasionally, assist with their daily commute, make it possible for a household to manage with one car instead of two, and/ or reduce expenses.

CAR-SHARING

DESCRIPTION

Car-shares offer pre-screened members access to shared vehicles for short-term use at an hourly or daily rate. Cars are typically self-service, using apps for remote access, and vehicles may come from a dedicated fleet or be owned by members. The service works best in dense areas where many users can conveniently access the cars.

EXAMPLES

Míocar is a membership-based car-sharing service offering 24/7 access to a fleet of electric vehicles in California's San Joaquin Valley. Members can reserve vehicles online or via an app, with rates starting at \$4 per hour or \$35 per day, inclusive of insurance, maintenance, and roadside assistance. In 2024, the program had 13 cars and 5 charging stations, and provided 1,600 trips.²⁶ It is funded with proceeds from California's cap-and-trade emissions program.

Green Raiteros is a sharing service in Huron, California (population 6,000). In addition to cars, it connects riders with volunteer drivers.

CONSIDERATIONS

Car-sharing offers a convenient and cost-effective alternative to car ownership for occasional drivers and households with more drivers than cars. It works best in neighborhoods with moderate to high population density, where many residents live within walking distance of designated car-share locations. Availability can be limited, especially during peak times, and users may face restrictions on where they can pick up or drop off cars. Additionally, costs can add up for frequent users, making car-sharing less economical than owning a vehicle for those who drive regularly.

RIDE-SHARING

DESCRIPTION

Ride-sharing programs help commuters connect with others traveling to and from similar destinations. The driver is a commuter themself and uses their personal vehicle. In addition to connecting riders, the programs may offer other supports to encourage participation, such as an emergency-ride-home benefit that guarantees users a ride if they or their driver has an emergency, such as an illness.

EXAMPLE

GO MAINE, a program of the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) and the Maine Turnpike Authority, is a free app that helps travelers connect with ride-sharing and public transit opportunities. Users can enter their destination and find others nearby looking to carpool. It also shows any available bus or van options. MDOT's goal is for GO MAINE to become a "one stop statewide platform" for those looking for transportation alternatives.

Workers at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard (PNS) can receive up to \$1,500 annually for commuting expenses through the Navy's Transportation Incentive Program. One recent PNS publication listed 50 independently operated vanpools originating in communities across southern Maine and New Hampshire. 27

CONSIDERATIONS

Ride-sharing helps with longer commutes where public transportation is not an option – for instance, between Greater Portland and Augusta. Rider groups may form based on employment at a common business or location.

WORKFORCE TRANSPORTATION

DESCRIPTION

Employers are recognizing the impact of transportation challenges on their employees, and some have taken action to help. Typically, this involves providing commuter vans for workers at specific businesses, either subsidized or operated by the employers.

EXAMPLES

WorxLink is an on-demand, subscription shuttle service available to anyone who lives and works in Lewiston or Auburn. Panolam Surface Systems, a manufacturer several miles from downtown Auburn, is the biggest user and pays for its employees' fares. Its night shift sometimes extends beyond midnight, when city buses no longer run. WorxLink started with about 20 trips a day and now provides over 60, with a focus on riders working afternoon and night shifts. WorxLink is operated by Western Maine Transportation Services and was launched in collaboration with Strengthen LA, an initiative of the Lewiston Auburn Chamber of Commerce. The 18-month pilot has been extended to three years thanks to additional funding.

The Maine Department of Transportation has used \$5 million of American Rescue Plan Act funds for workforce transportation pilots at several large employers, including Sunday River, Sugarloaf, and Saddleback ski resorts, Bath Iron Works, and Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.

CONSIDERATIONS

These programs are best suited to large employers operating predictable shift schedules. There have also been efforts by groups of smaller employers, such as those in tourist destinations where housing is expensive and seasonal workers must commute from less expensive areas.

DEMAND-RESPONSE SERVICE

DESCRIPTION

Demand-response services offer door-to-door (or "curb-to-curb") transportation that riders must schedule in advance. These are most common in small cities and rural areas where riders and destinations are spread over a wide area.

EXAMPLE

Every day, Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) deploys 18 vans to homes and businesses across its region, providing as many as 1,000 door-to-door rides to older adults, people with disabilities, and residents with low incomes. Most riders (about 85%) are MaineCare recipients going to and from medical appointments. Rides must be scheduled 24 hours in advance. In 2023, KVCAP provided over 127,000 trips within Kennebec and Somerset counties.²⁸

CONSIDERATIONS

Demand-response services are the primary form of public transportation in Maine's rural areas. They are largely funded by and serve MaineCare recipients, since that program is legally required to provide transportation for non-emergency medical visits. MaineCare funding has strict limitations. For example, it will cover a trip to the pharmacy inside a grocery store but does not allow riders extra time for shopping.

While demand-response services can be convenient, they require advance scheduling, are impractical for daily commutes, and cost more on a per-rider basis than fixed-route transit. As always, families encounter additional challenges, such as ensuring a van has a properly installed car seat. These services also lack flexibility, making it difficult to handle last-minute transportation needs, like picking up a sick child from school.



COVID really opened people's eyes to workforce needs."

Brian Pickard, Vice President of Finance and Operations Lewiston-Auburn Metro Chamber of Commerce

COMMUNITY STRATEGIES (CONTINUED)

MICROTRANSIT

DESCRIPTION

Microtransit is similar to demand-response but uses technology that allows people to request and pay for rides with less advance notice using an app, which also helps providers coordinate routes. It utilizes vans or shuttles operated by professional drivers.

EXAMPLE

In 2021, Montpelier, Vermont (population 8,000) replaced its three fixed-route buses with a microtransit service. MyRide now provides about 3,000 rides per month in three vehicles operating within a 12-square-mile service area. Travelers can book rides by app or phone and all rides are free. MyRide's goal is to pick up riders within 15 minutes of their request.

CONSIDERATIONS

Microtransit works best in communities with some density but not enough to support a fixed-route system. An evaluation of microtransit pilots in Virginia identified several uses for rural communities, including: servicing high-need populations (e.g., older residents and those with disabilities), replacing underutilized fixed-route services, and "first/last mile connections" that help travelers in outlying areas reach public transit hubs.²⁹

The switch to microtransit in Montpelier has drawn in new riders who appreciate its on-demand convenience, similar to Uber and Lyft. However, others still prefer the predictability of a fixed route. The city plans to bring back one fixed-route bus with stops at key destinations, including a senior living center and the hospital.

FIXED-ROUTE SERVICE

DESCRIPTION

Fixed-route public transportation operates along a predetermined route on a predetermined schedule. It works well in densely populated areas where people live near stops and where a critical mass of riders can support frequent service.

EXAMPLE

Greater Portland Metro operates 13 fixed-route buses in the city of Portland and surrounding communities. They generally run every 30-60 minutes on weekdays and 60-90 minutes on weekends, from approximately 5:00am to 11:00pm Monday-Saturday and 8:00am to 6:00pm on Sundays. In 2024, Greater Portland Metro provided 1.7 million trips.³⁰

CONSIDERATIONS

Fixed-route systems are expensive but have the lowest per-rider costs in urban areas. In Maine, only a few cities (Bangor, Biddeford, Lewiston-Auburn, Portland and neighboring communities) currently have fixed-route transit. Ridership dropped significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic and is still recovering. For families with children, these systems can be challenging unless they offer very frequent service. For example, if a bus runs once an hour, a commuting parent may need to take the bus with their child, drop them off at daycare, and then wait an hour for the next bus before continuing to work.

VOLUNTEER DRIVERS

DESCRIPTION

Volunteer drivers can be a valuable, cost-effective resource for increasing transportation access while fostering positive social interactions for the drivers. They are typically supported by paid staff who assign rides, handle mileage reimbursement, and address any problems that arise. Volunteers typically use their personal vehicles and pay for their own insurance.

EXAMPLE

Penquis, a nonprofit serving Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Knox counties, operates a volunteer driver program with over 100 volunteer drivers as of early 2025. Together with 20 full-time drivers, they provide about 1,000 rides daily, receiving mileage reimbursement based on the IRS's standard rate. Approximately 80% are MaineCare and Medicare patients getting to medical appointments. Many volunteers are retirees, but others come from a wide range of ages and backgrounds, drawn to the program for social connection, community service, or the chance to earn extra income. Penquis emphasizes driver appreciation through program events, gifts, and perks like free car washes.

CONSIDERATIONS

Volunteer drivers can help fill gaps in transportation services when backed by a strong support team. They must pass background and driving record checks and have their own car insurance. Competitive mileage reimbursement serves as an incentive, along with the reassurance that staff assistance is available when needed. Programs can also honor driver requests, such as avoiding service dogs, wheelchairs, or specific rider pairings. While some organizations struggle to recruit and retain drivers, Penquis has seen a recent increase in volunteer inquiries.



POLICY AND FUNDING STRATEGIES

The transportation challenges faced by today's households and transit providers stem from decades of carcentric funding and policy decisions. These choices have created an environment where personal vehicles are essential for everyday life, despite their high cost. Solving these issues will require fresh thinking, a focus on accessibility and sustainability, and coordination across all levels of government, as well as private and community stakeholders.

In approaching this work, there are several opportunities and challenges to consider.

Public Transit Benefits All

Sustainable public transportation systems are rooted in the principle that public transit enhances the quality of life for all community members, not just transit riders. They ease traffic congestion, reduce emissions, and ensure workers can reach their jobs. This benefits all residents by creating cleaner air, smoother commutes, and a more reliable workforce. Government subsidies sustain these benefits, as farebox revenue typically covers only a small portion of transit operating costs.

Reliable transportation also boosts economic activity by helping people maintain employment, seek better jobs, and attend school – key contributors to economic growth. Maine lacks concrete data on how households' current transportation challenges are affecting its economy. Research from other states hints at the potential scale of the benefits of improved transportation. In Minnesota, one group attempted to quantify the societal benefits of a \$450 million investment in public transportation around Minneapolis.31 They estimate that a 20% reduction in vehicle miles traveled will save residents \$91 billion by 2050; changes to traffic lights and lane striping to prioritize buses will save transit riders 781,000 hours annually; and reduced car crashes will prevent 65 deaths and 1,000 injuries per year.

Today, a growing collection of Maine nonprofits, employers, and economic developers are turning to public transportation as a shared solution to multiple challenges. While organizations supporting working families have long seen the need for better transit options, employers are recognizing its role in securing a reliable workforce.



use public transit if you have to sit somewhere for an It all comes down to investment. You're not going to hour and a half or two hours before you return."

> Kirk Bellavance, Senior Transportation Director Kennebec Valley Community Action Program

The Rural Challenge

Public transportation works best where many riders travel between similar locations at similar times, enabling efficient, fixed-route service. In rural areas, sparse populations make this difficult to achieve. Routes would be limited and infrequent, which is expensive and discourages ridership. Most of Maine's rural transit providers use a demand-response system where people schedule rides in advance (sometimes up to a few days) and are picked up at their door. Occasionally, providers can coordinate the trips of multiple riders but sometimes they must drive an empty vehicle for miles to remote homes. Long trips on country roads mean higher fuel and labor costs, and extra wear and tear on vehicles. For instance, in 2023 Kennebec Valley Community Action Program provided 8% as many rides as Greater Portland Metro (127,892 compared to 1,694,203) but their vehicles traveled approximately the same distance (1,382,233 and 1,377,464 miles, respectively).32

There is no rural transit model that matches the efficiency of urban, fixed-route systems. Despite providers' best efforts, many services are expensive, even by their own assessment. Several rural providers mentioned their one-way fares of \$5 or \$10 being too high for riders to pay on a regular basis, especially if traveling with multiple family members. This creates a chicken-and-egg problem where high fares suppress demand for a service that can only be offered at a lower rate if ridership increases. It also challenges providers to show the need for their services to skeptical decision makers.



In rural areas, you're serving the acutely low income riders. It's not as simple as just charging them more."

Erin Binghalib, Former Senior Transportation Director Kennebec Valley Community Action Program



Funding Challenges

Many efforts to improve transportation options for Maine families have quickly run into funding obstacles. Local transit agencies do not have tax authority or a dedicated funding source large enough to cover ongoing costs, which leaves them in a constant search for funding. With the state's Highway Fund reserved for roads and bridges, and priorities leaning heavily toward those areas, public transit has been underfunded for many years. Even when federal or state grants are available, providers must secure local matching funds, which primarily come from municipalities. This approach creates a continual funding challenge and sets Maine apart from other states with more stable transit funding structures. It also disadvantages communities with small tax bases that struggle to raise match funds.

The majority of the State of Maine's public transit funds go to the Maine State Ferry Service (MSFS), despite accounting for a relatively small share of ridership. In 2023, the state's 19 over-the-road (bus and van) publictransportation agencies provided 81% of Maine's public-transportation rides and received 19% of the state's public-transportation funds. MSFS and Downeaster rail service received 62% and 19%, respectively. The chart below shows the amount of state money granted to service providers divided by the number of times people boarded their vehicles. MSFS received the equivalent of \$13.87 per rider, the Amtrak Downeaster received \$3.77, and over-the-road transit providers received \$0.45.

STATE OF MAINE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FUNDING PER BOARDING, 2023



Federal Transit Administration, National Transit Database; funding per boarding

A Fragmented System

Despite the general lack of public transportation in Maine (or perhaps because of it), on any given day the roads are busy with various transit providers serving specific groups. In some larger communities, there may be daily services for community college students, four-year college students, public school children, veterans, older residents, MaineCare recipients, cancer patients, commuters going to a specific business, and participants of certain social services, such as foster care youth and workforce development programs. This fragmented system results from the patchwork of funding sources that fuel Maine's transportation system. Each typically comes with guidelines about who providers can serve and within what geographic area. Many providers would like to offer more general services to a wider ridership. There appears to be untapped potential to better coordinate these resources.



POSSIBLE APPROACHES MOVING FORWARD

As Maine navigates these opportunities and challenges, we can look to existing models for guidance in creating a transportation system that better serves the needs of families and all users across the state. While Mobility Management offers a framework for centering the needs of users across transportation modes, alternative approaches to funding prioritization could widen the public benefit of our transportation investments.

Mobility Management: A New Approach

Mobility management is a relatively new approach to coordinating and delivering diverse transportation services that center on the needs of riders rather than a particular mode of transportation. The National Center for Mobility Management describes two core activities of this practice:33

1. Connecting people to the transportation options that best get them to their destinations.

A mobility management model would create a centralized service of "mobility managers" who are well informed about local transportation options and can help customers access them appropriately based on their need. Currently, most providers operate independently, serving only specific populations for specific needs, and they cannot help riders who fall outside their funding guidelines.

2. Working across sectors to understand people's transportation needs and create services that respond to those needs.

A mobility management approach acknowledges that increased funding alone will not improve our transportation system. It will require better coordination of services, a more expansive menu of transportation options, and a more client-centric outlook.

In York County, several organizations are coming together to create a Mobility Management Hub, intended to be a model for other regions. The effort, led by York County Community Action Corporation with help from Moving Maine Network and Southern Maine Planning and Development Commission, will include development of a "One-Call, One Click" service that allows travelers to access and schedule rides across all transportation providers and funders, and the creation of the York County Mobility Network, a "multi-sector workgroup" that provides an ongoing forum for local transportation providers and stakeholders to coordinate activities and investments.

Reimagining Transportation Investments

In order to create a transportation system that allows all Maine families to thrive, we must place a higher priority on addressing the hurdles they face. This includes reshaping how public funds are allocated to ensure that all residents benefit, not just those with cars. It would also require developing a clearer understanding of the economic impact of transportation access and rethinking the process by which public transportation funds are allocated to allow for transparency and goal setting.

Based on a survey of practices across all fifty states, the Brookings Institution concludes, "Most states do not publicly explain why they build specific projects, including whether those projects address their long-range plans. Thirty-three states fail to use any public-facing project selection systems, making it nearly impossible for stakeholders to understand why specific projects were chosen to receive funding."³⁴ Maine is one of them. The report points to the State of Virginia's Smart Scale approach as a model for others. It is a transparent process for rating projects according to their potential impact on six factors: safety, traffic flow, accessibility, economic growth, land use, and the environment. Localities, transit agencies, and regional entities can submit projects across all transportation modes, which are scored in the six areas. These public scores guide development of Virginia's Six-Year Improvement Plan.



Conclusion

This report highlights a growing body of work that places the needs of families at the heart of transportation investments. Decades of car-centric policies have disadvantaged those without access to personal vehicles, but a blend of short-term solutions and long-term policy shifts can help level the playing field. A wealth of research and the firsthand experiences of professionals in the field point to three key principles to guide this work:

- Recognize transportation as essential to economic independence and opportunity.
- Support families in overcoming immediate transportation obstacles.
- Drive long-term change by placing the needs of families at the heart of transportation investments, and adopting a more holistic approach to transportation planning and coordination.

With support from a wide range of stakeholders - including family advocates, businesses, and nonprofit organizations - there is momentum to invest in solutions that put families first. By rebalancing resources and fostering collaboration, Maine can move toward a transportation system that improves the quality of life of all residents and opens doors for more opportunities.

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