# Transportation Access is Essential

Accessible Transportation



# Accessible transportation is the foundation of participation in society — necessary for employment, education, healthcare, services, and social connection. Yet, for many Minnesotans with disabilities, especially in rural communities, meaningful access is missing. When transportation systems fail, the result is isolation, missed opportunities, poor health outcomes, and economic exclusion. For nearly 9% of Minnesotans without a driver’s license, reliable transportation is the difference between economic participation and dependence. We cannot afford to underinvest or ignore this fundamental need.

Transportation equity is not only a civil rights issue, but also an economic one. Reliable transportation for disabled Minnesotans improves workforce participation, reduces health costs, and strengthens community well-being. We can no longer afford to treat accessible transportation as an afterthought. It’s time to prioritize it as a critical component of Minnesota’s infrastructure, now and for the future.

Minnesotans report frequent delays, long waits for rides, and unsafe or inaccessible options. One advocate recalled working in a warehouse with no predictable ride home, waiting alone for hours. It was unsafe and unnecessary and yet, a common experience.

From missed medical appointments to limited job options, the impact of inaccessible transportation is real and measurable. In Minneapolis, even the cheapest reliable option (paratransit) must be scheduled a day in advance and is limited to one destination, an enormous challenge for workers or caregivers.

# Factors Contributing to the Lack of Accessible Transportation

* Accessible public transportation in urban areas includes limited space for wheelchair users. For example, MetroTransit in the Twin Cities designates 2 spaces per accessible bus. If the designated spaces are already in use, wheelchair users often must wait for the next scheduled bus. (1)
* Rideshare hailing companies like Uber and Lyft as well as taxi companies continue to fight against complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act and their accessibility is woefully lacking. (2)
* Transportation agencies and non-emergency medical transportation providers often partner with ridesharing companies to provide efficient in-demand transportation to ambulatory riders while wheelchair users continue to rely upon the traditional paratransit next-day services. (3)
* Websites and apps for making reservations for transportation services are not accessible and do not meet current accessibility standards, especially for people with low-vision or blindness. Additionally, people with disabilities are often required to call to get information, make reservations, or get a discount.
* It is dangerous for people with disabilities who use mobility devices such as wheelchairs to travel by air. Many are injured, equipment is frequently damaged, and some have died as a result of unsafe conditions. Self-driving or autonomous vehicles are not currently designed for accessibility.
* Snow removal rules and enforcement vary by municipality, and information about them is often difficult to find. (4)
* Low density and scattered housing make it di cult to run fixed-route public transportation systems efficiently.
* Public transportation in rural Minnesota is limited to mostly dial-a-ride services which generally operate between 7 AM – 6 PM weekdays, often provide next-day service, and do not cross county lines which limits access to employment, healthcare, and retailers. (5)

# Previous Programs and Policies

* A partnership between Minnesota Department of Transportation, City of Grand Rapids, The PLUM Catalyst, May Mobility, Department of Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation, Itasca County, Via, University of Minnesota, Arrowhead Transit, and Mobility Mania called go MARTI (Minnesota's Autonomous Rural Transit Initiative) is piloting the use of autonomous and accessible transportation option for residents and visitors in Grand Rapids, MN through Spring 2024.(6)
* In 2019 Dakota County’s Transit Coordination Assistance Project partnered with Lyft to reduce barriers for older adults and residents with disabilities. More than 750 individuals were part of the program as of July 2021, averaging 19 trips each month. 81% of riders reported that Lyft has reduced their transportation barriers. (7)
* In June 2023 Delta flight products in partnership with Air4All revealed a new airplane seat design that would allow wheelchair users to remain in their own chair during flights. This is just a prototype and is expected to take at least 18 months to be commercially available. (8)
* Traverse City, MI partners with businesses near bus stops to clear snow and maintain accessibility of the bus stop all winter. Sponsorship of individual bus stops is documented on the transit authority’s website. (4)

# Policy Recommendations

Recent reductions in disability transportation funding put thousands at risk. Cuts to public transit, paratransit, and community-based programs have increased barriers for non-drivers, especially those with mobility, sensory, or cognitive disabilities. This increases strain on healthcare, education, and employment systems statewide. At the same time, technological advances in transportation, rideshare services, autonomous vehicles, and digital scheduling, are evolving without accessibility standards. This leaves Minnesotans with disabilities excluded from the systems shaping our future.

We recommend and support the following solutions and urge policymakers to consider using multiple approaches as the current systemic need is complex and long overdue:

Protect and expand funding for disability-focused transportation programs, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Avoid further cuts that deepen disparities.

* **Invest in reliability and flexibility**, not just availability. People need to get where they’re going when they need to, safely and affordably.
* **Mandate accessibility** for all transportation innovations — including apps, rideshare services, and autonomous vehicles.
* **Incentivize inclusion** by offering grants or tax incentives to companies expanding accessible vehicle fleets or infrastructure.
* **Support data collection and evaluation** to better understand the full transportation needs of Minnesotans with disabilities.
* **Elevate lived experience** in transportation planning by including people with disabilities in decision-making roles.

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