

Tribal Transportation: Issues and Successful Models



Tribal transportation needs are similar to the needs of most people who live in rural areas, yet there may be greater challenges. Without transportation, many Tribal members cannot participate in their Tribal community events or access critical services, such as medical care. Many residents of Tribal lands must depend upon friends, church members, Tribal councilmen, and neighbors for rides to medical centers, Tribal-wide community events, schools, and jobs. However, others are unable to access any transportation and may be unable to access medical care or food or maintain long-term employment.

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Conditions unique to the reservation complicate the mobility problems for many Tribes and nations. Social barriers and tremendous geographic distances across Tribal lands make Tribal transportation services more difficult to initiate and maintain. There are multiple layers of government – local, state, federal, and Tribal – that Tribes must deal with when establishing and operating a transportation system. However, even in the face of such challenges, many Tribes and nations have developed transportation systems designed to meet the needs of their people as well as the general public living in the surrounding regions.

Tribal Sovereignty

“Tribal sovereignty ensures that any decisions about the tribes with regard to their property and citizens are made with their participation and consent” (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2016). Tribal rights of self-government are recognized and protected by the U.S. Constitution, legislation, treaties, judicial decisions, and administrative practice. At the time of this writing, the U.S. government officially recognizes 574 Tribes as sovereign nations. Federal recognition means that Tribes can use federal funds for transportation; without that recognition, states may choose to contract with Tribes for transportation, but they are not obligated to do so.

Federal transportation funds are allocated to the states based on total population, which includes American Indians and Alaska Natives. Developing transportation on Tribal lands and Indian reservations involves considerable communications between the Tribe and the State Department of Transportation (DOT), local city governments, and possibly other non-Tribal transit providers. Some Tribes have working relationships with their states, while others have little or no dialogue with state officials. In order to provide an effective transportation service for Tribes in keeping with their sovereign nation status, a Tribal/state/local relationship must be established and maintained on a case-by-case basis.

Funding

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Tribal Transit Program was established under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users or SAFETEA-LU in 2006 as part of the Section 5311 program. The program has continued through successive reauthorizations, most recently in 2021 through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, Public Law 117-58, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, or BIL).

Tribes may receive funding for transportation programs through FTA Section 5311 (Formula Grants for Rural Areas), 5311(c)(1)(B) (Tribal Transit Formula Grants), Section 5310 (Enhanced Mobility of Seniors & Individuals with Disabilities), and Section 5307 (Urbanized Area Formula Grants). Section 5311(j) formula funds are distributed to federally-recognized Tribes providing public transportation on Tribal lands. Section 5311 formula program apportionments funds to Tribes using the three tiers based on National Transit Database (NTD) data.

Only federally-recognized Tribes are eligible recipients under the Tribal Transit Program. Nonetheless, Tribes, which are not federally-recognized, remain eligible to apply to the state as subrecipients under their state's apportionment for 5310, 5311, or 5307 funding. Additional FTA funding is available through competitive grants and is announced through notices of funding opportunities (NOFO) at various times throughout the year.

Tribes as Section 5311 State Subrecipients

If the neighboring Tribe receives funding through the Section 5311 program, it is often the case that the state is the FTA direct recipient, and the Tribe is considered a subrecipient of the state. As a subrecipient of the state, the Tribe has the same grant program administration requirements and responsibilities as other Tribal and non-Tribal Section 5311 subrecipients. Tribal subrecipients enter into written agreements with the state that indicate the terms and conditions of assistance for their project, and the state submits certifications, assurances, and NTD data to the federal government on their behalf.

Tribes as Section 5311 Direct Recipients

Federally-recognized Indian Tribes or Alaska Native villages, groups, or communities identified by the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) annual Federal Register listing of Indian Entities Recognized and Eligible to Receive Services from the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs are eligible direct recipients under the Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Program (Tribal Transit Program) in Section 5311(c)(1). Federally-recognized Tribes may also elect to become direct recipients under Section 5311 in lieu of being subrecipients under a state 5311 program. As a direct Tribal Transit Program recipient, Tribal requirements are slightly different from those under the Section 5311 program.

For questions about Tribal transit funding and FTA's role in Tribal transportation, Tribes may contact their Tribal Liaison. Each FTA Region (except Region 3) has a designated FTA Tribal Liaison. See FTA's Regional Tribal Liaisons webpage, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/federal-transit-administrations-regional-tribal-liaisons>, for a list with their names and email links. This webpage also lists FTA contact information about the Tribal Transit Program.

Additional Tribal Transportation Funding

Additional federal Tribal transportation funding is available from (but not limited to) the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Administration on Aging (AoA), Administration for Native Americans (ANA), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Department of Agriculture (USDA). Tribes must apply for federal funding through Grants.gov. There are also state and local government sources of funding, as well as grants available through philanthropic institutions.

Coordination

Transportation coordination is an important way for Tribal transportation services to work together and/or to work with non-Tribal transportation services to create a transportation system that is cost-effective and rider-efficient. Coordination connects transportation providers with groups needing transportation to improve people's ability to get to health care, jobs, education, and needed services, especially in isolated rural areas. A need to coordinate transportation can occur because several human services programs, like senior nutrition programs, assist the general public as well as Tribal members within the service areas. In order to come up with an effective plan for transportation coordination, Tribes should identify their needs and the extent of transportation services already in place to avoid duplication of services.

Potential coordination partners can include, but are not limited to:

- Head Start programs
- Schools, colleges, or universities
- Day care centers
- Alcohol and substance abuse centers
- Tribal industries
- Nursing homes, assisted, and independent senior living centers
- Medical centers
- Transit agencies
- Nutrition sites
- Boys and Girls Clubs of America

Coordination can be as simple as sharing information on the transportation needs of agencies and their Tribal members and working together to meet these needs through existing programs:

- A group can join together informally for staff training activities.
- Agencies can coordinate their vehicle maintenance in a single facility.
- Dispatching of several agencies' vehicles can be coordinated at one site.
- An existing agency can oversee the transportation activities of several agencies.
- An agency can be created to broker transportation services among separate providers.
- An independent agency can be created to assume all the transportation responsibilities for a Tribe.

- A quarterly regional group meeting consisting of local transportation agencies and stakeholders to discuss transportation obstacles and solutions in their regional area.

Coordination Case Study: The Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin

The Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin coordinates its Public Transit system with a number of other reservation service providers to meet the needs of the community while making the best use of existing resources.

The transit system uses coordination to enhance access to employment, health care, recreation, education, and public transit for the Menominee people. Menominee Regional Transit was organized in 1982 as a small service mainly used by older adults. However, as word spread that the service was available to everyone, ridership grew. Menominee Regional Transit began partnering with Menominee travel day care, the Commission on Aging, the Tribal School, W2 Works, and the Indian Head Start Program. Today, the agency provides fixed-route service and ADA Complementary Paratransit, Reserve-a-Ride service, school tripper service, and public transportation service to the entire state of Wisconsin.

Tribal Transportation and Economic Development

Transportation plays a key role in economic development for Tribes, whether on or off reservations, to bring economic growth to their members. Linking people to their community through work, health care, social events, and shopping is essential to a strong economic future.

In 2021, the Tribal Transit Study: Demographic Needs Indicators, Funding Needs and Livability by the Small Urban and Rural Center on Mobility (SURCOM) at the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute at North Dakota State University identified small urban and rural Indian Tribes and reservations throughout the U.S. that had the most significant transit needs.

The researchers found that in the average Tribal area:

- 19% of the population is aged 65 or older
- 16% has a disability
- 27% has a household income below the poverty level
- 9% are living in a household with no vehicle

About 60% of survey respondents answered that they had used public transit services. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for public transit to be available to their community residents.

Tribal Transportation and Economic Development Case Study: Sitka Tribe of Alaska

The Sitka Tribe of Alaska, an Indian Reorganization Act Tribal government, is made up of over 4,000 Tribal citizens whose community is located on Baranof Island in Alaska. The Tribe included transportation in its plan for economic development by creating tourism transportation in 1994.

Shortly after the visitor's transit service was started, the Tribe held discussions on opening a public transportation system. In 1997, with the help of the Community Transportation Association of

America (CTAA), the Tribe formed a community committee that included Tribal organizations, businesses, schools, non-profits, city officials, and hospitals. In 1999, CTAA awarded the Sitka Tribe a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) technical assistant grant that enabled the Tribe to hire a consultant.

The consultant helped the committee to identify existing transportation providers and the community's remaining needs, which enabled the community to recognize key issues, such as employment, and medical access. Armed with information, the committee created a management plan and sought funding from FTA Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) and USDA grants. After successfully receiving funding from FTA and JARC, the Sitka Tribe began a fixed route service.

Today, the nonprofit Center for Community oversees Sitka's transportation program, with help from two main partners — Sitka Tribe of Alaska operates the RIDE (fixed-route service) and Southeast Senior Services operates the Care-A-Van (ADA complementary paratransit).

The Sitka Tribe and its partners have implemented several innovative programs that enhance the economic development of the region and provide greater opportunities for residents. The first was a program of free vouchers for fixed-route service to human service agencies – the plan identified low-income populations that were unable to even pay a low fee. The second was a new program that could provide grant funding for human service agencies to purchase vehicles, which became institutionalized and is currently relied on by transit agencies.

Tribal Transportation and Economic Development Case Study: Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

Some Tribes perform integrated transit planning and Tribal comprehensive planning as part of their Tribal economic development strategy and Tribal vision. For example, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation sought to identify and bring under Tribal control as much of the existing historic Tribal lands as possible. They have ongoing existing Tribal rights for employment, hunting, and gathering within the area. When they developed a transportation system, they wanted to create one that allowed members to access jobs throughout their historic lands. It was one way to take Tribal values and provide a presence in ceded lands and Tribal lands.

Successful Tribal Transit Program Case Studies

Blackfeet Nation: Blackfeet Transit

There are over 17,000 members of the Blackfeet Nation, which is one of the ten largest Tribes in the U.S. Their 1.5 million acre Reservation is in Northwest Montana. The Reservation borders Alberta, Canada to the north and shares its western border with the Glacier National Park in an extremely rural setting. Therefore, the Tribal transit system also incorporates the City of Browning in its service area. The transit service also provides transportation service to Kalispell, Great Falls, Shelby, Cutbank, and more.

Since 1978, Blackfeet Transit meets the mobility needs of the transit-dependent population on the Blackfeet Reservation, including those individuals with disabilities, people who are not able to drive,

and those without their own means of transportation. It is a public service available to all regardless of age, income, or Tribal status. Seniors, persons with disabilities, and children ride free, and all other trips cost \$1.00.

Currently, Blackfeet Transit offers on-demand and pre-booking rides within the Blackfeet Nation and to and from neighboring cities. The service provides a full-time dispatcher available Monday-Friday to receive calls for rides from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM.

Pueblo of Laguna Shaa'srk'a Transit Program

The Pueblo of Laguna reservation is located 45 miles east of Albuquerque in rural New Mexico. The reservation consists of approximately 500,000 acres of land situated in Cibola, Valencia, Bernalillo, and Sandoval counties. The U.S. Census estimated that in 2019, there were 3,901 residents living in Laguna Pueblo and Off-Reservation Trust Land.

The combined efforts of the Pueblo of Laguna Tribal Council and the Community Health Representative (CHR) Program developed the Shaa'srk'a Transit Program in 1998. CHR provides several community-based health services, including non-emergency medical transportation. CHR both tracked the different requests for transportation (medical, employment, shopping) from the residents and conducted a survey among 1,077 Tribal homes to learn of the reservation's need for transportation. Results from the survey showed that 33% of Pueblo Laguna families had no reliable transportation to access services on or off of the reservation. Using the information from the survey, CHR and the Tribal Council wrote an application for 5311 funds in 1998. By 1999 the Pueblo of Laguna's Shaa'srk'a Transit Program began a demand-response service with a 15 passenger, lift-equipped van.

Pueblo of Laguna's Shaa'srk'a Transit Program has grown since its inception to now serve its community through both demand-response and fixed-route service. Shaa'srk'a Transit also offers route deviation services through the public transportation services within the reservation and service area. Services are from 6:30 AM to 5:30 PM, Monday through Friday. Fares range from \$0.50 to \$0.75 for children, seniors, and persons with disabilities. Free services are available for eligible dialysis clients through the Laguna Medical Transportation program.

In addition to its daily transportation service, Shaa'srk'a Transit has a key role in the Pueblo of Laguna Emergency Management Program as the Transit Coordinator. Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and other state resources support Pueblo's well-coordinated emergency management plan.

Coordination of services within the area is critical in Shaa'srk'a Transit's ability to meet the high demand and needs within the area. Shaa'srk'a coordinates rides with the CHR program and the local Indian Health Services hospital for medical transit, as well as the Department of Education for after-school and other special workforce/training programs. The reservation's public transit also provides support to the senior service programs.

Tribal Transportation Program of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation

The Tribal Transportation Program of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation provides transit services within the eleven counties of the MCN Tribal reservation boundaries. These services are available to

anyone residing in these communities. Tribal Transportation Coordinator Amy Hill, Transit Manager Kogee Spaniard, and their team have been hard at work over the past year delivering safe and efficient transportation to all.

They've grown to two transportation hubs and are utilizing low-emission vehicles, again, thanks to FTA funding. Many of their staff has been with them since their beginning and the program takes special care to recognize their elders.

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians: Choctaw Transit

The Choctaw Indian Reservation consists of 35,000 acres of trust land throughout 10 counties in east central Mississippi. Choctaw Transit is operated by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and provides transit service to an estimated 18,500 members of the Tribe, as well as individuals in the surrounding communities.

One of the Band's Number One Priorities is to take care of their elders. The Choctaw Cultural Legacy has a webpage dedicated to Tribal elders (<http://choctawculturallegacy.com/meet-our-elders/>) who contributed their cultural knowledge and shared their life stories about growing up in the Choctaw communities.

Jeremy Bell, Choctaw Transit Interim Director, showed how Choctaw Transit continued to provide outstanding service during the COVID-19 pandemic in our Best Practices Spotlight - <https://bit.ly/3BeXgV7>, and stresses that "it wasn't just one person, it was everyone." Choctaw Transit has been providing food deliveries to seven communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, starting the deliveries by 10:30 AM each day, and has even helped an elder obtain a much-needed wheelchair ramp for their home.

With collaboration between the governing bodies of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, the City of Meridian, and coordination with the Mississippi Department of Transportation, Choctaw Transit has been providing services to the city of Meridian (population 37, 848) since March 2015. The city had previously been without any kind of transit service for several years and with planning and collaboration, an agreement was signed in January 2015. Today, Choctaw Transit transportation services are provided Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM.

Bois Forte Band of Chippewa: Big Woods Transit

Bois Forte Band of Chippewa's local bus service Big Woods Transit serves Nett Lake, Orr, Cook, Vermillion, and Virginia, Minnesota. Dial-A-Ride and commuter routes are available to the public. Transportation routes are provided daily from the client's home to the destination.

Many of Big Woods Transit's changes have been quite innovative. For example, there was concern about shut-ins during the COVID-19 pandemic, so the agency repurposed their oldest bus to start delivering both fresh food boxes (meat, cheese, vegetables, etc.) and shelf-stable food boxes. They also delivered a phone blast about their "food bus" so community members could come to the bus and take their food "to go." They even used the bus wheelchair lifts to load boxes to take to other public food shelves for food-compromised community members.

Jennie Rowland, Big Woods Transit Transportation Manager, saw the need for more help for people to get to medical appointments during the pandemic and started a volunteer driver program that grew to 8 drivers in its first year. Drivers use their own vehicles and are paid above the required per-diem mileage rate. The agency currently drives three regular dialysis patients to the nearest clinic, which is 67 miles away from the reservation. An FTA Tribal Transit grant supplied funding for the agency to purchase four 1-wheelchair mini-vans for non-emergency medical transportation. By really thinking outside the box, the agency wrote policies and developed a program where community members can borrow the van to take family members to medical appointments. The vans can also be driven by staff or volunteer drivers, and if the family needs help paying for gas for the medical trip if they drive themselves, Big Wood Transit pays.

Big Woods Transit drivers go above and beyond, brushing snow off cars when they bring commuters to the Park-and-Ride and staying close-by to make sure their riders' cars start (temperatures can drop to below 40°C in Minnesota).

Conclusion

American Indian reservations are particularly vulnerable to the challenges where the need for accessible, affordable transportation is clear, distances are great, and personal transportation is not a reliable or viable option. However, with continuing support from the FTA, there are more options for Tribes to create solutions for affordable and accessible transportation. In addition to increased federal funding through FTA and other federal agencies, coordination of transportation services is an important tool in making all available services accessible to more people. Transportation is a key element in a Tribe's economic growth, health, and overall quality of life of its members. The highlighted programs in this technical brief provide examples of how many Tribes are ensuring that their members have access to essential services and the mobility to travel to wherever they need and want to go.

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Further Information

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