Funding Focused Transit Manager Peer Roundtable Summary

October 1, 2025

We held a Rural Transit Peer Roundtable on Funding on October 1, 2025. Participants discussed funding strategies, challenges, and opportunities in rural transit. This roundtable explored innovative approaches and exchanged practical solutions for sustaining and expanding rural transportation services.

Participants:
Julie Sweeney (North Fork Area Transit – Norfolk, NE), Amanda Nava Estill (Southwest Georgia Regional Commission), Doreen Abrahamsen (Director of the Essex County Public Transportation), Crystal Gauthier (City of Brainerd and Crowing County Public Transit), Becky Carten-Crandell (Director of Interurban Transit Authority), Lyn McCarthy (Hope Link), Robin Phillips (National RTAP), Jeremy Bell (National RTAP), Julia Castillo (HIRTA) Jonnie Kusek (Director of Transportation for Open Points Transit), Cheryl Paquette (City of Carnation), Tracy Jones (SMTS), Debbie Elders (Southeast Missouri Transportation Company) and other rural transit professionals.

Discussion Overview

This Transit Manager Peer Roundtable brought together transit and mobility professionals to share experiences, identify new funding streams, and discuss ways to strengthen rural transportation and healthcare coordination. Facilitated by *Enjoli Dixon*, the conversation explored innovative partnerships, sustainable grant strategies, and the use of technology to improve service delivery and access across rural communities.

Participants represented a broad range of transit systems and perspectives—from operations and coordination to funding and innovation. *Julie Sweeney* opened the conversation by sharing that North Fork Area Transit operates under the FTA 5311 Rural Formula Grant Program, setting the stage for a discussion around key federal and community-based funding sources.

Funding and Grant Opportunities

Participants discussed numerous funding opportunities available to rural transit providers, organized by type and source:

Federal Programs:

- Formula Grants for Rural Areas (5311): *Julie Sweeney* confirmed that her agency participates in this foundational program supporting rural mobility.
- Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG): Introduced by *Robin Phillips* and expanded upon by *Enjoli Dixon*, this program enhances transportation access for veterans in remote areas.
- Rural Health Transformation Program: *Robin Phillips* shared details about this Health and Human Services (HHS) initiative supporting innovative technology use, cybersecurity, and digital health integration—linking directly to rural transit coordination efforts.
- Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES): *Enjoli Dixon* highlighted this U.S. DOT initiative addressing infrastructure investment barriers in rural regions.

Health and Community Foundations:

Enjoli Dixon shared several health-related and charitable funding opportunities including:

- Health Forward Foundation
- American Kidney Fund Safety Net Grants
- Hearst Foundations
- Labcorp Charitable Foundation
- American Society of Nephrology Grants & Funding
- US ACT on Health Equity: Community Engagement and Investments

Local and Private Resources:

Participants discussed local-level resources and private partnerships:

- Local Infrastructure Hub – recommended by *Enjoli Dixon*, with a reminder to check each state's hub for eligibility.
- MileOneCares Funding Portal – shared by *Enjoli Dixon* as an emerging platform for community-based funding.
- Rural Community Development Initiative Grants (USDA) – identified as a strong opportunity for small, capacity-building rural programs.

- Company giving and corporate social responsibility funds were also mentioned as valuable supplemental sources for smaller systems. Example: JB Hunt

During the conversation, *Crystal Gauthier* noted she had not previously heard of several of these opportunities, reflecting the value of the peer exchange. *Becky Carten-Crandell* expressed appreciation for the shared information before leaving the session, stating she looked forward to reviewing the notes.

Collaboration and Innovation

A key theme of the roundtable was the power of cross-sector collaboration, especially between healthcare and transit agencies.

Robin Phillips initiated a discussion on HHS Access to Healthcare Grants, which led to dialogue around aligning transportation with healthcare services. She also suggested coordination with One Call/One Click systems and "transportation at the point of appointment reservations," noting that the regionalization of health services under HHS underscores the need for regional transit coordination.

Participants explored how technology could bridge rural healthcare and mobility needs, such as through shared scheduling platforms, data integration, and remote service coordination. These innovations were seen as essential tools to improve efficiency, rider experience, and access to care in sparsely populated areas.

Upcoming Opportunities

Enjoli Dixon reminded participants about the upcoming National RTAP 2025 Conference in Austin, TX, highlighting it as a continued space for learning, networking, and cross-agency collaboration.

Closing Reflections

As the session wrapped up, *Lyn McCarthy*, *Crystal Gauthier*, *Doreen Abrahamsen*, and *Amanda Nava Estill* thanked the group for their insights. *Amanda Nava Estill* closed with:

"Thank you! Great conversation. Looking forward to the next one."

Participants expressed interest in future sessions focused on joint funding applications, regional partnerships, and integrated healthcare-transit coordination projects. The group agreed that peer learning through National RTAP continues to be an invaluable resource for connecting ideas, programs, and professionals serving rural communities

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