



Mobility & Accessible Transportation

Annual Report and Strategic Plan

Tennessee Department of Transportation | March 2024



OMAT Mission Statement

Provide resources and expertise for expanding and improving accessible transportation and mobility across the state.

Introduction

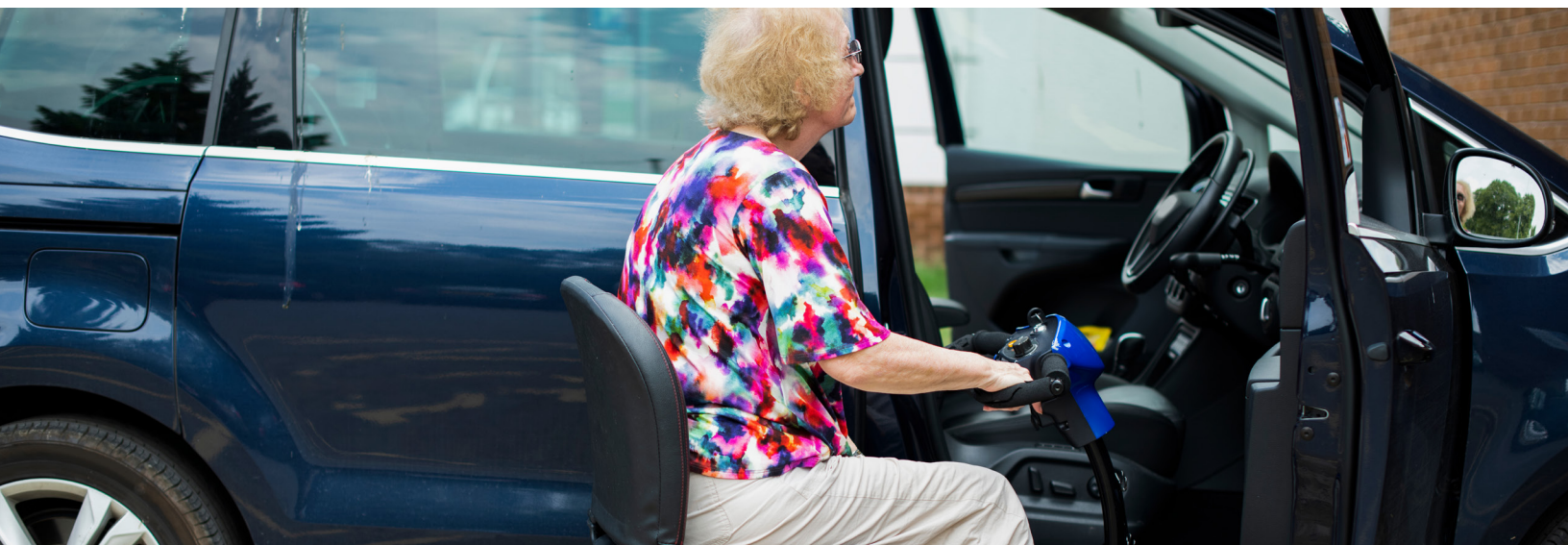
Starting with the creation of the Office of Mobility and Accessible Transportation (OMAT) in 2020, the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) and its partners initiated a transformative statewide planning effort to develop priorities, goals, and strategies for providing resources and expertise that result in improved accessible transportation and mobility across the state. The multi-department planning effort was led by TDOT and supported by partnerships with other state departments, human services agencies, area agencies on aging, regional and metropolitan planning organizations, public transit providers, non-profit organizations, advocates, users of accessible transportation, and the general public. The planning effort resulted in the five-year OMAT Strategic Plan and became a

catalyst for clearly defined strategic goals to reduce barriers to transportation for older adults, individuals with disabilities, and other users of accessible transportation.

The Strategic Plan and Annual Report highlights partnerships built and investments made in community resources. TDOT and its partners identified and continue to work together to seek solutions for new and recurring transportation challenges to accessing services, including non-emergency medical transportation, job access, and wellness activities.

The Mobility and Accessible Transportation Strategic Plan identified five strategic goals that focus on addressing the current and future transportation challenges and gaps in services. This Annual Report provides ongoing updates to the goals, strategies, and recommended action steps for each goal. It also includes information about the ongoing initiatives and actions taken to support accessible transportation in Tennessee.

As OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup continue to engage with stakeholders and implement the five strategic goals identified during the planning process, action steps and performance measures have been refined to ensure meaningful successful outcomes.



OMAT Strategic Goals

OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup have continued to engage with stakeholders and implement the five strategic goals identified during the planning process.

Expand Access. Support local solutions for expanding and improving access to transportation services.

Service Solutions. Identify where barriers to transportation overlap and develop quality solutions that meet travelers' needs.

Collaboration. Establish a structure and collaborative culture that maximizes financial resources for transportation across multiple programs and departments.

Technology Solutions. Prioritize user-focused public information systems and transit technology tools to diversify access to services.

Communication. Facilitate communication and coordination between transportation providers and users for a more seamless mobility network.

OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup have made significant progress toward the priorities established for the initial years of the strategic plan. Key initiatives include the development of the State's first Mobility Management Program to facilitate the implementation of meaningful, coordinated

transportation improvements at the local level. Along with the program, OMAT created a Toolkit for Mobility Managers complete with forms, marketing and outreach guidance, reporting instructions, and suggested performance measures. New and existing Mobility Managers utilize the Toolkit as a valuable resource.

OMAT and its partners have drafted the Statewide Job Access Plan, which focuses on improving access to jobs, particularly for areas of persistent poverty. The planning process is ongoing and is focused on employment transportation, such as transportation to and from work, training, and job-related childcare.

OMAT has supported the development of local Coordinated Transportation Plans which facilitate conversations between multi-jurisdictional partners within a designated region. The planning process prioritizes goals and strategies to address the transportation needs of older adults, individuals with disabilities, and people with low incomes.

TDOT has identified transit software vendors with the appropriate products and services to support the needs of local transit agencies and accessible transportation users.

Finally, the Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) Policy Project is a significant ongoing effort to facilitate more efficient and cost-effective NEMT services for public transit providers. Through ongoing stakeholder engagement and coordination, the project will result in policy and procedure recommendations to increase access to care for individuals with no other means of transportation.

1 Goal: Expand Access

Support local solutions for expanding access to transportation services

Access to transportation services means access to work, health and wellness activities, socialization, and independence. OMAT is working with state and regional organizations to design and implement programs that expand access to important community resources.

Updates

Statewide planning projects to support job-related transportation during 2023 focused on areas of persistent poverty with the intent of fostering regional economic health, such as transportation to and from jobs, job training, and job-related childcare.

With guidance from OMAT, multi-agency partnerships with organizations that provide and represent individuals with disabilities worked collaboratively to develop local solutions to the unique transportation

challenges of their communities. The job access planning program is designed specifically to consider and meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Locally created programs are designed so that they can be successfully implemented in local communities and also applied to a future statewide program.

OMAT also supports regional transit agencies and mobility managers through the development of regional Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plans, commonly referred to as Coordinated Transportation Plans. These plans are prepared in cooperation with a local lead transit agency or planning organization

and various other participating non-profit and for-profit human resources, transportation, and governmental organizations. The plans focus on improving access to transportation for older adults, individuals with disabilities, people with low incomes, and the

general public. Shared federal and local funding opportunities are explored during the planning project as well as goals and strategies that promote coordinated use of transportation resources such as information sharing and technology improvements.

“Transportation to and from work on a regular and reliable basis is one of the most significant transportation challenges.”
—*Mobility & Accessible Transportation Needs Assessment*



| Objective | Action Steps |
|---|---|
| <p>Oversee updates of Regional Coordinated Transportation Plans with a focus on identifying local issues and solutions to those issues.</p> | <p>OMAT assisted the South Central Transportation Development District, Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency, and Southwest Human Resource Agency regions with updates to their locally developed Coordinated Transportation Plans. Plans focus on access to transportation for older adults, individuals with disabilities, people with low incomes, and the general public. Other regions throughout the state are working with OMAT to update their Coordinated Transportation Plans, including in urban areas, many with assistance from a regional Mobility Manager.</p> <p>In 2023, OMAT issued the draft HOPE Statewide Job Access report which is a statewide plan to help facilitate employment for areas of persistent poverty. Employment-related transportation was identified as an unmet need or challenge during the coordinated transportation plan processes as well as during the statewide Strategic Plan Needs Assessment.</p> |
| <p>Develop Regional Transportation Advisory Boards (RTAB) in each region with representation from each county.</p> | <p>OMAT established a Mobility Management Program which provides leadership and structure to the process of regional collaboration around passenger transportation. Mobility managers serve as representatives for local and regional needs.</p> |
| <p>Ensure passenger transit is considered in non-transit plans for development, and establish effective methods of communication within the regions and counties.</p> | <p>OMAT distributed the Mobility Management Toolkit as guidance for implementing locally appropriate structures and activities that promote regional collaboration and communication in support of improved access to transportation.</p> |

2 Goal: Service Solutions

Identify where barriers to transportation overlap and develop quality solutions that meet travelers' needs

Transportation providers, riders, and other participants in the Five-Year Strategic Plan identified the barriers commonly faced when working to address the unmet transportation needs and gaps in access to services. In response to the identified challenges, the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup developed suggestions for state-level policy changes that would enable the successful implementation of solutions and reduce barriers. Specifically, in 2023, OMAT focused on analysis of the Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) program, as well as a job access study to help Tennesseans re-enter the workforce and/or to gain or sustain employment.

Many of the most significant challenges to service solutions that persist in Tennessee are also impacting transit at the national level. Such challenges include but are not limited to:

- The national vehicle shortage, which includes accessible vehicles that are commonly used for passenger transportation, started during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues years after. While manufacturers have restarted vehicle production, the production cycle and delivery of vehicles is behind schedule and facing significant order backlog. As a result, transportation providers are working with aging vehicle fleets, as well as

shrinking fleet sizes when vehicles can not be replaced on schedule. Reduced fleet sizes typically result in more limited service options.

- The cost of vehicles used by transportation service providers has significantly increased. The dramatic increase in costs to purchase vehicles has put an unexpected strain on the budgets of transportation service providers.
- Post COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all transportation service providers continue to experience labor shortages, including difficulty hiring a sufficient number of transit drivers, mechanics and other staff. As transportation service providers recognize the gaps in access to services that people are experiencing, they are limited in their ability to respond with expanded service hours or service levels due in part to labor shortages.



Updates

OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup identified the need for an in-depth focus on transportation barriers and solutions for trips related to medical appointments. NEMT is a type of ride service for individuals needing medical care or related support who are unable to access appropriate transportation through other means. Eligibility for NEMT services through TennCare includes individuals who do not have a working vehicle or driver's license, have a physical or mental disability, or are unable to travel or wait alone for a ride.

NEMT is specific to TennCare-funded transportation. The current system can be complicated for users and transit providers.

OMAT has initiated a NEMT Policy project to analyze transportation challenges and needs related to accessing appointments and treatment. The project will ultimately result in recommendations and implementable solutions. Following the project, OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup will facilitate local and regional implementation of solutions in partnership with local entities such as human resource agencies, medical transportation providers, hospitals and clinics, and TennCare.

| Objective | Action Steps |
|---|---|
| Use the Strategic Plan to conduct a regional assessment of barriers and opportunities. | The ongoing NEMT Policy project will make recommendations to eliminate policy-related barriers for the rider to access transportation appropriate for NEMT service, and also for the transportation providers to more effectively participate in the TennCare network of services. |
| Standardize transportation safety and quality guidelines among all programs for older adults and individuals with disabilities to be consistent with other transportation funding sources. | Service standards and policies of the participating transportation providers are included in the NEMT Policy project. Standardized safety policies will ensure a consistent level of passenger service and safety no matter which participating transportation provider operates the trip. |
| Explore the effectiveness of structures to support electric vehicles and service modes like vanpools and microtransit. | <p>In 2023, OMAT worked with the Central Procurement Office to include a fully electric, accessible vehicle option on the State purchasing contract for the first time.</p> <p>Alternative service modes will continue to be explored through the Mobility Management structure and the locally developed Coordinated Transportation Plans.</p> |

3 Goal: Collaboration

Establish a structure and collaborative culture that maximizes financial resources for transportation across multiple programs and departments

Multi-agency collaboration and collaboration between State and local-level program administration within a single agency is vital to transportation success. Stakeholders recognize that successful solutions are possible but require leadership. Furthermore, leadership must be present at the local, regional, and State levels. "Expand Access" addresses efforts to establish leadership at the regional and local level through Mobility Managers or other leaders of the local Coordinated Transportation Plan. "Collaboration" develops leadership responsibilities at the State level.



Updates

TDOT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup focused on identifying and maximizing transportation funding to ensure existing services, as

well as potential service expansions, are sustainable. This includes examining where, at the State level, existing transportation-related policy is creating challenges for partnerships and limiting the ability for Tennessee to address the identified gaps in access to services.

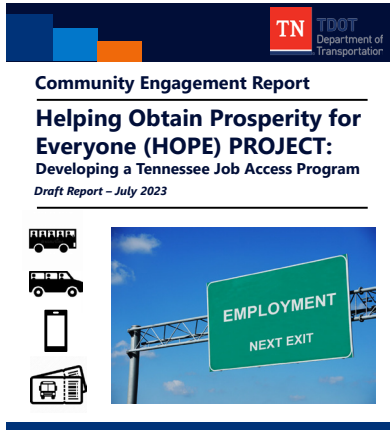
- OMAT identified the NEMT program as an area with opportunities to enhance collaborative use of resources and financial policies. In participation with TennCare and other stakeholders, the NEMT policy project will provide policy recommendations that maximize the benefits to users of the NEMT program, including beneficiaries, healthcare providers, and transportation service

providers. The ongoing NEMT Policy project will continue to facilitate collaboration between state agencies and local providers. This project will recommend policy changes that support more efficient use of Medicaid

transportation funds and better service to beneficiaries.

- OMAT continues to work with local communities to support the design and implementation of job access programs and regional coordinated transportation plans. Lessons learned from locally designed programs will be shared statewide to facilitate successful implementation and build opportunities for innovation.

In 2023, OMAT issued the draft report for the Tennessee Helping Obtain Prosperity for Everyone (HOPE) Project, which will develop a statewide Job Access plan to help facilitate employment access for areas of persistent poverty. The project is supported by the federal HOPE program, which is specifically intended to help areas of persistent poverty by increasing access to jobs and supporting enhanced transportation options.



The objective of the Job Access plan is to facilitate critical employment and job training access into and from persistent poverty areas, as well as encourage regional economic health by connecting people to jobs. OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup continue to participate in Job Access planning efforts, including coordination with the Employment First initiative.

| Objective | Action Steps |
|--|---|
| Identify and maximize sustainable transit funding. | In 2023, OMAT initiated the NEMT Policy project, which identifies policy-related barriers for the rider to access transportation appropriate for NEMT service, and will make recommendations to maximize the effectiveness of public transit NEMT programs. |
| Expand sources of sustainable funding. | OMAT supported new and returning Mobility Management programs across the state. Mobility Management is a type of transportation project that is focused on coordinating available transportation resources and funding. |
| Nurture regional partnerships that fill identified gaps in transportation. | OMAT continues to provide resources, tools, and guidance to Mobility Managers who are focused on developing multi-agency partnerships that offer transportation solutions to the gaps identified through local and regional needs assessments. |

4 Goal: Technology Solutions

Prioritize user-focused public information systems & tools to diversify access to services

Technology is a significant part of the strategic planning process. Transportation services being delivered today were built over decades and based on policies, products, and resources that were available at the time. In recent years, technological advancements have quickly and drastically impacted the way organizations and people function, but service changes have not kept up in the public sector. For example, in the transit industry today, there are advancements in technology that more effectively streamline record keeping, reporting, and billing activities to the extent that they reduce the administrative time required by staff. At the same time, riders and potential riders report that in addition to existing call centers, they need websites and apps to support access to transportation services and information.

Updates

OMAT focused on being a liaison between the State and the community to support implementation of advanced technology including new, more modern scheduling and dispatching software for transit agencies. Transit agencies needed new, more modern software that reduced manual input and made scheduling and dispatching passenger trips a more seamless process for the provider and the rider. Transit users who

participated in the strategic planning process requested technology solutions that made finding and scheduling a ride easier, especially for people with disabilities.

OMAT participated in the vendor selection process from the beginning, providing input on the scope and evaluating vendor responses to ensure that the needs of seniors and people with disabilities were reflected in the final selection. Two preferred software vendors were selected and are available to grantees on a statewide contract. Both software vendors offer an app and can support online scheduling and real-time vehicle tracking.

Transit agencies across the state are now starting to partner with preferred vendors to implement the software. Some of the transit agencies already implementing or beginning to transition to the new software include eight out of the nine regional rural public transit providers. With the new technology, transit agencies have the ability to provide apps, online scheduling, real-time vehicle tracking, and other technology advances that

Transit users and potential users were interested in solutions like apps, online scheduling, and real-time vehicle tracking.

were identified as needs during the strategic planning process. Transit agencies reported immediate efficiency and customer service improvements. For example, First Tennessee Human Resource Agency (NET Trans) reported improvements such as:

- Phone service and online scheduling are both available to customers
- Reduced staff time spent on manual entry or scheduling processes
- Staff can focus on problem-solving and customer service
- Significant reduction (8%) in fuel usage, with results in the first week of full implementation.

| Objective | Action Steps |
|---|--|
| <p>Serve as the liaison between the State and the community to support transportation programs across the State in their efforts to implement advance technology.</p> | <p>In 2023, TDOT selected two preferred transit software vendors. Public transportation providers have purchased new software and are reporting improvements over previous technology.</p> |
| <p>Support smart investment in scheduling and dispatching software.</p> | <p>TDOT narrowed down an extensive list of potential transit software vendors to two vendors that offered services to meet the expressed needs of transit operators and users. The two vendors are available through a statewide contract.</p> |
| <p>Encourage technology that allows customers to choose their mobility option and schedule.</p> | <p>Software vendors included in the State contract list offer solutions for customer-facing applications. Local transit providers have the option to select customer-facing functions based on their local goals, needs, and budgets. Providers can engage their customer base to determine transit software needs at the local level.</p> |
| <p>Identify technology that facilitates coordination between operators and provides options for multiple services to work together toward meeting transportation needs.</p> | <p>The NEMT Policy project focuses on collaboration and streamlining policies to address gaps in service. A component of addressing NEMT Policy is the potential incorporation of technology that assists with reporting, billing, and assigning trips to appropriate funding sources. Software improvements help facilitate the opportunity for providers to schedule shared rides for passengers whose trips are funded by different revenue sources.</p> |
| <p>Equitable access to technology options.</p> | <p>The Mobility Management Toolkit developed by OMAT incorporates strategies to ensure telephone options are available in addition to websites and apps, and that training programs are available to teach people how to use new technology. TDOT developed a transit software scope for transit agencies which includes basic guidelines to help ensure selected technology is accessible. Finally, OMAT and the Mobility & Accessible Transportation Workgroup continue to represent the population of older adults and individuals with disabilities to ensure procurement of technology is accessible.</p> |

5 Goal: Communication

Facilitate communication and coordination between transportation providers and users for a more seamless mobility network

Public transportation is available in all 95 Tennessee counties, and specialized transportation is offered across the state. During the strategic planning process, OMAT often heard from people who were trying to get to critical destinations like healthcare, employment and education. When transportation options are limited, finding a ride becomes an additional challenge in an already difficult process of getting to services and locations that are vital to independence and community inclusion.

Updates

[Tennessee Disability Pathfinder](#) is a one-stop shop for disability resources, including information about accessible transportation. Pathfinder provides a website with an online database of resources, and it also has a call center with trained staff who can walk callers through every step of their journey. Pathfinder call-takers can make a warm handoff to ensure people can access the resources they are looking for, including transportation.

TDOT partnered with other state agencies to help fund Tennessee Disability Pathfinder.

“We don’t know how to ask or who to ask.”

—Tennessee Disability Services Survey (Vanderbilt Peabody College, 2021)

Pathfinder connects individuals to resources by providing personalized assistance with multiple information topics, in multiple languages. Information about resources ranging from addictions, advocacy, education, and

employment to social skills, technology, transportation, and veterans services is available through Pathfinder.



Objective

Establish and oversee a clearinghouse and moderator for transportation issues and solutions.

Action Steps

TDOT partnered with other state agencies to help fund Tennessee Disability Pathfinder, an existing one-stop location for disability resources, including transportation options. The state leadership team includes the Council on Developmental Disabilities, as well as the Departments of Education, Human Services, Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, and Transportation.

Develop the role of mobility management. Support local and regional mobility managers.

The Mobility Management Toolkit includes forms and tools to assist local and regional leaders with stakeholder meetings, information-sharing and marketing, tracking and reporting performance measures, and more. The toolkit is actively used throughout the state.





**Tennessee Department of Transportation
Office of Mobility and Accessible Transportation
Division of Multimodal Transportation Resources**

James K. Polk Building, 12th Floor
505 Deaderick Street, Nashville, TN 37243

Email: TDOT.OMAT@tn.gov

<https://www.tn.gov/tdot/multimodal-transportation-resources/omat.html>