



Safe Routes
to School
National
Partnership

The Wheels on the Bus Go to the Grocery Store



For too many people across the county, getting to the grocery store, farmers market, or food pantry is a challenge. Unsafe conditions for walking or biking, inaccessible or unaffordable public transit service, and lack of access to cars can make getting to healthy food stores dangerous, time-consuming, and expensive.¹ The challenge is two-fold: too few stores sell healthy food in many neighborhoods and there is inadequate transportation to places selling nutritious foods. Transit agencies can play an important role in overcoming these challenges.

This fact sheet outlines the role of transit agencies in improving food access, offers examples from transit agencies across the country, and shares solutions that will allow transit agencies to create or strengthen the connection between neighborhoods and grocery stores.

Does Public Transit Count as Active Transportation?

People often ask why riding public transportation counts as active transportation. The answer is that the transit ride is usually the middle leg of a journey. Very few people catch the bus at their front door and get off at the front door of their destination. As research shows, most people walk to a station to catch the bus, subway, or train and then walk from their stop to their destination. Half of transit riders spend 19 minutes or more per day walking to and from transit,⁸ and compared to people who rely on cars, transit riders take 30 percent more steps per day.⁹ Public transit helps people achieve the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation to get an average of 22 minutes per day of moderate aerobic activity, which includes walking.

Challenge: Lack of Healthy Food Options in Neighborhood

Nearly one in ten Americans live in communities where there are no healthy food stores within one mile of their home -- "food deserts."² Low-income people, people of color, and people living in rural places are all more likely than other people to live in food deserts.³

Without a grocery store nearby, people living in food deserts must travel outside their neighborhoods, or where available, rely on corner stores, which tend to sell limited healthy food options and food that is both poorer in quality and more expensive relative to supermarkets.⁴ Low-income residents, Black residents, and Latino residents are less likely than other residents to shop for food in their own census tract – meaning that they have to travel further to find adequate or appealing food options.⁵ It is a hardship to have to travel a long distance to get healthy food, and one that particularly affects low-income people, people of color, and people living in rural places.

Challenge: Inadequate Transportation Options

For low-income individuals, the challenge of traveling outside the neighborhood to go grocery shopping is often compounded by lack of vehicle access. Approximately one-third of very low income and food-insecure families have to use a means other than their own car to get food. That means that the same people experience barriers to accessing food and barriers to convenient mobility.⁶ Without vehicle access, low-income residents rely heavily on walking, bicycling, and/or transit to reach basic needs, including food.⁷

The Opportunity: Strengthen Public Transit to Grocery Stores

In communities with public transportation, transit often plays a critical role in connecting people and neighborhoods to the places where they buy and obtain food, in addition to other destinations needed to live a healthy life, such as places of employment, parks, and community services.

Barriers to Using Public Transit to Access Healthy Food

Too often, public transportation routes fall short of meeting the needs of communities, requiring inconvenient transfers and connections and providing long routes and poor connectivity to the places that people need to thrive and prosper -- burdens that fall disproportionately on low-income communities and communities of color.

- A high percentage of public transportation users are low- to moderate-income, with two-thirds of riders having household incomes of less than \$50,000 per year, and 20 percent of riders having a household income of less than \$15,000 per year.^{10,11}
- African Americans are six times more likely to use public transit than whites; Latinos are three times more likely.¹²
- More than 1.6 million rural households in the U.S. do not have access to a car and are dependent on transit, walking, and biking, even though public transportation is extremely limited in rural areas.¹³

For people who rely on public transportation to access groceries or emergency food services, there are several impediments to easy, convenient transportation. Chiefly, a transit route may not link the places where people live, work, and spend time with the places where they obtain food. Transit schedules may not align with grocery shopping schedules, particularly if individuals' work schedules fall outside of the typical nine-to-five work day. In addition, the reliance on transferring between different modes of transit (i.e. metro to bus) adds time, uncertainty, and complexity to trips. Families carrying home perishable grocery stores may worry about buying produce, fresh meats, and dairy items for fear that they may spoil on the long trip home.



Why Public Transit Agencies May Care About Food Access

Transit agencies aim to link individuals and communities with important destinations like work, home, school, and community services. Across the transit agencies we interviewed for this fact sheet, three primary reasons emerged as to why public transit agencies care about food access:

- **Public transit is a service.** Transit agencies aim for customer satisfaction, and can improve this by providing amenities for passengers. By understanding the needs of riders, transit agencies can offer amenities and services that add convenience and enhance the service provided.
- **Environmental sustainability matters to transit.** Environmental sustainability is a goal established by many transit agencies across the country. When defining sustainability, many transit agencies strive for more than increasing the fuel efficiency of their vehicles. For Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, sustainability is defined as a triple bottom line aim, aspiring to economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Reliable, accessible public transportation enables people to take mass transit rather than drive in private automobiles, thereby decreasing carbon emissions and mitigating damage to the

environment. Linking transit riders with services and destinations that they need, like places of employment and places to buy food, increases livability and economic vibrancy.

- **Food access is good business for transit.** Creating intentional linkages to food access for riders provides an opportunity for transit agencies to generate revenue. Transit agencies can lease space at transit stops to generate revenue for the system. If there is a service that adds value to customers' lives, such as grocery pick-up at a metro stop that can also generate revenue for the system, it creates a win-win scenario for both riders and the agency.

Tip for Advocates

If you're interested in getting your local transit agency to work to improve food access, it is beneficial to frame your request to resonate with a new or existing goal that the agency has. Appealing simply to good intentions or altruism is likely to be less effective -- even if individual employees care about food access. Look for transit agencies' goals in Sustainability Plans, Strategic Plans, and Long Range Plans.

How Transit Agencies Can Improve Food Access

Examples of how transit agencies are working to strengthen the link between their services and food access emerge from several cities across the country and Canada, and fall into three main categories: service planning, co-location of services, and real estate.

Service Planning

For a transit rider, the question seems simple enough: why doesn't the train connect me to the farmers market? Why doesn't the bus schedule line up with when I want to go to the grocery store? But for transportation planners in transit agencies, they must balance myriad competing demands to optimize cost and efficiency.

- Transit agencies can engage community residents to understand how a route can best meet their needs. Flint Mass Transportation Authority (MTA) in Flint, Michigan responded to the closure of two major grocery stores in its east side by creating a dedicated Rides to Groceries bus line that links low-food access neighborhoods to full service grocery stores. Funded in part through its participation in the Federal Transit Administration's Rides to Wellness Initiative, the Flint MTA Rides to Grocery line conducted targeted community outreach in affected communities to understand how a dedicated grocery line would best connect them to the grocery store. As a result, Flint MTA routed the bus stops close to residential streets so that riders don't have to carry their groceries far from the bus stop and created branded wayfinding signs to ensure that riders knew where to catch the bus.
- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires transit agencies to enact service standards that ensure that service is provided in an equitable, nondiscriminatory manner.¹⁴ Transit agencies can use this requirement as the impetus for ensuring that riders of all races, ethnicities, and income levels across their service areas are able to use transit to meet their basic needs, including food

access. TriMet, the transit system for the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area, developed an equity analysis that it uses for service planning. As part of this equity analysis, TriMet analyzes how changing a route will affect grocery store access for riders. TriMet recognizes that changing a bus route may place a higher burden on some individuals and communities, for example those without vehicle access or with limited mobility, and takes those factors into consideration.

- Transit agencies can encourage developers to engage them early in the development process to ensure that project sites can be serviced by public transit. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, SEPTA worked with a developer of a new grocery store to improve bus access to the store as part of the transit agency's goal to make food access available within 10 minutes to 75 percent of Philadelphians. The developer reached out to SEPTA to ensure that a bus line would service the new grocery store, and SEPTA extended the bus line to service the grocery store every 15 minutes during peak shopping periods



Photo: The Food Trust

Co-location

Many drivers have found that convenience stores at gas stations are easy one-stop shops to purchase food and beverages while fueling up at the pump. For busy transit riders, picking up groceries at a transit stop could provide convenience that was previously only available to drivers.

- Transit agencies can provide space at transit stations for temporary sales of fresh produce and other healthy foods. In Atlanta, GA, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) launched a farmers market – its Fresh MARTA Market -- at the West End Rail Station in 2015. The market was so successful that MARTA is expanding from one station to four. The market requires that prices are competitive with grocery stores and that produce is sourced locally when possible.
- Transit agencies can provide space and utilities for permanent structures within or connected to transit stations for the sale of fresh produce and healthy foods. In Montréal, Canada, the Société de Transport de Montréal (STM) partnered with a local nonprofit to identify transit stops located in food deserts, and now provides land, electricity, and water to food markets at nine transit stops.
- Co-locating healthy food access at multi-modal transit hubs amplifies the impact of initiatives aimed at linking food access and public transportation. In Washington, D.C., the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) piloted a grocery pick-up service with PeaPod by Giant. For riders with multi-modal trips (bus + rail), adding in another stop to shop for groceries can be a significant investment of time. By offering pickup at transit hubs, WMATA makes it more convenient for transit riders to access groceries.

Real Estate

Transit agencies own miles of real estate. This land includes tracks for subways and the land where they store and repair vehicles.

- The way that transit stops are built occasionally leaves awkward shaped parcels of land that are not usable to a transit system in current form. In Philadelphia, SEPTA leases a parcel of land that it previously used for staging construction materials to The Enterprise Center for use as an urban farm, The Walnut Hill Farm. The produce that is grown on this land is then sold as community supported agriculture at SEPTA's headquarters in downtown Philadelphia.
- Transit agencies can also use their real estate to promote safety, vibrancy, and a sense of place with Transit Oriented Development (TOD), either as landowners or as part of public-private partnerships. At the location of transit stops owned by a transit agency, the agency can develop plans and recommendations for developers or by expanding into under-served neighborhoods. Transit agencies can catalyze development that is accessible by public transportation by expanding into under-served neighborhoods and/or by making recommendations/plans for developers for the land around transit stops. In Washington, D.C., WMATA has pursued TOD at numerous transit stops. When expanding into and improving service in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, WMATA catalyzed public and private investment in the neighborhood, yielding over \$900 million in investment, including a 53,000 square foot Giant supermarket.¹⁵

Conclusion

Transportation obstacles to food access are a real problem for many Americans. Transit agencies can help to overcome these obstacles, while also earning revenue and serving customers.

Transit in Rural Areas

Unlike in urban areas, where public transit is intended to move large numbers of people over short distances, in rural areas the opposite is true. Transportation is needed to move relatively few people across long distances. Roughly 1.6 million rural Americans do not have cars.¹⁶ That means they must rely on other ways to get to work, access community services, and obtain food. Rural America is home to an aging and elderly population, and as older Americans stop driving, they need alternative transportation options to get around.

Many rural transit agencies are demand-based, which means they rely on passengers scheduling trips. As the American Public Transportation Association reports, "small urban and rural public transit service is provided primarily by demand response and bus operations. This type of service is the most economical for the lower-density population areas."¹⁷ While rural transit agencies look different than their urban counterparts, rural transit agencies are also working to improve healthy food access. Approaches include:

- Free Saturday bus: The Greater Lynchburg Transit Company in Lynchburg, VA provides a free bus on Saturdays from James Crossing, a low-income apartment building, to Food Lion, the full service grocery store in this Central Virginia city.¹⁸
- Bus routes that serve grocery stores: North Central Montana Transit operates fixed bus routes in frontier

northern Montana, covering five counties and three Indian reservations. More than 100 passengers per day ride these routes, which average 80 miles each way. North Central Montana Transit serves an area with low population density (1.5 to 5.7 people per square mile) and most routes cost only \$1.^{19,20} These routes link residents to several essential services, including jobs, medical services, and grocery stores.

- On demand vans for essential services: In Erie County, New York, on demand vans are available through Rural Transit Service for residents of 18 rural towns who are seniors, disabled, or low-moderate income to access essential services like jobs, adult day cares, medical services, senior nutrition sites, and grocery stores.²¹
- Discounted rides to grocery stores: The Cherokee Nation in eastern Oklahoma has a Demand Response Transit Policy that "provides low cost transportation for Native Americans and/or tribal employees to and from eligible destinations within Cherokee Nation's (CN) Jurisdictional Boundary based on request."²² There are four transit agencies that are contracted to provide this demand response transit, which costs riders \$1. Grocery stores are specified as one of the eligible destinations for this discounted ride. Other eligible destinations include financial institutions, employment, health care and government facilities.

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