Chapter 3

Mobility Needs and Gaps

Federal law requires that the Coordinated Plan identify needs and gaps in the special needs transportation network. The needs and gaps outlined below were assessed throughout the planning process through outreach to transportation providers, local mobility coalitions, and community-based organizations (CBOs). Outreach was targeted to reach seniors, people with disabilities, and others with special transportation needs. In addition, subject matter experts on PSRC’s Special Needs Transportation Committee provided insight into the needs and gaps throughout the special needs transportation network in the region. The intent was to inform and update the prioritized strategies that will guide transportation and information service providers in overcoming these gaps. These prioritized strategies can be found in Chapter 4 of this plan — “Mobility Tomorrow.”

The first section of this chapter summarizes the methodology employed to solicit views of key stakeholders and members of the public to learn more about mobility gaps facing the region’s special needs populations. The main body of this chapter summarizes emerging needs and gaps identified through targeted outreach and addresses identified needs and gaps by categories—spatial, temporal, institutional, infrastructure and awareness gaps.

Methodology

Literature Review

In the early stages of this Coordinated Plan update, PSRC staff conducted a review of existing local needs assessment reports and plans to identify the most up-to-date transportation needs and gaps in the region. A summary of each resource reviewed was shared with the Special Needs Transportation Committee. The summary was organized to identify emerging needs and gaps in the region. A list of needs assessment reports and plans reviewed by staff is provided in Attachment B of this plan.

Targeted Outreach

Building on the literature review, consultants and PSRC staff organized community outreach activities and participated in county mobility coalition meetings to solicit feedback from stakeholders and residents across the region. Between May and September 2017, the project team attended a total of 15 in-person meetings and solicited feedback on emerging mobility needs and gaps and prioritized strategies for addressing identified gaps. The specific form of in-person outreach during events varied but options included presentations and facilitated “dot-exercises”—where participants used dots to prioritize topics on large posters. In addition to the targeted outreach, in July 2017, the project team developed an online survey to collect feedback from a larger number of people in the region (collecting over 1,200 responses) and to reach people unable to attend the in-person meetings. A more detailed description of the public outreach methodology and events is provided in Attachment B of this plan.
Emerging Needs and Gaps in the Region

Several key themes emerged out of the literature review and feedback from targeted outreach to people with special transportation needs and other stakeholders. Although all mobility needs and gaps for the transportation-disadvantaged are important to address, the five emerging needs and gaps identified below represent special needs transportation mobility issues that the region will focus attention on in the coming years. These emerging needs and gaps are not presented in any priority order.

There is a need for more travel training and information assistance and referral services for available mobility options to close awareness gaps within the region.

Providing adequate travel training and information assistance and referral services were widely voiced throughout the targeted outreach, as well as providing information in diverse languages. Travel training and trip planning assistance helps people who are unaware of more affordable and available transportation options to learn how to use the options. Information assistance and referral programs connect people with available transportation options that will meet their mobility needs. Oftentimes, the transportation-disadvantaged need not only referral, but assistance in connecting with an appropriate mobility option. With that assistance, older adults, persons with disabilities and other specific transportation users can learn about available transportation options and become informed on how to use such services.

There is a need to provide better transportation services within rural areas and connecting rural areas to urban areas where jobs and services are concentrated, particularly for those who cannot rely upon an automobile to transport themselves.

Access to and from rural and isolated areas is an issue in many communities in the region. This mobility need is most acute in areas that do not have the characteristics to make fixed-route transit efficient to serve. Examples of these areas and the trips that people need to take are found in places throughout the four counties of the region.

There is a need for more comprehensive access to non-emergency healthcare and associated critical services that are related to healthcare outcomes. There is a particular mobility gap identified for those who have special transportation needs and are not eligible for Medicaid non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) or ADA-complementary paratransit service.

Transportation gaps specifically related to medical transportation were mentioned, including reducing the cost of providing medical transportation for non-Medicaid eligible persons and even finding more cost-efficient way to provide services to low-income seniors who are on Medicare but do not qualify for NEMT services. Improving access to medical transportation can reduce healthcare costs and improve health outcomes of various groups of patients, including rural veterans.

There is a need for better coordination between transportation providers and human service agencies in order to provide more efficient service and avoid unnecessary duplications in service.

The need for better coordination between service providers was expressed, both for inter- and cross-county travel. There are difficulties in transferring between different travel modes (e.g., connection between volunteer services, paratransit or fixed-route transit). Cross-county connections particularly require improved partnerships and communication among service providers. However, program requirements often result in the need to transfer between different services, creating more of a disincentive for people with special transportation needs. In addition to coordination between transportation service providers, there is need for coordination between the human service agencies providing social services to their clients and the transportation service providers who can provide mobility for their clients.
There is a need for a sustainable source of funding to support existing special needs transportation services experiencing growing operating costs.

A number of issues were raised related to sustaining special needs transportation programs with limited funding while meeting specific program requirements. The cost of providing specialized transportation continues to rise. It costs more every biennium to provide the same service level to a population or geographic area. Moreover, current policies and contracts restrict providers from serving outside of their service boundary, resulting in additional transportation gaps.

**Needs and Gaps by Category**

Gaps in the special needs transportation network have been identified as organized into five categories: spatial, temporal, institutional, infrastructure or awareness. This section of the Coordinated Plan explains each need or gap in greater detail and provides specific regional examples related to each gap. This framework of categorizing needs and gaps has been used in the plan for many years. Updates to the needs and gaps identified through targeted outreach in 2017 have been incorporated into this section.

**Spatial Gaps**

Spatial gaps refer to locations that are not served at all by transportation services or in some cases to geographic areas where service is limited. To be cost-efficient, fixed-route public transportation service is oriented towards serving the region’s urban centers, major employment centers, and other urban areas. As a result, there are spatial gaps in suburban and rural locations where fixed-route transit service is either unavailable or inadequate to meet the daily needs of special needs populations. For these people, spatial gaps can be especially disruptive as alternative transportation options may not be available where they live.

**SPATIAL GAPS IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION**

- Redeployment of fixed-route transit service since the recent recession has focused on more urban areas making it increasingly difficult to connect rural clients and riders to areas well served by fixed-route transit. This problem is particularly evident in areas outside of transit district boundaries (see Figure 3-1). As a result, travel is cumbersome for transit-dependent populations who live outside of urbanized areas and may require multiple transfers.
- Public transportation service to destinations outside of major activity centers is inadequate to meet the mobility needs of special needs populations.
- Affordable and accessible non-emergency medical transportation in the region is lacking. This is especially problematic for patients who do not qualify for Medicaid NEMT services and do not have other means to access medical appointments.
Figure 3-1. Transit District Boundaries in the Central Puget Sound Region

Temporal Gaps

Temporal gaps are caused when transportation service is not available at times when it is needed by individuals with special transportation needs. With public transit’s commute-hour focus, a substantial portion of the region’s transit service does not operate early enough in the morning or late enough in the evening for low-income individuals on alternative work schedules.

TEMPORAL GAPS IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION

- Transportation options are inadequate outside of peak hours — very early in the morning, middle of the day, after 7:00 pm, and on weekends.

Institutional Gaps

Institutional gaps are caused by the rules, regulations and requirements that govern the provision of transportation services. This results in transportation service that can be confusing, inefficient (through duplications, among other things) and disconnected for customers. Institutional gaps are not always clearly defined and can take many forms.

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION

- Transportation providers do not group trips or offer shared rides among different special needs populations. This can result from eligibility requirements preventing shared trips. This may result in inefficient delivery of service as vehicles from different agencies travel the same corridor at the same time to serve their clients.
- Cross-county trips within and outside the region are difficult due to a lack of coordination among service providers, human service agencies or program regulations.
- Each transportation system has different eligibility requirements. A person who may qualify for more than one type of service may need to apply for several different programs with each having different requirements and processes. As a result, transfer between different special needs transportation services is cumbersome and may result in additional wait time for a customer to complete a trip.
- Transportation providers and brokers use different scheduling, dispatching and reporting software, making information sharing difficult.
- Statewide cost-sharing allocation formulas are lacking to allow for standard reimbursement rates for clients who are eligible for multiple transportation services.
- It is challenging for new programs to compete for funding. As a result, new projects that may effectively fill spatial or other gaps where fixed-route transit is not efficient may not get off the ground.
- Paratransit systems generally do not provide same-day service, which means riders must always plan trips in advance and cannot be spontaneous about travel. Complementary ADA paratransit service is funded locally through the transit district’s tax base. Since this service is federally mandated, but is funded by the same local tax base as fixed-route transit, ADA paratransit service both competes with funding for fixed-route service and adds to the cost of providing fixed-route service. This can result in decreased fixed-route service in some areas to maintain the minimum level of ADA paratransit service and may discourage expansion of paratransit service beyond the minimum to comply with the ADA requirements.

Regional Example that Covers Multiple Gaps

Access to Medical Facilities in the PSRC region; Spatial & Institutional Gaps

Many south Snohomish County clients who live in the areas outside of the fixed-route ADA paratransit service boundaries need to get to medical appointments in King County. Living in a transportation-disadvantaged community creates spatial gaps to access medical facilities. At the same time, these clients may experience institutional gaps which prevent easy cross-county transfer between different transportation service providers due to their eligibility requirements.
Infrastructure Gaps

Infrastructure gaps are areas where a lack of physical or technological infrastructure prevents individuals from accessing needed transportation options. Infrastructure gaps can take the form of a major roadway acting as a barrier to accessing daily necessities, a lack of sidewalks connecting to a fixed-route transit stop or intersections not meeting ADA standards.

INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION

- Some fixed-route transit facilities and bus stops are without accessible walkways and safe crossings.
- Bus stops and other transportation waiting areas lack benches and other amenities (e.g., weather protection) for older adults and individuals with disabilities.
- Individuals with special transportation needs have limited access to new travel information resources, including mobile and web-based applications.
- Pedestrian crossing times at signalized intersections are not long enough for seniors, children and individuals with mobility impairments.
- There is a lack of accessible or lift-equipped vehicles for people who have limited ability, but who are not eligible for Medicaid NEMT or ADA paratransit services.

Awareness Gaps

Learning how to access and utilize transportation options can be a daunting task for individuals unfamiliar with all transportation programs and services available in the region. Gaps in awareness occur when individual riders and social service agencies are not fully informed of available transportation options. While awareness gaps can take many forms, they all stem from a lack of information.

AWARENESS GAPS IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION

- Language and cultural barriers prevent diverse riders and clients from accessing transportation options.
- Traveler information technologies are too advanced or are too difficult to acquire for some users who have special transportation needs.
- Decision makers do not know where special needs populations reside in their community and may not be fully aware of their mobility needs and gaps.
- Social service agencies do not always have adequate information regarding available transportation choices for their clients, particularly if transportation is not offered by such agencies. This can result in referral to less efficient transportation options which may require more transfers and longer wait time for a client to complete a trip compared to other options that are available.
- Fixed-route transit, rideshares and vanpools are often marketed to commuters and not to special needs populations. Furthermore, funding is insufficient to meet the increasing demand for specialized paratransit, volunteer and other community transportation, and hence marketing is not prioritized for these services.
- Safety issues (e.g., no available seat on the bus or unsafe waiting areas) discourage riding transit and create a negative perception of transit among older populations.
- Special needs populations are not aware of all available resources including online information such as online trip planning services.