



June 8, 2021

AEOA/Arrowhead Transit Testimony

Thank you, Chairwoman Smith, Ranking member staff, and distinguished members of the committee.

My name is Brandon Nurmi, I am an Assistant Director for Arrowhead Transit. Arrowhead Transit is the transportation department for a larger Community Action Program located in northeastern Minnesota named Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency or AEOA. Our transportation program began in 1974 as a program for senior and disabled transportation under an Area Agency on Aging grant and has expanded over the last 47 years to a full rural public transit agency covering 24,470 square miles across 10 counties. This is about the same size as the state of West Virginia. We operate 184 routes of varying frequency including 19 different Dial-A-Ride service areas utilizing 127 buses and over 150 employees including dispatchers, mechanics, and administrative staff.

By providing safe, affordable, and reliable transportation to our rural communities many of our passengers have access to services that they may not have otherwise had. Our aging population, disabled community, and low-income households have additional transportation options for accessing things like, medical appointments, employment, shopping, and social events where transportation is regularly cited as a major barrier.

Arrowhead Transit has been working hard with Minnesota's Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT) to identify and address any transportation needs in our area and are involved with two of our Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCCs) to collaborate with other transportation providers and community partners to explore new ways to bridge the transportation gaps that still exist in the rural and deep rural areas of the state. OTAT has also been working with all the state's transportation providers to start building connections between the different systems, in hope of eventually connecting all Minnesotans to the transportation currently available in other areas.

Arrowhead Transit was also awarded a grant under the FTA's Innovative Mobility Integration program (IMI) to work on developing a rural transportation program utilizing local transportation options and volunteer drivers to provide first and last mile access to existing transportation services for people outside the transit service areas utilizing technology for trip planning and integrated payment for the whole trip. It is our hope that, if successful, we would be able to utilize this program in additional rural areas across the state.

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During the COVID pandemic, Arrowhead Transit, with the support of OTAT, was able to provide free rides to COVID testing sites, provide additional transportation to support pop up sites, and offer free vaccine transportation inside our service areas. We also partnered with Scenic Rivers Health to offer cost free vaccine transportation options to deep rural areas around their Eveleth clinic with appointment blocks reserved just for passengers that wanted to utilize the service.

AEOA's largest community contribution during the pandemic came from food and meal delivery. AEOA received nearly weekly shipments of fresh produce, proteins, and dairy products from May of 2020 through May of 2021 through the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. Over that time period we served 95,165 individuals in 35,499 household with over 2.1 million pounds of food by collaborating with over 80 community partners across our service area. We were able to accomplish a large portion of this by utilizing the transit buses for food delivery to multiple rural distribution sites being run by other programs and agencies. To date, Arrowhead Transit buses delivered 37,805 boxes, school lunch meals, food shelf deliveries, and 1-day and 7-day shelf stable meal kits during the Peacetime Emergency.

The overall theme in all of our efforts is working towards providing access to transportation in as many areas as we can. Access to services, access to employment, access to social events, access to transportation. One of the largest barriers we face in rural transportation is the ability to provide access to rural and deep rural areas that would not meet classic passenger metrics used to evaluate the value of a route. We have tried to address this by offering routes based on a minimum passenger basis. If we have x number of passengers that request to use the route on the books, then we will send it. While this provides the basic access to the route, it requires passengers to recruit their own riders to ensure that the route meets the minimum passenger requirement and removes the "reliability" of the transportation. If you know the route is always going, then you can schedule appointments or plan your trip based on the route's availability. Allotting greater weight to a route that provides access without having to worry as much about the classic metric of passengers per hour would be one way that rural transit providers could address these gaps. I believe that sometimes the need for a route is not necessarily that there will be a lot of people that will be riding it.

To close out, I would like to share a story about a couple in the Ely, MN that experienced their own issue with transportation gap coverage. We operate a Dial-A-Ride in Ely Monday through Friday with specific boundaries. I had multiple phone conversations with the wife that was trying to arrange transportation for her disabled husband to attend his annual medical appointments. Their home was outside our service area so we normally would not be able to provide transportation for them, but the issue she was facing was that the private carriers also could not provide the transportation they needed due to the trip to the clinic not being cost effective for the private carriers due to the distance they would have to travel to pick them up and the relative shortness of the trip. Identifying transportation options for her husband was more complicated for her because he required the use of a wheelchair for his mobility. This meant that there were

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only a few services that had the ability to accommodate their transportation needs. After several conversations with her, she was able to arrange for his doctor's appointments to be scheduled on one day, and we diverted our bus to pick them up and bring them home after his appointments, which is a service we now provide to them annually. Unfortunately, most of these types of requests cannot be resolved in this way. In many situations people are forced to move from their homes to allow access transit services or pay much higher rates for specialized transportation from private companies.

This is just one example where improved access could help those in rural and deep rural areas, especially those with special transportation needs, and a greater emphasis on access to transportation or specialized routes designed just to improve access to transportation would be immensely helpful for filling some of the gaps in rural transportation.