

This Implementation Memo is supplemental to *NCHRP Research Report 1059: Access to Jobs, Economic Opportunities, and Education in Rural Areas* (NCHRP Project 08-131). The full report can be found by searching for *NCHRP Research Report 1059* on the National Academies Press website (nap.nationalacademies.org).

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Implementation of Research Findings

Introduction

Improvements to rural accessibility and connectivity require coordinated efforts among various stakeholders, from federal agencies to local organizations, as well as tools and methods to fund and implement solutions. *NCHRP Research Report 1059: Access to Jobs, Economic Opportunities, and Education in Rural Areas* provides guidance to support diverse organization types in improving rural access and connectivity. The research employed a comprehensive set of methods, including twenty interviews, five case studies, and one virtual practitioner workshop, to identify strategies to promote such improvements.

Through this set of research methods, the report provides guidelines on improvements in the following areas: coordination, engagement, evaluation, capacity, and funding. This **Implementation of Research Findings Memorandum** describes steps for the distribution of this research and associated products, along with expected challenges and opportunities in implementation.

Expected Products

Along with the final report and presentation, this research led to the development of the following nine guiding documents associated with the five improvement areas:

Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cross-Agency Coordination Self-Assessment
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Engagement Worksheet• Community Engagement Tools and Techniques
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accessibility Evaluation Process Worksheet• Evaluation Tools and Data Guided Reference Sheet
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff Capacity Self-Assessment Tool• Skill-Building Resource Checklist
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding Strategies and Financing Mechanisms Worksheet• Federal Transportation Funding Resource Guide

These guiding documents can also be found in Appendix C of *NCHRP Research Report 1059*. The report references the worksheets throughout so that practitioners reading the report can understand how to use the worksheets in different planning contexts or to help employ a specific strategy.

Key Audiences

The primary audiences for this research and associated products include:

- State Departments of Transportation
- Rural Transit Agencies and Transit Service Providers
- Regional and Rural Planning Organizations
- Local Governments
- Local Social Services and Economic Development Organizations

This research and the associated products may also be of interest to a wider range of audiences, including mobility providers, advocacy groups, and other organizations with an interest in rural accessibility and connectivity.

Key Organizations

The **Transportation Research Board** (TRB) and the **National Cooperative Highway Research Program** (NCHRP) will lead the distribution of this research and associated products.

TRB will host and share the research products. TRB can also organize events to educate executives, managers, and staff members about products available for their respective organizations. TRB can also have a role in facilitating peer exchanges among agencies, particularly rural transit agencies and transit service providers, to share lessons learned from earlier adoptions of these products.

Furthermore, **TRB committees** can play a leadership role by promoting the research to their members and friends and potentially developing research needs statements that build on this research. The following committees, in particular, may have an interest in the research:

- AEP10: Standing Committee on Transportation Planning Policy and Processes
- AEP15: Standing Committee on Transportation Planning Analysis and Application
- AME10: Standing Committee on Equity in Transportation
- AME50: Standing Committee on Accessible Transportation and Mobility
- AME70: Standing Committee on Transportation and Public Health
- AMS50: Economic Development and Land Use Committee
- AP055: Standing Committee on Rural, Intercity Bus, and Specialized Transportation

NCHRP can have a role in developing and funding implementation and complementary research on rural accessibility and connectivity. Specifically, the panel for **NCHRP Project 08-131** may opt to support a follow-on implementation project. This would involve choosing to continue as an NCHRP panel and developing a scope for an implementation project. The nine interactive

worksheets developed in this project were well-received in the virtual workshop hosted as part of the project. An implementation project could allow researchers to work with several organizations (such as state departments of transportation or rural planning organizations) to use the worksheets and guidance developed in this research to support actual project or program development. Researchers can then document this process to provide valuable insight for practitioners seeking to implement the tools and guidelines developed in this research. NCHRP may also opt to support related research, such as research focused on addressing rural freight accessibility challenges.

Other organizations can also support the dissemination of this research. **The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and Federal Transit Administration (FTA)** can share research products with executives, managers, and staff members in their networks to make this research available and accessible.

Research Distribution

The research team recommends a variety of strategies to share this research and associated products. First and foremost, the final report can be shared through existing modes of communication, including:

- *TRB Weekly* Newsletter
- APTA Passenger Transport Weekly Newsletter
- Social Media Platforms

In addition to these modes of communication, the research team can present this research at events including:

- TRB-hosted webinar(s) following report publication, which can mirror the virtual practitioner workshop completed during research
- TRB Annual Meeting
- TRB International Transportation and Economic Development (ITED) Conference
- Conference on Advancing Transportation Equity
- NADO National Regional Transportation Conference

Measures of Successful Implementation

Progress in implementation can be measured in several ways:

- Participation in the TRB-hosted webinar(s) and reception of the webinar (based on a survey of attendees).

- Number of downloads of the report and associated products.
- Organizational evolution of rural transit agencies and transit providers, particularly through increased understanding and application for funding sources.
- Peer exchanges between rural transit agencies that promote cross-agency coordination among rural areas.
- Increased or prioritized investment—in part due to an increased understanding and application for funding sources—in transit in rural areas.

Potential Challenges to Successful Implementation

Challenges to successful implementation of this research include the organizational barriers identified by organizations interviewed for this report. These include the following:

- While jurisdictional boundaries and **cross-agency coordination** challenges exist in urban areas as well, large, low density rural regions often require planning initiatives and services to cross jurisdictional boundaries. This often requires special coordination to combine funding sources and address diverse regulations.
- Many rural areas are located a long distance away from decision-makers, such as state leadership. This can limit rural **stakeholder engagement** and contribution to planning, investment, and implementation decisions.
- Due to low population density, rural investments in transportation infrastructure often score poorly on **evaluation rubrics** that focus on per mile or per person metrics. Even when rural areas can demonstrate a clear need and benefit, they sometimes lack staff capacity to perform the required evaluation tasks, as described in a previous bullet.
- **Staff capacity** in rural areas is often limited; smaller economies and agencies representing smaller populations typically have less funding and therefore fewer staff focused on issues such as transportation connectivity and access. A query of regional organizations with a role in transportation found that over 80 percent of responding organizations have three or fewer staff members who work at least part-time on transportation. Some have less than one full-time professional. Within rural transit agencies, transit managers are likely to have significant responsibilities beyond the systems-level perspective needed to analyze accessibility. These include compliance, addressing personnel issues, and communications.
- Securing **funding** is a major challenge in many rural areas. Low population and job density also means that rural areas often have a smaller tax base to draw on to fund projects or provide the local match to federal funds.

The guidelines and interactive worksheets developed in this research provide strategies that can support organizations in overcoming these barriers. Direct support from researchers in implementing these strategies, such as the proposed NCHRP implementation project discussed above, can further empower state, regional, and local organizations to successfully leverage the tools developed in this research.