



EQUITABLE TRANSPORTATION ACCESS SOLUTION:  
BEAR RIVER ASSOCIATION  
OF GOVERNMENTS  
MOBILITY VOUCHER PROGRAM

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AUGUST 2023 // CASE STUDY PREPARED BY NADO RESEARCH FOUNDATION



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This resource is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: [www.nado.org/EDDCoP](http://www.nado.org/EDDCoP). The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this resource are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.



**ALYSSA CRONIN***Mobility Manager**August 2023***EQUITABLE TRANSPORTATION  
ACCESS SOLUTION:  
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Transportation mobility was not what Alyssa Cronin expected to focus on when she joined the [Bear River Association of Governments \(BRAG\)](#) as a social worker serving housing-insecure families. When her role evolved and she became the Mobility Manager for the Economic Development District administered by BRAG, however, she said it didn't take long to see that equitable access to transportation is essential for equitable access to almost everything else.

Cronin now manages the [Mobility Voucher Program](#) together with the program's key funding partner, [Cache Valley Transit District \(CVTD\)](#), that allows qualifying participants to submit vouchers reimbursing friends and family for giving them rides to access healthcare, shopping, and other needs.

"From our standpoint, our board's primary objective is access," said Todd Beuhler, CEO of CVTD. "[Access to] employment, healthcare, education, and services are required to be productive in society and contribute. That contributes to better health overall."

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**Background: Transportation in the Rockies**

The BRAG region in northern Utah covers almost nine thousand square miles across three counties, separated from each other by the Wellsville and Bear River Mountain Ranges. The counties have little in common besides geographic proximity, but share pride in their history as important centers of activity during the early years of European exploration, settlement, and industrialization. More recently, the region's beauty and classic Rocky Mountain recreation has helped spur population growth as much as six percent a year in some towns. Today the region is home to just over 190,000 people.

Equal access to diverse opportunities, goods, and services only available in the more urbanized part of the Wasatch Front is important for everyone in the BRAG region. US Interstate 15, connecting Utah to Los Angeles and Montana's Canadian border, traverses Box Elder County and serves as the primary conduit from the BRAG region to the Wasatch Front. Every day, tens of thousands of people from the BRAG region funnel onto the interstate and head south toward Salt Lake City.

Connecting to the interstate requires a significant time and resource investment for much of the BRAG region. Two interstate onramps are each more than 30 miles from Logan, the Cache County seat, and another 45-mile canyon road separates Rich County from Logan. Chains or snow tires are required for all vehicles on canyon highways from November to March.

A few private shuttle companies offer routes from Logan to Wasatch Front destinations for \$30-\$60 each way, but there is no public transportation in or out of the region. Private vehicles are the only option for the majority of the population, so residents whose circumstances prevent them from driving can be left without cost-effective options. Elderly, new immigrants, others without drivers' licenses, people with physical or mental reasons for not driving, and people who cannot afford a vehicle are left without access to transportation, further exacerbating their challenges.

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# Transportation IN THE ROCKIES

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**Context: Efficacy versus Efficiency**

When discussions about transportation equity veer into considerations of costs per mile, Cronin is quick to reframe the problem.

“If the idea is that moving people around needs to be as inexpensive as possible, because that’s the only way to justify moving people around, that’s not what I’m going for,” she says. “It’s not optional for people to have access to transportation, that’s my starting point. Then the question is, how do I make sure that they can access transportation for the least cost?”

In keeping with this view that equitable access to mobility is the paramount objective of public transportation, the [Cache Valley Transit District \(CVTD\)](#) provides fare-free bus, on-demand ride-share, and paratransit service along popular transit corridors in Cache County. It’s an [award-winning system](#) with universal community support, and reduces road congestion especially in and around Logan. Logan’s population density is more than three thousand people per square mile, and Utah State University’s main campus there swells the carless population when classes are in session.

However, the system doesn’t serve the six smaller and more remote towns in the county where more than 3,500 people live. In Box Elder and Rich Counties, two of Utah’s largest counties with average population densities below ten people per square mile, certain vulnerable populations have access to scheduled shuttles for medical appointments, but no other public transportation services.

The CVTD relies on local taxes matched by state and federal transportation grants to fund its services and has to meet certain population thresholds and costs per trip for its areas of service. From a numbers perspective, trying to serve dispersed rural populations with its traditional system would compromise CVTD’s bus and paratransit service funding.

“From an access standpoint, however, there is definitely a need,” CVTD’s Beuhler said.

The challenge became to find a solution that would meet the mobility needs of the dispersed population, while making best use of limited resources.

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**Regional Solution: Partnering For Solutions**

In 2017, Beuhler worked with [BRAG's Community and Economic Development office](#) to pilot the Mobility Voucher Program. In its first year, participants submitted vouchers for about one thousand qualifying trip miles, for a total of about \$350 in reimbursements. Even with the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, reimbursements have tripled on average every year since.

Partnering with BRAG to solve the access puzzle was an obvious choice for the CVTD board because qualifying participants are often already acquainted with BRAG and benefitting from the organization's other services, Buehler said. "We have this organization that already conducts outreach and has systems in place for administering social programs. The partnership was an obvious choice."

By 2019, the voucher program was enough of a success that BRAG's Community and Economic Development office hired Cronin to manage the program full time. Trained as a social worker to focus on whole systems to improve individual outcomes, Cronin was unsatisfied with available information about the voucher program's users. She conducted an outreach campaign and survey across the community to better specify needs, preferences, and gaps in service. To reach the aging population, she partnered with senior centers and Meals on Wheels to fill out surveys directly and reached younger populations with a digital survey. Immigration service providers helped their communities fill out the survey, ensuring that language barriers weren't keeping people from responding.

***"I knew we had been missing a lot of the people in need," Cronin said, noting that she didn't have a vehicle for almost ten years as a young newlywed herself. "I needed those numbers and actual documentation to show our funding partners they're out there."***

With the report of Cronin's survey results in hand, in 2023 the CVTD board increased the voucher reimbursement rate by 20 cents a mile and added education to qualifying reimbursable trip purposes. The outreach effort was so successful that the voucher program went from always having a funding surplus to running out of funding four months before the end of the 2022 fiscal year. The Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) stepped in to help find \$40,000 in federal funding, citing the program's great success at serving its target beneficiaries for a fraction of the cost of other systems.

Cronin is determined to ultimately find ways to address all the transportation access gaps in the BRAG region. Public transportation in Rich and Box Elder Counties is next on Cronin's agenda, and she is partnering with CVTD and UDOT to conduct a feasibility study that will help her navigate constraints like insurance and federal funding programming requirements to achieve full transportation equity.

"I have heard enough of 'you can't do this,'" she said. "I want to know why. And then I can figure out how I can."

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### **\* Engage transportation stakeholders in CEDS development:**

When Cronin's predecessor identified gaps in transportation equity, he spent time and resources to engage the local transit district as a stakeholder in the solution. If regional stakeholders who can help find solutions for equitable transportation access aren't already involved in CEDS development, engage them. Access to transportation is critical for individuals to improve their circumstances and participate in the community.

**\* Champion solutions for the margins:** Cronin found that some community members' needs were overlooked even by the voucher program, and she successfully advocated to change the system to address their needs. Advocate with partners and stakeholders to implement solutions for vulnerable populations that aren't served by current programs. Economic Development Districts can champion problem-solving for underserved community members by educating partners about circumstances that result in exclusion from public services.

**\* You haven't communicated until you've been heard:** Cronin targeted hard-to-reach audiences and tried different tactics until she received an adequate representative sample of responses from every community. Use best practices to design communication strategies, including targeted outreach and information gathering campaigns. List all audiences, determine effective key messages and appropriate mediums for communicating them, and identify effective communication channels. Evaluate communication campaigns for effectiveness and adjust tactics as necessary to ensure everyone in the target audience is reached. Enlist the help of a communications professional if necessary.



## BEAR RIVER ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNMENTS KEY STATISTICS

**Region Characteristics:** University Region, Manufacturing and Agriculture Industry Region, Mountainous Region, Natural Amenity Destination Region, Rural Region

**Counties:** 3

**Population (2020):** 191,101

**Area (Square Miles):** 8,988

**Average Population Density**

**(people/sq mile):** 43

**Population Density by County**

**(people/sq mile):** Rich County – 2,  
Box Elder County – 9, Cache County – 117

### **Resources for Equitable Transportation Access Strategies:**

[Expanding Access to Our Communities: A Guide to Successful Mobility Management Practices in Small Urban and Rural Areas](#). This Transportation Research Board's National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) report identifies best practices and analyzes successfully implemented rural and small urban mobility management programs that can be considered and replicated by state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) and their sub-recipients across a range of environments.

[Federal Transit Administration \(FTA\)](#): The FTA offers resources to promote equitable access to transportation in rural areas. It provides funding programs, guidance documents, research reports, and toolkits on topics such as rural transit planning, tribal transit, transit-oriented development, and accessibility.

[National Rural Transit Assistance Program \(RTAP\)](#): RTAP provides technical assistance, training programs, and resources to enhance the capabilities of rural transit providers. It offers training materials, webinars, toolkits, and best practices guides on topics such as transit planning, operations, safety, and funding.

[Community Transportation Association of America \(CTAA\)](#): CTAA offers a range of resources for rural transportation, including toolkits, reports, and publications. It provides resources on topics such as rural transportation coordination, mobility management, vehicle procurement, and rural transportation funding options.

[American Public Transportation Association \(APTA\)](#): APTA provides resources on various aspects of public transportation, including rural transportation. It offers publications, research reports, webinars, and toolkits covering topics such as transit planning, operations, sustainability, and innovative mobility solutions.

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