

## Health Benefits

### Full Report: Measuring the Economic Benefits of Rural and Small Urban Transit Services in Greater Minnesota

Access to transportation is critically important for some users to obtain health care services. Many transit riders in rural communities rely on public transportation to get to their medical appointments. Transit improves access to health care services, which can result in reduced health care expenses and improved quality of life. Missing a trip for routine care or preventive services can often result in a medical trip that is costlier than the trip that was missed. A missed trip can lead to emergency trips or hospitalization. Improving access to health care allows the individual to maintain well-managed care, reduces the need for more expensive services, and improves quality of life.

Transit stakeholders across Greater Minnesota were surveyed regarding the benefits of transit in their communities, and most agreed that improved access to health care is a major benefit. Several stakeholders noted it would be difficult for transit riders to get to their appointments if the service was not available. Surveys of riders confirmed these concerns.

### Impact on Access to Health Care

Transit riders from six Greater Minnesota transit agencies were surveyed to collect information regarding the benefits of these services. Those surveyed included riders from one urban system, St. Cloud Metro Bus, and five rural providers: Paul Bunyan Transit, Southern Minnesota Area Rural Transit (SMART), St. Peter Transit, Timber Trails, and Trailblazer Transit. Responses demonstrated the importance of transit for accessing health care.

Health care trips are a common use of transit in Greater Minnesota, along with work trips and shopping trips. Approximately 15% of trips are estimated to be for health care purposes, and about 70% of riders use transit for health care trips.

Most riders use transit because they cannot drive or do not have access to a vehicle, and because it can be difficult to get a ride from others. Overall, about one-third of riders surveyed said they would not have made their current trip if transit was not available. Most others would have relied on family or friends for a ride, taken a more expensive taxi or ride hailing service if available, or walked. Among those who were taking a health care trip when surveyed, 38% said they would not have made the trip if transit was not available.

As shown in Table 1, many respondents reported that they would miss at least some doctor visits or prescriptions if bus service was not available. Overall, 17% said they would miss many health care trips, and an additional 23% answered that they would miss at least some trips. The importance of transit is more significant when focusing on those who frequently use transit for health care trips. Among those who use transit multiple days per week for health care, 37% would miss many health care trips and an additional 27% would miss at least some trips if transit were not available.

**Table 1 Percentage of Respondents That Would Miss Health Care Trips Without Transit**

	<b>Paul Bunyan Transit (n=132)</b>	<b>SMART (n=99)</b>	<b>St. Cloud Metro Bus (n=455)</b>	<b>St. Peter Transit (n=22)</b>	<b>Timber Trails (n=30)</b>	<b>Trailblazer Transit (n=140)</b>
	-----Percentage of respondents-----					
<i>Yes, many</i>	18	14	22	27	17	4
<i>Yes, few</i>	23	23	28	14	20	11
<i>No</i>	59	63	50	59	63	84

## Monetary Benefit of Improved Access to Health Care

Previous research has demonstrated the significant monetary benefits of providing non-emergency medical transportation. This study applied results from previous work to demonstrate the substantial health benefits that transit services in Greater Minnesota provide. The number of health care trips that would have been forgone if transit was not available was estimated for each case study agency based on the percentage of transit trips that are for health purposes and the percentage of respondents that said they would not have made the trip without transit. The cost of a missed health care trip was based on previous research that estimated the monetary value of increased health care costs and reduced quality of life that would result. Table 2 shows the estimated total cost of forgone health care trips for each case study agency. This is the health benefit of providing transit services to those who would have missed health care trips.

**Table 2 Estimated Access to Health Care Benefit**

	<b>Paul Bunyan Transit</b>	<b>SMART</b>	<b>St. Cloud Metro Bus</b>	<b>St. Peter Transit</b>	<b>Timber Trails</b>	<b>Trailblazer Transit</b>
<i>Access to health care benefit (\$)</i>	3,520,587	5,514,718	29,466,106	980,629	2,180,975	4,623,828

The total benefit across all agencies in Greater Minnesota is estimated as \$228 million, including \$107 million from the rural agencies statewide and \$121 million from the urban agencies in Greater Minnesota. These benefits more than exceed the total costs of providing transit in Greater Minnesota. On a per trip basis, these benefits equal \$26.46 for rural agencies statewide, \$15.58 for urban agencies in Greater Minnesota, and \$19.30 total across Greater Minnesota. This is approximately twice the cost of providing service. Based on 2017 data, per trip costs in Greater Minnesota were \$14.28 for rural agencies, \$6.43 for urban agencies, and \$9.11 total.

## Broader Health Benefits

Transit also provides other health benefits that were not measured in monetary terms. The study provides some evidence regarding aspects of mental health and quality of life. Transit supports public health by providing people access to meet their daily needs. In addition to medical services, transit improves access to other daily destinations, including grocery stores, employment, education, and recreational opportunities. Many transit riders rely on the service as their primary means of transportation to work. All of these activities have positive

benefits for physical and mental health. Including transit in the transportation network ensures that all people have the ability to reach destinations.

Transit can have positive mental health benefits by reducing social isolation and stress. Most transit riders surveyed agreed, and many strongly agreed, that transit increases their social interaction with other people, reduces their stress levels, allows them to live independently, and improves their overall quality of life. Most also agreed that it helps keep them connected to their town.

Transit in Greater Minnesota serves populations that are adversely impacted by health inequities. Among the rural riders surveyed, 75% had household incomes below \$25,000, two-thirds did not have access to a vehicle, only 26% had a driver's license, and 63% reported having a disability. These are populations that tend to be more vulnerable to poor health and are reliant on transit. Supporting access to vital community services through transit is a health equity strategy.