

An Evaluation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Services in New Jersey, Program Year 2021

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
Key Takeaways	2
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Research Questions	5
Transportation Data	6
Transportation Models	6
Expert Panel Discussions	6
Transportation Stakeholder Interviews	7
Transportation Models	7
Via JC	8
New Jersey Travel Independence Program	8
Washington State Intercity Bus Program	8
Research in Context	11
Research Findings and Recommendations	12
Research Question #1	12
Research Question #2	17
Research Question #3	19
Research Question #4	22
Suggestions for Future Research	24
Conclusion	25

Contents (continued)

Appendix A: Transportation Models	26
Appendix B: Interview Protocol	31
Appendix C: Expert Panel #1 Protocol	33
Appendix D: Expert Panel #2 Protocol	34
Appendix E: Transportation Stakeholders	36
Appendix A: Transportation Expert Panel Summary Report	37
Appendix F: Bibliography	44
Acknowledgments	46
About the Heldrich Center	46

Executive Summary

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey worked with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOL), Office of Research and Information to conduct an evaluation of transportation services provided to Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I and Title IV customers during Program Year 2021 (PY21), defined as the period of July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022. The objectives were to assess the nature, extent, and scope of transportation services provided to Title I and Title IV customers during PY21; examine service delivery strategies currently implemented in New Jersey's southern/rural counties (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem); identify transportation services that warrant further evaluation, expansion, and/or replication; and recommend modifications to address transportation barriers that WIOA customers, particularly those with disabilities, face in New Jersey.

Researchers used the following multi-method approach for data collection:

- ▶ Analyzed transportation-related data in the Participant Individual Record Layout (PIRL) and Accessible Web-based Activity and Reporting Environment (AWARE) in PY21;
- ▶ Assessed local and national transportation models;
- ▶ Held two expert panels with transportation stakeholders; and
- ▶ Conducted nine structured interviews with 12 interviewees representing state, local, and national transportation and employment experts.

Through these research efforts, the Heldrich Center examined the transportation-focused data available in PIRL and AWARE to illustrate the extent to which WIOA customers are engaging in supportive transportation services at the local level. The Heldrich Center explored the complex dynamics of the transportation systems that currently exist or are in development in New Jersey's

southern/rural counties, with a targeted emphasis on identifying challenges and/or gaps in the current transportation ecosystem. Through conversations with transportation experts and stakeholders, researchers explored both areas of strength and areas of investment for the transportation supports and infrastructure required to connect individuals in New Jersey's southern counties' transit deserts to the workforce development services needed to advance their employment journeys.

Moreover, in this research, stakeholders explained that the issue of transportation is often invisible, with little attention being paid to the degree to which transportation may be a barrier at the individual level but also how the lack of transportation in more rural regions can cut off communities from accessing services that could assist them. Stakeholders further explained how a lack of centralized, up-to-date transportation information is a hindrance to individuals seeking supportive services, particularly individuals with disabilities. As such, the findings from the Heldrich Center's research point to a transportation landscape in need of investment and strategic partnerships to connect existing, in-development, and future transportation-focused supports to the individuals who need them the most.

Building upon the aforementioned learnings from these varied data collection efforts, the Heldrich Center identified 16 findings and eight recommendations. This report is organized by research question and its associated findings and recommendations. A summary is presented below. Taken together, these findings and recommendations offer a path forward for a multitude of stakeholders to work collaboratively in the state to reduce the significant barriers that exist when individuals do not have access to safe and reliable transportation that they can navigate with independence.

Key Takeaways

Research Question #1:

To what extent were transportation services provided through WIOA to Title I and Title IV customers during PY21? What was the nature, extent, and scope of transportation services provided in New Jersey to access WIOA services, enroll in training, and search for and prepare for employment in PY21?

Findings:

- ▶ There were 256,595 customers reported in the PIRL data in PY21.
- ▶ Less than 1% (130) of PY21 customers were co-enrolled in PIRL between WIOA Title I and Title IV services during this period.
- ▶ PIRL lacks populated transportation-related fields. Though PIRL contains fields like "Related assistance: Transportation" and "Lacks transportation," neither have any data across program years, including PY21.
- ▶ 154 out of 12,039 Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) customers (1.3%) received transportation services in PY21 across New Jersey. According to the AWARE data, the most common category was client transportation and the New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJTIP).
- ▶ The number of VR customers who received transportation services in the counties of interest (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem) was low (28) in PY21.
- ▶ NJ TRANSIT was the most common transportation service vendor of those reported in PY21. The second most common was Rutgers University, which provided transportation services to Title IV customers.

Short-term Recommendation:

NJDOL could standardize data collection by using existing transportation-related fields in the America's One-Stop Operating System. Populating existing transportation-related fields shown in PIRL would provide essential information on the types of transportation services provided to WIOA customers, as well as any transportation barriers, in the state.

Long-term Recommendation:

NJDOL and local One-Stop Career Centers could collect more detailed data on transportation services provided to WIOA customers. Collecting data such as the use of ride-sharing, NJ TRANSIT route utilized, and dollars allocated would allow future studies to examine the patterns of transportation use by WIOA Title I and Title IV customers.

Research Question #2:

What are the transportation service delivery strategies currently implemented in five of New Jersey's southern/rural counties (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem)?

Findings:

- ▶ Existing transportation service delivery strategies focus on providing WIOA customers with NJ TRANSIT vouchers and gas mileage payments.
- ▶ WIOA Title IV customers are referred to NJTIP for travel training.
- ▶ Local One-Stop Career Center staff are trying to rethink and/or get creative in addressing transportation barriers for WIOA customers.
- ▶ Local One-Stop Career Center staff did not mention referring customers to county-based or community-driven transportation systems and/or micro-transit systems, which is a possible area for growth and development.

Short-term Recommendation:

NJDOL, in conjunction with the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) and local counties, can promote greater awareness of existing transportation systems and/or supportive structures with a transportation information hub. Information about transportation options and their routes, departure and arrival times, costs, accessibility, and other service features should be collected from various existing sources (e.g., county websites) and stored in a centralized database. NJDOL could also coalesce critical stakeholders such as community-based organizations and advocates in the development of such a resource hub.

Long-term Recommendation:

NJDOL could champion the development of (a) mobility and/or transportation manager role(s) with the New Jersey legislature. Previous research, in addition to feedback collected in this study, recommended establishing the role of a statewide mobility manager, who would be tasked with providing coordinated trip planning and scheduling services to individuals with disabilities in New Jersey. This role could foster greater alignment with existing services to create a more robust ecosystem for the state's southern/rural counties that currently contain transit deserts, constituting impactful gains for this service area of focus.

Research Question #3:

What, if any, transportation services or options for services in one or more of New Jersey's southern/rural counties warrant further evaluation and/or expansion and replication, based on transportation and workforce development staff and/or other state subject-matter experts?

Findings:

- ▶ Micro-transit can fill gaps left by NJ TRANSIT and other transportation services and help alleviate transit deserts. The Federal Transit Administration defines micro-transit as a "technology-enabled service that uses multi-passenger vehicles to provide on-demand services with dynamically generated routing."¹ Micro-transit systems are in development in New Jersey and are regarded as a middle-ground service between private individual transportation (car services) and fixed-route public transportation services.
- ▶ NJ TRANSIT's Americans with Disabilities Act paratransit program, Access Link, is a critical program and model of service but needs improvement.
- ▶ Educating individuals on existing transportation services in New Jersey is integral to increasing access and public transportation use, which can help reduce transportation barriers in pursuing training and employment opportunities.

Short-term Recommendation:

Based upon the learnings of this study, NJDOL could commission a study of existing transportation pilots to assess micro-transit systems' implementation, challenges, and successes for future adaptation and/or expansion in the state. Relevant New Jersey transportation stakeholders regard micro-transit systems as positive strategies to address transportation barriers in the state. Future studies could further engage local and state leaders, community-based organizations, advocates, and public transportation riders to ensure the learnings are robust and able to shed light on critical investments in the programs and transportation infrastructure needed in New Jersey.

Long-term Recommendation:

NJDOL, in conjunction with partners such as the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) and the New Jersey Department of Human Services (NJ DHS), could expand transportation-focused education and training services. Transportation stakeholders recommended specifically tailoring transportation education services to youth with disabilities, specifically 18- to 21-year-olds, after graduation to ensure that this population can navigate public transportation with ease and independence.

Research Question #4:

What modifications could be made to WIOA services in the context of the transportation challenges identified in New Jersey?

Findings:

- ▶ Transportation needs to be a factor in choosing training and/or employment opportunities for WIOA customers.
- ▶ Lacking employer engagement thwarts efforts to develop and implement effective transportation services for WIOA customers in New Jersey's transit deserts.
- ▶ Virtual service provision assists with addressing customers' transportation barriers.

¹ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/shared-mobility-definitions>

Short-term Recommendation:

Local One-Stop Career Centers can highlight the need for staff and counselors to consider the impact of access to transportation upfront in any engagement with customers. By defining training and job search parameters early in the customer engagement process, WIOA customers can explore potential learning and employment opportunities more suitable to their access to transportation.

Long-term Recommendation:

NJDOL could continue to invest in virtual service delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for the growth and innovation of virtual services that has continued and flourished with local areas transitioning most, if not all, of their services to exist in a virtual space as needed.

These findings and recommendations offer a path forward that engage a multitude of stakeholders who could participate in building and socializing a more robust public transportation ecosystem that connects individuals to the public services that would support their education and employment journeys. NJDOL is positioned to engage a strong coalition of partners to

further dive into the recommendations stemming from this report. Transportation experts and stakeholders discussed the need for coalitions at all levels of government to engage in the conversation to address the complexities that persist in New Jersey's transit deserts. Programs and services to alleviate transportation issues do exist or are in development in the state's rural counties; however, they could be further expanded to be more effective with modifications and/or highlighted in local communities for increased visibility and usage.

To have access to and be able to navigate transportation is an empowering independence that stakeholders emphasized throughout this study. The tangible and intangible benefits of a more robust, easily navigable transportation ecosystem cannot be understated, as the impacts are far reaching in the populations that are most in need of additional supports. The Heldrich Center's study aims to shed light on the ways in which the transportation supportive services and infrastructure could be improved to better assist WIOA customers throughout New Jersey, with specific emphasis on individuals with disabilities navigating transportation for workforce development services and/or employment.

Introduction

Reliable and accessible transportation can be a persistent challenge for many populations in New Jersey. While there are more ample public transportation service offerings in the state's urban areas, there are other locations throughout New Jersey that constitute transit deserts, namely rural areas, particularly those in the southern region of the state. For this reason, New Jersey's transportation landscape is complex and requires further investigation to understand the breadth and depth of current service offerings as well as where more support and investment may be needed to create a robust public transportation system.

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey conducted an evaluation of transportation services provided to Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

Title I and Title IV customers during Program Year 2021 (PY21), spanning July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022. The Heldrich Center's evaluation was conducted in conjunction with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOL), Office of Research and Information.

The Heldrich Center's evaluation focused on individuals with disabilities' experience with transportation services in accessing workforce development and employment supports. Transportation is perceived to be a significant barrier to individuals with disabilities and others who are seeking access to workforce development services to support them in their employment journey. This evaluation seeks to highlight the transportation challenges that exist for this population seeking services at One-Stop Career Centers and related service locations.

The Heldrich Center’s evaluation specifically examines New Jersey’s five more southern/rural counties, namely Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties. The transportation challenges associated with rural and/or more geographically dispersed areas in the state are distinct from those experienced in urban areas. For that reason, this evaluation examines the rural context as a challenge to accessing transportation for the purposes of receiving workforce development services.

To answer the research questions guiding this evaluation, researchers:

- ▶ Analyzed transportation-related data in the Participant Individual Record Layout (PIRL) and Accessible Web-based Activity and Reporting Environment (AWARE),
- ▶ Profiled existing state and national transportation models,
- ▶ Convened two technical advisory panels with employment and transportation experts, and
- ▶ Conducted nine interviews with selected advisory panel members and subject-matter experts.

The mixed-methods approach revealed 16 research findings related to transportation services provided to Title I and Title IV customers in PY21. Within each finding, researchers provide short- and long-term recommendations to create and/or strengthen existing transportation for WIOA customers in New Jersey.

Taken together, these findings and recommendations offer next steps to coalesce the data, resources, investments, and stakeholders necessary to foster a more comprehensive public transportation system to serve the needs of individuals in New Jersey’s southern/rural counties seeking public services, particularly workforce development services. While transportation systems and supports currently exist, greater awareness of these services is needed to enhance their reach and effectiveness, with particular consideration for the communities and populations not served by current public transportation infrastructure. Moreover, innovation with new transportation service offerings, such as micro-transit systems, is perceived by transportation stakeholders to be the path forward in serving and reaching New Jersey’s transit deserts.

This study was conducted to meet NJDOL’s annual WIOA evaluation requirement.

Methodology

The following section details the Heldrich Center’s approach to each component of the WIOA PY21 evaluation plan (see Appendices B to D for research protocols). The evaluation had four primary tasks.

- ▶ Task 1: An Examination of America’s One-Stop Operating System (AOSOS) and AWARE Data for WIOA PY21 Customers who Received Transportation Services;
- ▶ Task 2: Profile of Exemplary National and/or Statewide Disability Employment and Transportation Strategies;
- ▶ Task 3: Convene a Technical Advisory Panel of Employment and Transportation Experts in New Jersey; and
- ▶ Task 4: Conduct In-depth Interviews with Selected Advisory Panel Members and Subject-matter Experts.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the Heldrich Center’s WIOA PY21 evaluation:

- ▶ To what extent were transportation services provided through WIOA to Title I and Title IV customers during PY21? What was the nature, extent, and scope of transportation services provided in New Jersey to access WIOA services, enroll in training, and search for and prepare for employment in PY21?
- ▶ What are the transportation service delivery strategies currently implemented in five of New Jersey’s southern/rural counties (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem)?

- ▶ What, if any, transportation services or options for services in one or more of New Jersey's rural counties warrant further evaluation and/or expansion and replication, based on transportation and workforce development staff and/or other state subject-matter experts?
- ▶ What modifications could be made to WIOA services in context of the transportation challenges identified in New Jersey?

The findings and associated recommendations in this evaluation will be tied to each of the research questions.

Transportation Data

The Heldrich Center reviewed transportation-related data in PIRL and AWARE. PIRL represents the federal reporting layout and includes data on multiple WIOA populations, whereas AWARE is the case management system for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) customers under Title IV. Researchers conducted an analysis of transportation services provided to Title I and Title IV customers captured in PIRL and AWARE during PY21.

The analysis uses customers rather than individual cases in AWARE by filtering unique individual IDs. A similar approach was used for PIRL, whereby researchers filtered by unique seeker IDs and removed duplicated records. Researchers used suppression in cases where cell sizes were fewer than 10 individuals, where necessary, to prevent users from identifying row or column totals.

Researchers encountered several analytical limitations. Most notably, PIRL lacks populated transportation-related fields. This posed substantial limitations on assessing the types of transportation services that Title I customers (Adult, Dislocated Worker, Youth) received in PY21. Another limitation was that the AWARE extract researchers had access to did not include social security numbers. Without hashed social security numbers, researchers could not link VR customers in AWARE with potential records in PIRL. The AWARE extract instead included seeker IDs, which were not able to be linked to the identifiers in the PIRL layout. Though researchers used various fields in PIRL to assess co-enrollment,

unique identifiers, such as hashed social security numbers, were likely necessary to identify **all** instances of co-enrollment.

Transportation Models

Researchers conducted a review of recent studies and documentation on transportation challenges in New Jersey and nationally. From this review, researchers identified three exemplary transportation strategies that could be used as models to inform initiatives to replicate, expand, or reform existing strategies in rural New Jersey counties.

Researchers conducted interviews with representatives of each identified transportation strategy to gain a deeper understanding of how key stakeholders were involved in implementation; critical components necessary for success; the target population served; and evidence, anecdotal, or quantifiable measures of success. Models featured in this report include Via JC of Jersey City, NJ; the New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJTIP); and the Washington State Intercity Bus Program.

Expert Panel Discussions

The Heldrich Center hosted two transportation expert discussion panels. The first panel was on November 15, 2023. The Heldrich Center research team invited 45 transportation stakeholders to participate in the discussion. See Appendix E for the full list of stakeholders. Stakeholders represented a variety of perspectives through which to consider transportation and access to workforce development and other public services. Stakeholders offered insights on how access to transportation varied by type of WIOA customer, with specific emphasis on those with disabilities. The panel had representation from stakeholders in New Jersey's southern/rural counties to provide input specifically on transportation issues related to rural New Jersey. Out of 45 invitations sent, and two email reminders, the expert panel was attended by 15 participants. A summary of the transportation panel was produced by the Heldrich Center for NJDOL in December 2023. See Appendix F for the full summary report.

The Heldrich Center conducted a second transportation expert panel on January 19, 2024. The second panel was designed to document the responses and/or reactions of transportation experts to the Heldrich Center's preliminary findings and themes identified in the first panel discussion as well as the stakeholder interviews. Moreover, the second panel discussion sought transportation expert input to ensure that the preliminary findings from the center's research were valid and the suggestions for potential innovative solutions to address transportation challenges were reasonable. For the second panel, 45 invitations were sent with two reminder emails; 10 transportation experts attended the panel.

Transportation Stakeholder Interviews

The Heldrich Center conducted nine in-depth structured interviews with 12 interviewees consisting of state, local, and national employment and transportation experts. The purpose of the interviews was to examine employment-related transportation services available to WIOA customers with a specific emphasis on Title IV customers in Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties. Through these interviews, researchers collected detailed information on transportation services at the local and state levels, including service strengths and weaknesses, local considerations, areas for improvement, and key components needed for replication or expansion. Interviews were held from October to December 2023.

Transportation Models

The Heldrich Center examined several state and national transportation models as part of this evaluation. Three models were selected to be profiled in this evaluation, as these models constitute promising and innovative practices in providing accessible transportation options to service areas otherwise perceived to be unreachable by existing public transportation structures. Moreover, these models represent exemplary transportation strategies and the wide range of innovation taking place to improve access to work and public services.

These three models were selected to demonstrate different variations of transportation structures and supports that could be considered in New Jersey's southern/rural counties to meet the needs of the populations seeking services in those areas. While these models have been implemented in more urban areas, they still hold value and should be considered for application in rural areas as they work with and alongside

existing transit services to increase overall connectivity. This is especially true for micro-transit services that do not operate on fixed routes. This type of service model is well suited to rural settings, as fixed-route public transit is often less feasible due to large distances and low population density. Stakeholders believe that the following models would be able to be implemented in rural settings with the proper resources and investments.

Key features of the three transportation models are briefly summarized in Table 1. See Appendix A for a complete description of each transportation model, including key stakeholders, implementation details, critical components, and impacts.

Table 1: Descriptions and Key Features of Transportation Models

Program	Description	Key Features
Via JC	On-demand, ride-share shuttle service that helps fill gaps left by public transportation to improve overall connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Low fares ▶ Long service hours ▶ Wheelchair accessible
New Jersey Travel Independence Program	Provides instruction and training on how to travel safely and independently on public transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ One-on-one travel instruction ▶ Individual concierge and trip planning service ▶ Small group and in-school travel instruction ▶ Educational seminars
Washington State Intercity Bus Program	Funds private carriers to operate an intercity bus service that connects rural communities to major transportation hubs and urban centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Funded by state but administered by private carrier ▶ Four bus lines that connect urban and rural areas

Via JC

Based in Jersey City, NJ, **Via JC** is an on-demand, ride-share shuttle service funded by Jersey City in partnership with the New York City-based transit technology company **Via**. Launched in February 2020, Via JC operates exclusively within Jersey City boundaries and is designed to help fill the gaps left by other public transportation without competing against them to improve overall connectivity. Via JC ridership has grown steadily, with over two million rides completed and 60,000 unique riders since launching. There are approximately five trips made per driver hour, resulting in an average 2.8 weekly trips per rider. Via JC is a micro-transit system. Jersey City’s city council and mayor worked with state legislators to secure funding.

New Jersey Travel Independence Program

The **New Jersey Travel Independence Program** (NJTIP) at Rutgers University provides instruction and training on how to travel safely and independently on public transportation, including buses, trains, light rails, community transportation, and ride-share systems. Launched in 2005, NJTIP works with a variety of government agencies, community organizations,

and schools to teach public transportation travel skills to people with disabilities, older adults, and others to increase their self-sufficiency. Service offerings include one-on-one travel instruction, individual concierge and trip planning services, small group and in-school travel instruction, and educational seminars. Since NJTIP began, it has taught public transportation skills to more than 15,000 individuals. Funding for NJTIP comes from a variety of sources, including state agencies and entities, schools, community-based organizations, and grants. State agencies providing funding include NJDOL, DVRS, and NJ TRANSIT.

Washington State Intercity Bus Program

The Washington State Department of Transportation’s (WSDOT) **Travel Washington Intercity Bus Program** is a public-private partnership in which WSDOT administers Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grant funds to local private carriers to operate an intercity bus service that connects rural communities to major transportation hubs and urban centers. The program offers four bus lines that aim to make travel more accessible, reliable, and convenient throughout the state. Private carriers handle the operation and administration of services, requiring little action from the state. Based on an assessment

in 2019, an additional 5% of Washington’s population was served within 10 miles of an intercity stop and an additional 17% was served within 25 miles through the program. In terms of operation and funding, WSDOT solicits requests for proposals for the FTA grant funding under four-year contracts, with an unsubsidized local 50% match requirement, to the contracting private carriers under a cost-per-mile structure.

For additional details on each of these three distinct models, see Appendix A. These three models of service are well-suited for expansion and/or adoption in New Jersey as they address three distinct transportation challenges facing the state, specifically those cited by the state’s rural counties (see Table 2). From interviews with transportation model experts, as well as other stakeholders, the Heldrich Center research team learned about three critical issues:

- ▶ Fixed-route services not reaching communities and/or populations in need of transportation,
- ▶ A lack of awareness of existing transportation services and supports, and
- ▶ A lack of funding to invest in additional transportation services.

The models highlighted in this evaluation represent promising transportation programs and/or services that could be expanded or replicated in five New Jersey southern/rural counties to address the perceived needs in these communities. These three models directly correspond to the voiced gaps in the public transportation ecosystem, as noted by the transportation stakeholders who participated in this study. Gaps in service availability,

understanding of service offerings, and consistent funding for modification and/or investment were all cited as ongoing challenges in addressing transportation barriers in New Jersey.

These three examples of transportation models highlight strategies that provide services that meet the needs of their respective communities and demonstrate the range of innovation that is possible for existing and future transportation services. Moreover, these three models are well suited for application in New Jersey’s southern/ rural counties as they represent innovation that directly addresses core barriers in an equitable manner. For example, according to program data, 60% of all Via JC rides serve low-income residents and 85% of riders use the service for essential needs (Israel, 2024). Statistics such as these highlight the way that micro-transit services are impactful in the communities most in need of support and/or services.

These three models warrant further evaluation and/or expansion and replication to apply them in a rural geographic context. Key considerations and/or potential challenges for application in a rural context are ride pricing in relation to distance traveled, availability of travel trainers, and the strategic designation of shared drop-off points and/or routes within more rural communities. The price structure of Via JC is a critical component of the program’s success and adoption across Jersey City. Application to a rural setting is feasible; however, it remains to be seen if the same pricing structure, specifically \$2 per ride, could be maintained when the miles traveled would likely be greater than the distances traveled in an urban setting. This is one key point that should be explored in a pilot program. Regarding the

Table 2: Transportation Issues Addressed by Models

Program	Challenge	Innovation
Via JC	Addresses challenges posed by fixed-route bus services and mitigates transit deserts by connecting less-dense areas to existing public transportation	On-demand, non-fixed-route service funded by Jersey City
New Jersey Travel Independence Program	Addresses the need for knowledge and skill building required to use public transportation	Formal education program that increases independence for people with disabilities, older adults, and others
Washington State Intercity Bus Program	Addresses the need to move people across large distances in a rural setting	Unique funding structure requiring less from the state than other models

expansion of NJTIP, the primary consideration for adoption in a rural context is the availability of travel instructors dedicated to New Jersey's southern/rural region. NJTIP is based on the Rutgers–New Brunswick campus. Thus, expansion to the Rutgers–Camden campus may be necessary to ensure staffing and coverage in the region. Lastly, another key consideration is the identification of shared drop-off points and/or priority routes in a rural setting. Local officials and community-based organizations would be critical partners in identifying more granular areas of need within the rural context of New Jersey's southern counties.

In considering the design of a pilot program, an area of potential innovation is designing a micro-transit system that crosses county borders. At present, the state's current micro-transit offerings are typically bound to one city (e.g., Jersey City) and/or one county. A pilot program could consider the ways that services are not bound by county line but rather focus on transportation needs and connecting individuals to popular destinations that serve them regardless of the geographic location. Customers do not think of their needs in terms of county lines; therefore, a pilot program could bring together collaborators in multiple counties to identify popular routes and/or destinations from areas known to be transit deserts. Conceptualizing a pilot program in this way would put the customer need and voice at the forefront of the service offering. To undertake such an endeavor, NJDOL could convene local leaders and community-based organizations to identify transit deserts of focus and perceived destinations of interest, and consider how a more flexible modality of service provision, such as a micro-transit system, could meet those identified gaps in service. This is one way a pilot program could be deployed in New Jersey's southern/rural counties. At the time of this study, researchers at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University were examining the feasibility of such a cross-county endeavor. NJDOL and other transportation stakeholders could connect with the researchers at the Voorhees Transportation Center to examine a potential path forward for investment in micro-transit in a rural context.

Other models of note within New Jersey include the community-based shuttle service offered by **Cross County Connection Transportation Management Association**, which provides services to Atlantic, Burlington, and Gloucester counties, as well as the micro-transit services, Camden Loop and GOTrenton! The Cross County Connection Transportation Management Association offers an affordable community-based, fixed-route shuttle service with five service areas. Each service route makes connections with existing NJ TRANSIT bus routes and rail stations.

Camden Loop, a public transit ride-share service, was launched in June 2023 and is currently in its pilot phase. Sponsored by Camden County, in partnership with Via, Camden Loop is a low-cost, on-demand micro-transit system for the city of Camden, with marketing materials featuring the ability to access meaningful employment opportunities without needing a personal vehicle.²

GOTrenton! is the state's first electric-powered shuttle system. GOTrenton! launched in September 2023 and is also in a pilot phase. The pilot program is operated by **Circuit** in collaboration with Isles, Inc. for the city of Trenton. GOTrenton! is marketed as a micro-mobility concept, designed to fill the gaps between conventional bus and rail service (Higgs, 2023).

These three additional transportation service offerings constitute innovation taking place at the local level in New Jersey. Both micro-transit pilots are in their infancy and should be explored in-depth after they are fully operational as they have the potential to shed light on best practices in non-fixed-route transit services.

² <https://city.ridewithvia.com/camden-loop>

Research in Context

This section offers background research by which the transportation challenges and landscape in New Jersey were considered for this evaluation. Researchers reviewed relevant literature that noted the historical context for existing transportation challenges as well as the ongoing motivations, priorities, and investments for New Jersey moving forward.

In New Jersey, a lack of access to safe and reliable transportation poses significant challenges for many populations, especially individuals with disabilities. Research suggests that individuals with disabilities experience a multitude of barriers when using public transportation to access public services and employment. A study conducted by Lubin and Deka (2012) found that public transportation plays a critical role in enhancing job access for people with disabilities, with 76% of job-seeking individuals with disabilities strongly believing transportation was important for their job search. Furthermore, the study found that individuals with disabilities encounter a variety of environmental, informational, and service-related barriers with 25% citing having left a job due to travel difficulties and 40% having turned down a job due to travel difficulties.

Lack of access to transportation services, coupled with the perceived barriers to utilizing transportation, make it increasingly difficult for individuals, especially those with disabilities, to get the workforce development, healthcare, and social services they may need, ultimately affecting their ability to obtain and maintain employment. This has serious implications for an individual's overall well-being as education, job opportunities, and access to health services are all key social determinants of health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., World Health Organization, n.d.).

It must be considered that this research is being conducted at a time of evolving needs in the post-pandemic world. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing transportation challenges as transportation availability gaps widened with fewer buses and trains running in combination with decreased capacity per public health guidelines (Ziminski, Thompson, & Villacis, 2023). Furthermore, research suggests that population shifts from urban areas to less-populated areas have

contributed to reduced overall transit ridership. However, low-density residence and work environments make public transit less attractive for commuting to work and for other trips (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024). This research is important in the context of understanding the transportation dynamics in more geographically distant locations, such as the five southern/rural counties of interest in New Jersey.

Moreover, additional context for this research focuses on the nation's shift away from fossil fuels to clean-energy sources, which has served to highlight public transportation options and services in the quest for more environmentally responsible ways to get people where they need to be. New Jersey's commitment to and prioritization of the green economy is reflected in service offerings as existing transportation providers and pilot programs are incorporating technological innovations, such as electric vehicles, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Specifically, these efforts align with Governor Murphy's creation of the [Office of Climate Action and the Green Economy](#), [New Jersey's Clean Energy Program](#), and the [New Jersey Partnership to Plug-In](#), all of which focus on moving the state toward clean-renewable energy sources with a focus on environmental justice. The importance of investment in public transportation in the context of the green economy and green investments in New Jersey provides a path forward to reimagine services for New Jersey's southern counties, particularly those that constitute transit deserts heavily reliant on personal vehicle usage.

Furthermore, for this research, the area of interest was New Jersey's southern/rural counties, which creates a distinct lens by which transportation challenges and solutions must be considered. Historically, rural areas are more likely to have uneven economic and population growth, and commonly lose population and jobs, a trend that has seen change in recent years with the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, rural areas typically receive a smaller proportion of funding for transportation services, infrastructure, and maintenance, and tend to lack alternative transportation modes for access and mobility (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and

Medicine, 2022). These factors greatly affect the public transportation services available to rural residents, as the result is limited transportation options, with infrequent schedules to cover long travel distances.

Understanding the context of this research is important when considering the Heldrich Center's findings and recommendations. The recommendations in this report will require the state's support and resources, across multiple state agencies working in conjunction, in order

to implement. New Jersey's Transportation Trust Fund, among other funding mechanisms, will likely play a critical role in supporting the recommendations outlined in this report. Investment in public transportation in New Jersey's rural counties for WIOA customers seeking services will constitute significant investment in creating a more robust and accessible service infrastructure for those in need.

Research Findings and Recommendations

This section aims to answer the research questions that guided the overall study and present findings that are supported by evidence across various data sources, including transportation data in PIRL and AWARE, local and national transportation models, two expert panel discussions, and nine stakeholder interviews. The research findings observed after analyzing these data shed light on transportation services provided to Title I and Title IV customers in PY21, areas that warrant further exploration and/or expansion, and any necessary modifications that would reduce transportation barriers in New Jersey.

Based on these findings, the Heldrich Center puts forth the following recommendations to help New Jersey provide better, more customer-centered services to all WIOA customers. These recommendations, though stemming from direct observations in this study, are also informed by previous research, specifically work from the [Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center](#) at Rutgers University and other WIOA-specific program evaluations conducted by the Heldrich Center.

Researchers note that NJDOL is well-positioned to advance collaborative efforts across stakeholders – including NJDOT, NJ TRANSIT, state and local leaders, employers, community members, individuals with disabilities, and others – toward implementing the recommended actions. Each recommendation should, therefore, be considered with a collaborative approach for implementation in mind.

Research Question #1: To what extent were transportation services provided through WIOA to Title I and Title IV customers during PY21? What was the nature, extent, and scope of transportation services provided in New Jersey to access WIOA services, enroll in training, and search for and prepare for employment in PY21?

The Heldrich Center examined transportation services provided to WIOA Title I and Title IV customers in PY21 to the extent possible with existing data, with an emphasis on Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties. Researchers identified **six** key findings associated with the analysis.

Though limitations curbed the analysis of the types of transportation services provided to Title I customers in the PIRL layout, researchers examined the number of customers served as well as those who were co-enrolled in PY21. This information provides helpful context around trends in participation and co-enrollment during this period.

Finding #1: There were 256,595 customers reported in the PIRL data in PY21.

Table 3 shows the distribution of customers across core WIOA Title I and Title IV populations: Adult, Dislocated Worker, Youth, and VR.

Table 3: WIOA Title I and Title IV Customers in PY21

	Adult	Dislocated Worker	Youth	Vocational Rehabilitation
Yes, local formula	4,286	5,200	5,464	-
Yes	-	-	-	89
Vocational rehabilitation & employment	-	-	-	Suppressed
Both vocational rehabilitation and vocational rehabilitation & employment	-	-	-	Suppressed
Reportable individual	Suppressed	48	45	-
NA	Suppressed	3,530	344	115,731
No	251,962	247,817	250,242	140,751

Source: PIRL

Finding #2: Less than 1% (130) of PY21 customers were co-enrolled in PIRL between WIOA Title I and Title IV services during this period.

Figure 1 shows that among the 130 customers who were co-enrolled, most received Adult and Dislocated Worker services, followed by Adult and Youth services. This finding illustrates that co-enrollment is not prevalent within the populations engaged in WIOA services. Greater emphasis could be placed on encouraging co-enrollment so that the reach and impact of supportive services could be further extended for these customer populations.

Finding #3: PIRL lacks populated transportation-related fields.

Though PIRL contains fields like “Related assistance: Transportation” and “Lacks transportation,” neither has any data across program years, including PY21. One possible explanation is that One-Stop Career Center staff may not enter these data because they are not required

to be reported to the federal government via PIRL under current WIOA requirements. Collecting data on existing transportation-related fields in PIRL would certainly be helpful, though they are not exhaustive and would present limited context on the types of transportation services received. Researchers were, therefore, limited in analyzing transportation services provided to Title I customers in PY21.

Finding #4: 154 out of 12,039 VR customers (1.3%) received transportation services in PY21 across New Jersey.

Figure 2 shows the categories of transportation services provided. According to the AWARE data, the most common categories were client transportation and NJTIP. While NJTIP provides education and training on using public transit safely and independently in New Jersey, what **client transportation** represents is unclear.

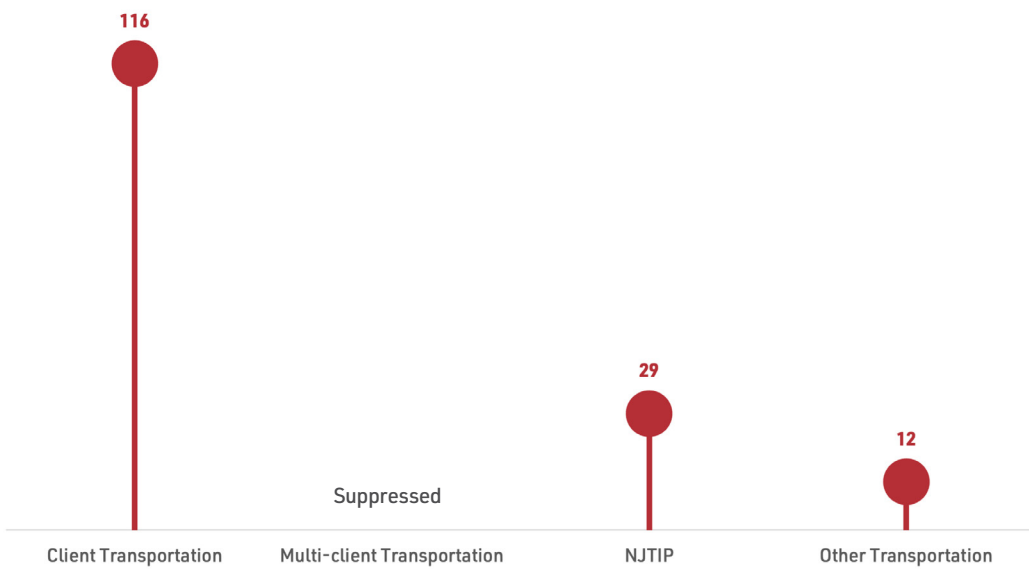
Figure 1: Co-enrollment for WIOA Customers in PY21



Source: PIRL

Note: Researchers used fields in PIRL to assess co-enrollment but did not identify any customers co-enrolled between Adult or Youth and VR. Because the AWARE extract that researchers had access to did not contain hashed social security numbers, they could not link VR customers with potential records in PIRL under Adult or Youth. Additionally, this figure does not include all 130 customers co-enrolled between Title I and Title IV services due to suppression.

Figure 2: Transportation Services for VR Customers in PY21



Source: AWARE

Finding #5: The number of VR customers who received transportation services in the counties of interest (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem) was low in PY21.

Due to data confidentiality and privacy restrictions governing disclosure, researchers aggregated information for counties based on region. Figure 3 shows that 28 VR customers received client transportation services in the southern New Jersey region, which includes the counties of interest. Other categories of transportation services were suppressed due to low counts.

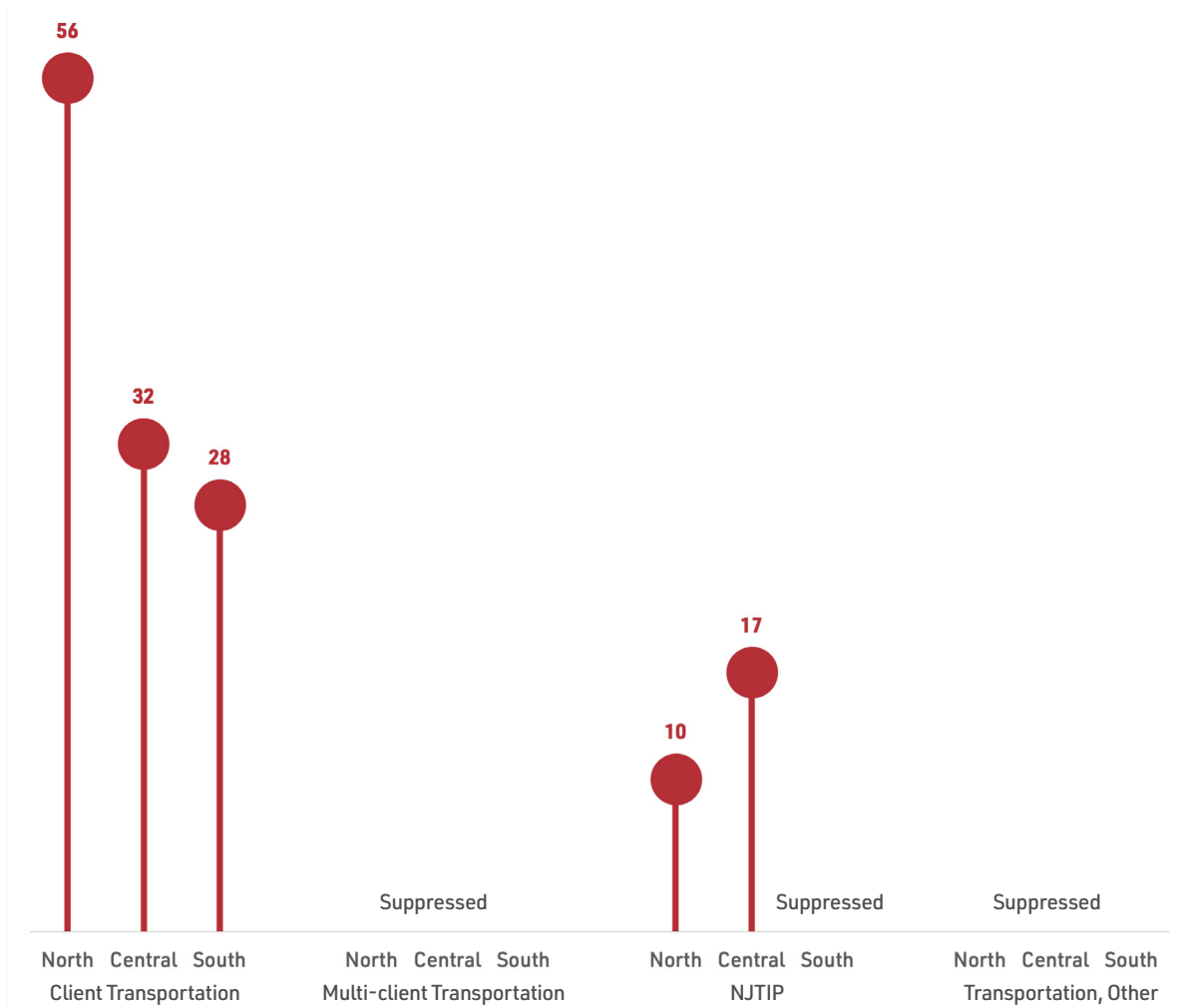
Finding #6: NJ TRANSIT was the most common transportation service vendor of those reported in PY21.

Figure 4 shows that 71 VR customers received either bus or general service through NJ TRANSIT. The second most common was Rutgers University, which provided transportation services to 30 Title IV customers in PY21.

Unfortunately, the transportation service vendor was not provided for 51 VR customers. These data, when consistently collected, provide important contextual information on transportation services provided.

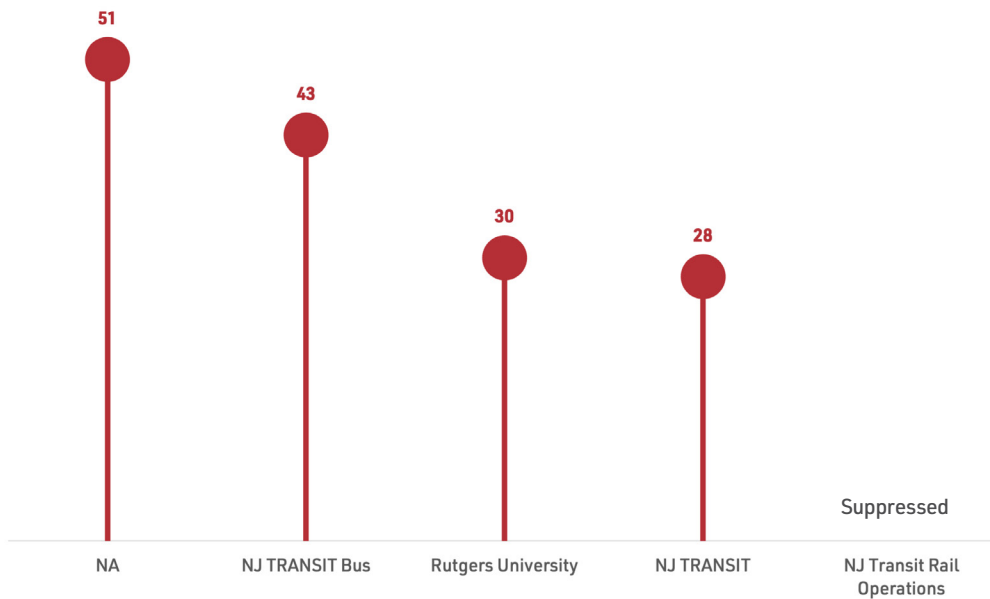
These findings illustrate an informative albeit limited landscape of transportation services provided to customers under Title I and Title IV in PY21. By populating existing fields and collecting better data, future studies can analyze the true extent of transportation services, including different types of transportation (e.g., Lyft or Uber) and dollars allocated, provided to WIOA customers. This topic will be expanded upon in later recommendations, whereby researchers suggest next steps and possibilities for future studies.

Figure 3: Transportation Services Provided to VR Customers by Region



Source: AWARE

Figure 4: Vendors of Transportation Services for VR Customers in PY21



Source: AWARE

Short-term Recommendation: NJDOL could standardize data collection by using existing transportation-related fields in the AOSOS data system.

Though interviewees suggested that local One-Stop Career Centers collect transportation-related data to best support their customers, the extent and consistency of data collection efforts across the state is currently unknown. Stakeholders report documenting transportation-related data in the services and comprehensive assessment tabs of AOSOS, though data related to transportation needs are not required. Stakeholders suggested that because the information is not required, it is more likely to go undocumented. As such, interviewees commented about that data being sparse and/or nonexistent. Populating existing transportation-related fields shown in PIRL would provide essential information on the types of transportation services provided to WIOA customers, as well as any transportation barriers, in the state. New Jersey should, therefore, standardize data collection to ensure that local One-Stop Career Center staff collect transportation-related data in AOSOS and later report them through PIRL. An AOSOS modification could be instituted that requires the transportation data fields to be completed for each customer. Relatedly, standardization of data collection could also be aided

by professional development and/or greater awareness for the importance of populating the barriers sections, specifically the transportation-focused barriers, of AOSOS. Staff could be informed on the potential learnings that could be derived from such fields, and how such learnings could then be used to inform customer-centered service recommendations and/or modifications in the future.

Long-term Recommendation: NJDOL and local One-Stop Career Centers could collect more detailed data on transportation services provided to WIOA customers.

Participants in the expert panels suggested, for example, that New Jersey should collect data on ride-sharing, such as Lyft and Uber. Informal conversations with local One-Stop Career Center staff revealed that these are often popular types of transportation offered to WIOA customers. The state could also collect better data on the NJ TRANSIT routes that WIOA customers are using. If someone uses the NJ TRANSIT rail system, for example, for which line are they redeeming the transportation service? This level of data could help NJDOL to better understand which rail lines and/or traditional fixed bus routes are most commonly used by WIOA customers in the counties of interest. Other data points that should be collected include dollars allocated. Collecting these data

would allow future studies to examine the patterns of transportation use by WIOA Title I and Title IV customers. To collect the aforementioned new data points of interest, AOSOS would require new data fields to be added in the transportation documentation section of the case management system for local One-Stop Career Center staff. If staff were encouraged to capture and easily document more nuanced and detailed information on transportation barriers, much more could be learned about the local-level patterns and customer needs regarding transportation supportive services. If new fields were added to AOSOS, professional development for local One-Stop Career Center staff would also be recommended to ensure that staff put in the proper information to the newly created fields.

Research Question #2: What are the transportation service delivery strategies currently implemented in five of New Jersey's southern/rural counties (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem)?

Researchers identified **four** key findings regarding the current landscape of transportation service delivery strategies.

Finding #7: Existing transportation service delivery strategies focus on providing WIOA customers with NJ TRANSIT vouchers and gas mileage payments.

The main transportation supportive service strategies employed by local One-Stop Career Centers in New Jersey's southern/rural counties are to offer NJ TRANSIT vouchers and gas mileage payments. Local staff offer WIOA customers NJ TRANSIT vouchers in the form of bus cards and/or daily tickets or gas mileage payments depending on the needs of the customer. Local staff interviewees noted using both of these strategies and also mentioned that if a customer is engaged in training, sometimes the training provider will also offer transportation assistance in other formats, but it is not typical or guaranteed. However, local staff noted the limitations of the transportation services they are able to provide. Vouchers are dependent on having access to public transportation and gas mileage payments hinge on an individual having either their own personal vehicle or access to a vehicle. While vouchers and gas

payments serve to reduce transportation barriers, they do not eliminate such barriers and effectively only benefit a narrower set of individuals seeking transportation supportive services. Local staff conveyed feeling limited by the options available to them to provide transportation supportive services, with one interviewee elaborating that they personally go over which bus stops, schedules, and routes to take with their customers before providing them with vouchers to ensure that this service is maximized. The interviewee explained their process:

"I will see the customer every two weeks. We have a form that they fill out and we figure out the zones and what buses they will need to take together, so I can give them enough bus tickets..."

This finding suggests that local One-Stop Career Centers and NJDOL could consider additional service options for allowable services under transportation-supportive services for WIOA customers.

Finding #8: WIOA Title IV customers are referred to NJTIP for travel training.

As previously mentioned in this report, WIOA Title IV customers are commonly referred to NJTIP for travel training assistance as a critical service to assist with transportation navigation for service delivery and employment purposes. As one local staff member commented:

"We've been speaking to NJTIP as well and the services they provide in the travel training is really interesting and very helpful to people for sure."

Local staff mentioned the value of travel training in the success of customers in continuing engagement with training and/or employment. Relatedly, interviewees spoke of the value of travel independence and the sense of pride it brings customers who do not have to rely on a family member to help them navigate getting to and from training or work.

Finding #9: Local One-Stop Career Center staff are trying to rethink and/or get creative in addressing transportation barriers for WIOA customers.

Interviewees suggested trying to get creative, where possible, in addressing specific transportation barriers for their customers. Local area staff spoke of taking time with customers to talk through any perceived transportation

barriers to ensure that the counselors' support was properly guided and supports were maximized. As one interviewee mentioned when talking about job placements with clients:

"Can they get to it? A lot of consumers are very aware and they're like, 'Look, I'm willing to only work in this area'...It is important [for] us to have that worked out based on their capabilities."

As mentioned previously, while NJ TRANSIT vouchers and gas mileage payments are available service offerings for southern New Jersey WIOA customers, they do not address the full range of transportation limitations that exist for individuals in geographically distant areas. One local area described utilizing WIOA funds for Youth customers to pay for driving school. Covering the cost of driving school removes a potential barrier that may have been otherwise insurmountable. Though the benefit of receiving a license is predicated on an individual having access to a vehicle, it is one additional avenue by which transportation-related barriers could be addressed for WIOA customers. Creativity could be encouraged statewide to further ensure that local areas are responsive to the transportation barriers persistent in their respective communities.

Finding #10: Local One-Stop Career Center staff did not mention referring customers to county-based or community-driven transportation systems and/or micro-transit systems, which is a possible area for growth and development.

In discussing the available service offerings for WIOA customers, none of the local staff that participated in interviews mentioned making referrals to county-based or community-driven transportation systems. For southern/rural New Jersey, this is of particular note with the presence of Cross County Connection Transportation Management Association, which maintains five community shuttle routes serving the counties of Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem. As such, local One-Stop Career Centers could explore creating better linkages with the services currently offered by Cross County Connection Transportation Management Association and other entities operating community-based transportation systems and/or micro-transit systems. As previously noted, micro-transit systems are currently being piloted and/or developed in New Jersey's southern counties.

This provides great potential to build synergy amongst transportation stakeholders that would enable a more robust service delivery ecosystem to be created to serve New Jersey's southern/rural counties moving forward.

Short-term Recommendation: NJDOL, in conjunction with NJDOT and local counties, can promote greater awareness for existing transportation systems and/or supportive structures with a transportation information hub.

From the Heldrich Center's interviews and transportation expert panels, it was made clear by stakeholders that the issue of transportation is often invisible, one that goes unnoticed and without investment if not explicitly highlighted or part of one's own background and/or experience. Compounding transportation as an invisible issue is the lack of awareness around services, service features, and availability. The state can address these barriers by making information about transportation services easier to find online. Information about transportation options and their routes, departure and arrival times, costs, accessibility, and other service features should be collected from various existing sources (e.g., county websites) and housed in a centralized database. Lubin and Deka (2012) suggested the creation of a transportation information hub to resolve the lack of centralized, accessible data, and stressed the need for such a tool given the number of customers – and people, in general – who search for information online. Local One-Stop Career Center staff and counselors can promote this resource early in their engagement with customers and during the job search and placement processes, thereby increasing awareness of existing transportation services in the state. The state can also use impactful marketing campaigns to increase awareness. This effort could be led by NJDOL in coordination with NJDOT, as well as other integral collaborators such as NJ TRANSIT, local New Jersey counties, and transportation management associations (TMAs). Such an effort would also distinctly benefit from the input of community-based organizations, advocates, and community members who use public transportation to ensure that an information hub is as robust and accessible as possible to the communities that will benefit from it. NJDOL can lead such an effort with the critical partnership and input of the diverse potential stakeholder groups.

Long-term Recommendation: NJDOL could champion the development of (a) mobility and/or transportation manager role(s) with the New Jersey legislature.

The 2015 report *Detour to the Right Place*, which focuses on addressing transportation needs for adults on the autism spectrum, recommends establishing a “specialized, statewide mobility manager” to “provide a coordinated, seamless service to address trip planning and scheduling [and] to meet the needs of individuals and/or their families” (Feeley et al., 2015, pp. 13–14). The research suggests that this role is most impactful at the state level in order to have a dedicated individual and/or office to assist adults on the autism spectrum and their guardians, families, caregivers, and service providers in identifying and securing feasible transportation alternatives. The research further explains that a statewide mobility manager would contribute to creating uniformity in access to transportation service information and planning guidance throughout New Jersey. In addition, researchers heard this recommendation from employment and transportation experts during the panel discussions. Panelists felt that this role, in particular, would play an important part in reducing transportation issues for WIOA customers, but especially adults with disabilities, throughout the state. This role could foster greater alignment with existing services to create a more robust ecosystem for the state’s southern/rural counties that currently contain transit deserts, constituting impactful gains for this service area of focus. More specifically, this role is further described by Feeley et al. (2015) as:

“This dedicated statewide mobility manager will have integral knowledge of transportation-related resources within a community, and can address the particular needs of individuals across the state, including those residing in urban, suburban, and rural locales. The mobility manager can also serve to assist the state and counties with coordination strategies, to link various regions and connect existing transit services in an economically efficient manner” (p. 14).

The eight TMAs in New Jersey serve a similar role to that of a mobility manager in that the TMAs coalesce resources on transportation and provide commuter information and services. However, the mobility manager role is envisioned to be heavily focused on supportive service planning and execution, with a specific focus on

individuals with disabilities. The TMAs could be leveraged to inform about where a mobility manager would be made most effective in the state’s transportation ecosystem. At present, no counties in New Jersey have a specific designation of a mobility manager, but multiple counties have coverage from their local TMA and/or may have local staff providing transportation assistance in a similar manner to the role of a mobility manager. *Detour to the Right Place* suggests that the New Jersey legislature would be a primary actor in creating such a role, with NJDOT, NJ TRANSIT, and local counties identified as supporting partners. At the state level, another potential partner for consideration and collaboration is the NJDHS, Division of Developmental Disabilities. It is also possible for the mobility manager role to exist in NJDOL’s DVRS structure to provide supportive services and coverage for the WIOA customer population across the state. Whether the mobility manager is created via the New Jersey legislature or housed within the DVRS structure, greater resources would be directed to the seamless coordination of transportation services for the benefit of individuals with disabilities and their families.

Research Question #3: What, if any, transportation services or options for services in one or more of New Jersey’s southern/rural counties warrant further evaluation and/or expansion and replication, based on transportation and workforce development staff and/or other state subject-matter experts?

Researchers identified **three** key findings for promising practices and services that warrant further expansion and/or replication.

Finding #11: Micro-transit can fill gaps left by NJ TRANSIT and other transportation services and help alleviate transit deserts.

Fixed-route transportation, such as the services offered by NJ TRANSIT, tend to have more robust service offerings and are perceived to be most effective in higher population density areas. However, fixed-route transportation, by nature, leaves voids in coverage, commonly referred to as transit deserts. In rural areas of the state, these transit deserts are significant and leave entire communities struggling to access services

or get to work, especially if they do not have access to a vehicle. Micro-transit services, such as Via JC, Camden Loop, and GOTrenton!, can fill these gaps in public transportation coverage by providing on-demand transportation services. These micro-transit models increase connectivity by providing linkages to existing NJ TRANSIT services to create a more robust system of linkages that can assist people in getting where they need to go. Stakeholders suggested that targeted development of micro-transit systems in New Jersey's southern/ rural counties would be a critical investment to connect communities and populations that otherwise do not have access to public transportation. One stakeholder explained they are currently exploring the possibility of creating a micro-transit service in their local area and the benefits that would come with its implementation:

"If we could expand [the micro-transit service] a few miles...we would have many more work destinations and we would be able to capture more people within the community than currently is served."

Micro-transit solutions are currently being piloted and/ or deployed on city-wide bases, but the stakeholders interviewed as part of this study believe that application to rural settings would be feasible with the right investment and partners. As another stakeholder mentioned:

"I think that is really the way to go, at least in the rural areas where you can't do a fixed route because it's not cost-effective, but you can serve the community if there was that on-demand ride-share option."

Researchers at the Voorhees Transportation Center also mentioned the development of cross-county micro-transit systems in New Jersey's southern counties. Innovations with micro-transit systems are under way with the goal of addressing the persistent challenges that have faced communities in the more geographically dispersed areas of the state.

Finding #12: NJ TRANSIT's Americans with Disabilities Act paratransit program, Access Link, is a critical program and model of service, but needs improvement.

Researchers asked interviewees and stakeholders about their perceptions of the transportation challenges facing individuals seeking employment, particularly individuals with disabilities, and many cited difficulties with the Access Link program as a pain point for individuals in need of transportation assistance. Stakeholders cited the limitations of Access Link service in rural areas, specifically referencing the program's three-quarter-mile requirement. Access Link is only available to individuals if their pickup and drop-off points are within a three-quarter-mile radius of an eligible bus route or light rail station, posing a challenge to those in need of services but located in more geographically remote areas of the state. As one stakeholder remarked:

"In South Jersey, I think the biggest issue is the three-quarter-mile restriction because we don't have that much transportation to begin with. So, it's just not that feasible for people in our area."

Other challenges with the program were cited, such as signing up for Access Link with proper medical documentation, reaching customer service, scheduling rides, and navigating the pickup and drop-off windows. Two stakeholders expanded upon the limitations and complexities of utilizing Access Link:

"I have a lot of individuals who use Access Link and it really works for them because it's the door to door. However, we just need to expand, you know, the qualifications of how far they can live and, where they can actually go to."

"Another problem is the pickup window. So, for Access Link, you have the pickup window either plus or minus the time that you're getting picked up. That doesn't work if you have a job that starts at 8:00 a.m. and you can get there as late as 8:30 a.m."

Access Link was cited as a good concept and model of service, but was regarded as a program with limitations, particularly with its operation in rural areas of the state. Stakeholders further explained that Access Link provides the framework for an effective and reliable transit system, but requires improvement in critical areas to maximize its impact and success. With targeted program

improvements, such as changing the three-quarter-mile rule, Access Link could serve a greater number of people in the state, particularly WIOA Title IV customers and others in need of services in New Jersey's southern/rural counties.

Finding #13: Educating individuals on existing transportation services in New Jersey is integral to increasing access and public transportation use, which can help reduce transportation barriers in pursuing training and employment opportunities.

Transportation stakeholders cited a general lack of awareness of existing public transportation services and supports as a key barrier to the use of public transportation. Also noted was a lack of understanding on how to access and/or navigate available services, which is perceived to greatly affect individuals' ability to access vital workforce development and other services and resources. This lack of educational supports and awareness has serious implications for people with disabilities who are likely to have to rely on friends, family, and caregivers for rides as a result. As one stakeholder explained:

"People who have more challenges really do rely on friends or family for transportation. Before we set [an] appointment, I hear, 'I have to see who's gonna bring me.'"

Few educational institutions in New Jersey offer education on how to use public transit, leaving many individuals without the knowledge and skills they need to operate safely and independently. NJTIP is a unique provider of travel training and education in the state; however, the need for transportation-centered education goes beyond the services currently available. As such, researchers found that an expansion of the awareness and education on how to access and navigate public transportation would likely increase ridership and connect more people in need of services to workforce development and/or employment opportunities that could assist them.

Short-term Recommendation: Based upon the learnings of this study, NJDOL could commission a study of existing transportation pilots to assess micro-transit systems' implementation, challenges, and successes for future adaptation and/or expansion in the state.

Relevant New Jersey transportation stakeholders regard micro-transit systems as positive strategies to address transportation barriers in the state. Assessing existing micro-transit pilots such as Camden Loop and GOTrenton!, as well as those in the planning and feasibility study stages such as those in **Middlesex County, Monmouth County,** and the **South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization,** would allow the state to learn what makes non-traditional transportation services effective at meeting transportation needs across New Jersey, with specific regard to connecting individuals to public services. Future research should specifically study:

- ▶ Service areas covered,
- ▶ Number of routes (if applicable),
- ▶ Ridership,
- ▶ Rider demographic characteristics,
- ▶ Rider experience, and
- ▶ Ridership timing, among other topics.

Panelists noted that Via, in particular, was promising for rural areas because the model can provide transportation options that do not revolve around fixed routes. Non-traditional models like Via present an opportunity for the state to better meet transportation needs and offer more cost-effective transportation services in rural areas. NJDOL could commission a transportation study in specific regard to micro-transit systems' use in connecting individuals with employment and/or public services to support employment. NJDOL's future studies could continue to further engage with local and state leaders, community-based organizations, advocates, and public transportation riders to ensure that the study's learnings are robust and able to shed light on critical investments in the programs and transportation infrastructure needed in New Jersey.

Long-term Recommendation: NJDOL, in conjunction with partners such as NJDOE and NJDHS, could expand transportation-focused education and training services.

Panelists recommended tailoring transportation education to youth with disabilities, specifically 18- to 21-year-olds, after graduation. Panelists spoke of an absence of supports for this population, which continues

to need supports to engage in further training and/or employment after secondary school. As such, in addition to increasing awareness of transportation services in the state, tailored transportation education and training to this group, in particular, could potentially increase the success of long-term job placements as well as help individuals navigate transportation with ease and independence in their daily lives. NJDOL, working in partnership with agencies such as NJDOE and NJDHS, could collaborate on a specialized transportation navigation curriculum to educate youth about how to travel independently. NJTIP and Rutgers University could also be critical partners on such a project.

Research Question #4: What modifications could be made to WIOA services in context of the transportation challenges identified in New Jersey?

Researchers identified **three** key findings for potential modifications and/or consideration with regard to WIOA service delivery.

Finding #14: Transportation needs to be a factor in choosing training and/or employment opportunities for WIOA customers.

Interviewees expanded upon the difficulties of navigating training and job placements with customers who struggle with transportation. Public transportation infrastructure in rural areas tends to be sparse, with limited public transportation systems serving localities with higher concentrations of the population. When local staff work with customers who live outside of these community hubs, the challenges with identifying suitable training and job opportunities become much more pronounced. For this reason, interviewees highlighted the need to have upfront and early conversations about transportation barriers with their customers. Interviewees also noted that this is not always standard practice across all counselors; however, it should be prioritized to ensure successful customer engagement as well as training and job placements. As one interviewee noted:

“Sometimes a barrier is when counselors are working with folks, they sometimes don’t talk about transportation early enough in the process and so they might find what seems like on paper the perfect job but it’s really not because that person has to take, you

know, two buses and, you know, a train to access it, so it’s basically unrealistic for them to get there if they don’t drive or have someone else who could transport them to get there.”

Without conversations early on in the service engagement, WIOA customers could be placed in training and/or jobs in which they do not have safe and reliable ways to reach. This has significant implications for WIOA Title IV customers who are likely to have additional challenges in using and navigating public transportation. As such, significant considerations should be given to the location of training providers and/or job placements when working with WIOA customers who identify transportation as a barrier.

Finding #15: Lacking employer engagement thwarts efforts to develop and implement effective transportation services for WIOA customers in New Jersey’s transit deserts.

Transportation stakeholders and interviewees who participated in this research cited that employers commonly perceive transportation as being the onus of the employee or a problem for the state to address. This lack of engagement of employers on mitigating transportation barriers results in hiring and retention challenges, as individuals struggle to find ways to get to work on time. Local staff interviewees spoke of the challenges of job placements if and when employers are not willing to engage in conversation about transportation supportive services. As one interviewee noted:

“Employers are looking for people with driver’s licenses, and a lot of ads are asking for access to a car or reliable transportation. A lot of job openings just want people to be able to get there on time. It sounds like employers are likely to exclude anyone who doesn’t have a license, even if the job doesn’t require driving.”

As employers are characterized as being uninterested in participating in discussions about local transportation, this presents challenges for WIOA customers who may struggle with getting to and from work locations, thereby limiting their job prospects even further. As such, this creates challenges for local One-Stop Career Center counselors in making successful referrals and/or placements. One interviewee remarked:

“Transportation is an important key to employability.”

One interviewee spoke of the importance of the business outreach teams at DVRS in engaging with and educating employers about what it means to hire someone with a disability, and considerations that must go into such employment opportunities. NJDOL could consider how the business outreach team could be expanded to support further employer engagement, with particular emphasis on the issue of transportation for WIOA Title IV customers.

While the issue of employer engagement is a challenge for WIOA customers, it also constitutes a broader challenge for New Jersey's southern/rural counties with cultivating buy-in on addressing the region's transit deserts. Moreover, the state could consider how employer engagement in the transportation space could be incentivized for priority regions, such as New Jersey's southern/rural counties.

Finding #16: Virtual service provision assists with addressing customers' transportation barriers.

Interviewees spoke of the value of being able to connect with customers over the phone or online as expanding their ability to work with individuals who might otherwise have had difficulty coming in person for an appointment at their local One-Stop Career Center. Interviewees also mentioned the ease of collecting information from customers via email or scanned documents as beneficial to the intake process. One interviewee remarked:

"There's been, you know, a big cultural shift, in terms of like people having to meet in person. Having like the Zoom or the Teams, it's just more acceptable and you know, a lot of people are taking advantage of that and that I do think that helps."

One interviewee mentioned a desire to be able to physically meet customers in their respective locations; however, this was not supported by the interviewee's management team. According to stakeholders and interviewees, it appears that local counselors provide flexibility and consideration on how to reduce the need for individuals with transportation challenges to come to meetings in person, when possible.

Short-term Recommendation: Local One-Stop Career Centers can highlight the need for staff and counselors to consider the impact of access to transportation upfront in any engagement with customers.

By defining training and job search parameters early in the customer engagement process, WIOA customers can explore potential learning and employment opportunities more suitable to their access to transportation. Local One-Stop Career Center counselors could clarify and standardize how transportation is considered in the intake and/or placement processes, and examine the ways in which they can ensure greater alignment between accessible transportation options and the location of a training and/or job placement. Such alignment can make certain that potential opportunities match on multiple fronts, thereby increasing the odds of successful, long-term engagement and/or placement. At present, it appears that these conversations certainly take place, but the stakeholders and interviewees who participated in this study suggest that the timing and/or extent of conversations about transportation depend on the individual counselor. Greater standardization and consistency with this process could ensure that transportation is identified as a challenge early in the process, and the services and supports geared toward that customer meet their needs from an accessibility standpoint.

Long-term Recommendation: NJDOL could continue to invest in virtual service delivery.

Continuing to invest in virtual services infrastructure and delivery will promote more equitable access to workforce development services, as virtual service delivery effectively removes transportation as a barrier. This is especially impactful for WIOA Title IV customers who may have additional challenges associated with accessing safe and reliable transportation. The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for the growth and innovation of virtual services that has continued and flourished with local areas transitioning most, if not all, of their services to exist in a virtual space as needed. To this end, recommendations made under the Heldrich Center's WIOA PY20 evaluation continue to be avenues the state could explore to strengthen virtual service delivery infrastructure at the local level. A few critical recommendations include:

- ▶ Investments in modernization, including procurement of technology and hotspot devices, software programs, reporting systems, etc., should be prioritized by NJDOL and local areas, to continue to update and strengthen the virtual service delivery infrastructure at the local level.
- ▶ NJDOL could test and invest in modernization, technology tools, and ideas for innovation using small grants/pilots to continue to strengthen the virtual service delivery infrastructure.
- ▶ To invest in WIOA Title I service delivery technology, infrastructure, and service flows, NJDOL should consider partnering with New Jersey's State Employment and Training Commission and/or the Garden State Employment and Training Association to provide local One-Stop Career Centers with desk aids, informational graphics, and other toolkits to support local service delivery. A statewide, multi-organizational partnership could help to ensure technological tool consistency at the local level of service provision.

- ▶ NJDOL could invest in technology solutions to standardize the virtual "front door" for customers across all local areas, in collaboration with the New Jersey Office of Innovation.

Recommendations such as these will ensure that virtual service delivery remains a high-quality service option for WIOA customers who may struggle with transportation, but continue to need assistance in their educational and employment journeys. From the Heldrich Center's previous research, it was found that local One-Stop Career Center staff felt they could reach more customers with the ability to offer virtual services, thus expanding their impact in the communities they serve. For this reason, investments in virtual service delivery should continue to be prioritized, particularly for WIOA customers who face barriers in attending in-person appointments and/or service engagements.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could assess employer involvement in offering transportation services, promoting existing public transportation, and/or investing in new transportation models to better meet transportation needs pursuant to employment opportunities in New Jersey. Based on conversations with panelists, employers are largely not interested in participating in discussions about local transportation, let alone funding transportation services for their employees. Though there are examples of employers offering transportation services, such as the [Pureland East-West Community Shuttle](#), the prevailing belief among employers is that transportation is the responsibility of the state and/or NJ TRANSIT. Studying this topic could help understand employers' perspectives, including any challenges they may have, and increase overall employer engagement.

Moreover, as was suggested previously in the report, future research could study the outcomes of the micro-transit pilots currently in development and/or under way throughout the state to examine success metrics and potential application to New Jersey's southern/rural counties. Innovation is taking place at the local level; thus, these efforts could be examined and replicated for application on a county and/or regional level. To maximize the application of a micro-transit strategy in New Jersey's rural regions, the state could conduct a needs assessment to ensure that application of a new transportation pilot is maximized to reach the communities most underserved by current public transportation offerings. The Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University would be a critical partner in such research.

Conclusion

The Heldrich Center's WIOA PY21 evaluation examined the transportation landscape and its associated challenges in New Jersey's southern/rural counties (Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem). This research identifies transportation service challenges for WIOA customers in New Jersey and offers meaningful recommendations to NJDOL on how to modify WIOA service delivery in light of the identified challenges. This research also sought to highlight promising transportation programs that could be expanded and/or replicated to serve New Jersey's southern/rural counties, which are perceived to have significant barriers with transit access, particularly barriers that keep people from accessing services to support their training and/or employment journeys.

Researchers found that access to transportation is perceived to be a significant challenge for the WIOA population in New Jersey's southern/rural counties. Local staff as well as other relevant stakeholders identified transportation as a major challenge for individuals trying to access employment and public

services. Moreover, stakeholders conveyed that transportation should be considered a high-priority issue for policy change. To heighten the conversation around transportation access in New Jersey's southern counties, a broader coalition of community partners is needed. Panelists and interviewees stressed the importance of involving critical stakeholders when discussing New Jersey's transportation landscape and service offerings, especially engaging with employers, state and local leaders, community-based organizations, advocates, and community members who rely on public transportation. NJDOL is poised to champion the building of coalitions of partners to address the transportation challenges that persist in New Jersey. When discussing transportation barriers, developing potential solutions, and implementing new programs or initiatives, the state should involve all potential stakeholders to ensure that the community's voice is at the center of the conversation and path forward.

Appendix A: Transportation Models

Via JC

Model

Via JC of Jersey City, NJ is an on-demand ride-share shuttle service funded by Jersey City in partnership with the New York City-based transit tech company Via. The service is powered, staffed, and operated by Via, including the app associated with the service.

Service Description

Launched in February 2020, the Via JC micro-transit service provides transportation to all residents, offering an affordable option to travel throughout Jersey City. Via JC operates exclusively within Jersey City boundaries and was designed to help fill the gaps left by other public transit options in the city, without competing against those other service options, but rather working toward alleviating transit deserts and improving overall connectivity.

Design

Jersey City divided the service region into two zones: the outer zone and the central zone. The outer zone encompasses regions of Jersey City with limited public transit service or with inadequate levels of frequency while the inner zone encompasses the more transit-rich area of Jersey City where four main public transit hubs are located (Journal Square Transportation Center, Grove Street Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation [PATH] Station, Exchange Place, and Newport PATH Station). Riders can travel anywhere within the outer zone or from the outer zone to the central zone (and back), while riders cannot begin and end rides within the central zone. This unique feature helps limit the replication of trips that could be made with other existing high-frequency public transit options.

Funding and Fares

The fare is a \$2 flat rate with an additional \$0.50 per mile for trips within the outer zone. Fares may be paid with a credit or debit card in the mobile app or over the phone. Jersey City worked with state legislators to secure



funding to engage with Via. Via JC has been recognized as a blueprint for how urban areas can rethink and expand access to mobility through city-funded micro-transit.³

Operation

To book a ride, individuals can use the Via app or call by phone for immediate travel. There is also an option to schedule a ride in advance. Riders are then paired with others traveling along the same route and are directed to a pickup location, typically no farther than one block away. The Via JC service is available from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on weekdays and from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on Saturdays. As of December 2023, Via JC had a fleet of 43 vehicles, including wheelchair-accessible vans and 4 electric vehicles. Via manages the fleet and sources vehicles through strategic partnerships to acquire the fleet vehicles on a short-term basis. For consistency in branding and awareness of the service, Via wraps the vehicles in a signature purple color with the Via and Jersey City logos. In addition to Jersey City's financial support, Via JC generates advertising revenue to help support the service.

Limitations

At this time, payment options are limited to credit or debit card. Operating hours do not extend late into the night and there is currently no service on Sundays. Demand for the service has generally exceeded available program funding, which poses challenges to meet requests for additional days and hours of operation.

Despite these minor limitations, there is evidence that the model is successful and provides needed connections to transit hubs throughout Jersey City.

³ https://www.jerseycitynj.gov/news/via_affordable_public_transit_surpasses_1m_rides

Impacts

Since its launch, Via JC ridership has grown steadily, with over 2 million rides completed, 60,000 unique riders, and approximately five trips made per driver hour, resulting in an average of 2.8 weekly trips per rider. Performance metrics indicate that Via JC is providing much-needed transportation services to residents and visitors with 85% of riders stating they are using the service for essential needs, 82% of riders identifying as racially non-white, 56% of riders identifying as women, and 34% of riders reporting they have used the service with children. Also, 48% of riders reported using the service to connect to another form of public transit. Additionally, Via JC has been awarded grant funding and awards, including:

- ▶ New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection e-Mobility Grant,
- ▶ NJ TRANSIT NJ-Job Access and Reverse Commute Program Grant, and
- ▶ Intelligent Transportation Society of New Jersey Outstanding Project of the Year 2022.

Via JC is a model for how a micro-transit service is successfully helping to provide transportation services that are needed in an urban community. The service aims to provide transportation to those in less-dense locations without competing with existing transportation infrastructure.

New Jersey Travel Independence Program

Model

The New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJTIP) at Rutgers University provides travel instruction to assist people in learning how to travel safely and independently on public transportation, including buses, trains, light rails, community transportation, and ride-share systems. Travel instruction topics include how to read bus and train schedules, trip planning, route navigation, fare payment, and safety precautions.

Service Description

Launched in 2005, NJTIP has worked with a variety of governmental agencies, community organizations, and schools to teach travel skills. As experts on NJ TRANSIT bus and rail services, NJTIP travel instructors aim to increase the self-sufficiency of people with disabilities, older adults, and others by teaching them to use public transit. Service offerings include one-on-one travel instruction, individual concierge and trip planning services, small group and in-school travel instruction, and Connect to Transit educational seminars.

Design

One-on-one Travel Instruction

Program participants work with an NJTIP travel instructor to learn safe travel skills through in-person lessons riding with their instructor until they can travel confidently and independently on the NJ TRANSIT fixed-route system most suitable for their travel needs. Instruction includes NJ TRANSIT's bus, train, and light rail systems. Individuals receiving training with DVRS vouchers are limited to a certain number of hours for training. In many cases, it is 12 or 27 hours. The only cost to NJTIP participants is the price of their transit fares. This service is also available to individuals who have applied for NJ TRANSIT-Access Link services and who live in Bergen, Camden, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, Middlesex, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, and Union counties, except those with visual impairments. One-on-one instruction may also be available on a fee-for-service basis depending on the request and in select counties free of charge depending on available grant funding.



**NJTIP @
RUTGERS**

Individual Concierge and Trip Planning Services

For those only needing assistance planning a trip, NJTIP provides consultation sessions via video conferencing, online, or by telephone. Travel instructors can prepare and send custom, personalized trip plans, schedules, and other tools to help customers make their desired trip.

Small Group and In-school Travel Instruction

NJTIP provides instruction for community-based agencies, schools, and small groups of participants. Group instruction is designed to teach groups of individuals how to use public transit, including traffic safety skills and bus familiarization. Group classes are available online or in person and are followed by virtual or in-person field trips to popular local transit destinations.

Connect to Transit Seminars

NJTIP offers seminars to teach representatives from social service agencies, schools, senior residences, and other community-based organizations how to be advocates for public transportation and how to assist clients, students, and residents to navigate the public transportation network. Sessions are offered in person or as online webinars.

Funding and Fares

Funding comes from a variety of sources, including state agencies and entities, schools, community-based organizations, and grants. State agencies providing funding include NJDOL DVRS and NJ TRANSIT. NJTIP receives approved vouchers from NJDOL DVRS counselors that support travel training modules to DVRS

customers with disabilities in specific counties (Bergen, Camden, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Morris, Ocean, Passaic, Somerset, and Union counties). NJ TRANSIT provides funding through Access Link for those who have applied to use the Access Link service to receive one-on-one travel training, who live in specific counties, and who are not visually impaired. School districts and community-based organizations can also pay to have NJTIP provide travel training for those in need. A limited amount of funding also comes from the Federal Transit Administration's Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Section 5310 program, which provides formula funding to states that can be used to cover the costs of travel training among other transportation-related services, programs, and initiatives.

Federal grants also fund individual mobility coaching for people with disabilities and older adults focused on employment, vocational training, life enrichment, or volunteer work in specific counties/cities (the city of Camden and Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Morris, Ocean, Passaic, Somerset, and Union counties).

Limitations

Limitations of the service include that in-person training services are limited to select counties and are not available statewide due to staff and funding availability.

Impacts

Since NJTIP began in 2005, it has taught travel skills to more than 15,000 individuals. The program's mission is to promote travel independence, which has implications for the population that has engaged in NJTIP's services. Empowering individuals to travel independently to be able to engage in activities such as employment has pronounced impacts at the individual and community levels.

Washington State Intercity Bus Program

Model

The Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) Travel Washington Intercity Bus Program is a public-private partnership that provides federal grant funds to local private carriers to operate an intercity bus service that connects rural communities to major transportation hubs and urban centers.

Service Description

The product of a 2006 statewide rural needs assessment and feasibility study, Travel Washington's Intercity Bus service aims to make travel more accessible, reliable, and convenient throughout the state through the operation of four bus lines. Under this model, WSDOT administers Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grant funds to contracted local private carriers, such as Greyhound, to operate bus lines that increase connectivity throughout local regions and the state where the private market does not provide bus service.

Design

The Travel Washington Intercity Bus service operates four lines, each branded with a regional theme such as a crop or resource from the service area. The lines are the Apple Line, Dungeness Line, Gold Line, and Grape Line. Through this program, the private carriers are asked to coordinate and align their schedules with other transportation services in the region when possible; as a result, the hours of operation and number of daily trips vary among the four lines. Private carriers contracting with WSDOT must agree to specific branding and marketing requirements, agree to meet minimum capacity requirements with vehicles that hold 15 or more passengers and are Americans with Disabilities Act accessible, and must comply with Title VI discrimination laws. Marketing is largely the responsibility of the carrier; however, the state does manage a portion of marketing to ensure that information about the service is accurate, up-to-date, and accessible. In the past, this has included updating the contracted carriers' websites to function similarly to the state's website.



Statewide Intercity Bus Network



Funding and Fares

WSDOT issues requests for proposals to solicit private carriers to operate the bus routes. WSDOT then provides FTA grant funding under a four-year contract, with an unsubsidized local 50% match requirement, to contract private carriers under a cost-per-mile structure. The cost-per-mile structure includes the operation, administration, and marketing of the service. WSDOT is not involved in purchasing vehicles or fuel. Fare prices charged by the bus lines are capped by the state to increase affordability with accepted forms of fare payment decided by the contracted carrier.

Operation

The private carriers handle the operation and administration of the service, requiring little action from the state.

Limitations

Limitations of the program include the frequency, hours of operation, and connection points. Many people are reliant on the intercity bus lines to travel throughout the state but three of the four lines offer one or two round trips daily.

Impacts

Program leaders characterize feedback from riders' on-board survey responses as positive, adding that people ask for more connections and greater route frequency. Between July 2017 and June 2018, WSDOT's Intercity Bus Program had 30,164 riders and made a total of 5,836 trips (WSDOT, 2019). As of a 2019 assessment of the service, through Travel Washington, an additional 5% of the state's population was served within 10 miles of an intercity stop and an additional 17% of the state's population was served within 25 miles of an intercity stop. WSDOT is currently looking into expanding two specific routes to increase connectivity of the eastern and western sides of the state and in one rural region experiencing rapid growth (WSDOT, 2019).

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

WIOA PY21 Evaluation

Task #4: Conduct In-depth Interviews with Selected Advisory Panel Members and Subject-matter Experts

Interview Questions

Logistics (if needed)

- ▶ What are the allowable supportive transportation services/activities under WIOA?
- ▶ For your customers, are transportation support services typically paid out of WIOA dollars or county dollars?
- ▶ How do you capture transportation services in AOSOS? Do you document these services in any other way/use any other system?

Transportation Services

- ▶ Please tell us about the transportation services available to WIOA customers in your local area.
- ▶ What transportation service offerings have you seen be most effective?
- ▶ What local transportation strategies do you perceive to positively impact access to workforce development services and/or employment for WIOA customers?

Service Strengths

- ▶ What are the strengths of the transportation service offerings you currently have available? Is there any way these services could be improved?

Local Considerations

- ▶ What are the local dynamics and/or considerations we should know about transportation in your county?

- ▶ Are current services responding to the level of need for transportation in your local community? In what part of your community do you see the most need for transportation services (a physical area, population, etc.)?
- ▶ Are there any transportation services you have tried in the past that were unsuccessful?
- ▶ If yes, why were they unsuccessful? Would you try that service again (acknowledging that the climate may be different in a post-COVID environment)?

Service Challenges/Weaknesses/Areas for Improvement and Possible Solutions

- ▶ What are the primary challenges your customers experience with transportation (Title I customers)?
- ▶ Do you have any suggestions for how these challenges could be addressed?
- ▶ What are the primary challenges your customers experience with transportation (Title IV customers)?
- ▶ Do you have any suggestions for how these challenges could be addressed?
- ▶ How can transportation be improved to better support individuals accessing workforce development services?
- ▶ If applicable, is there an unmet need in your community for transportation services?
- ▶ If yes, how do you think that could be addressed?

Innovative Practices

- ▶ Have you seen or heard of any transportation systems/services that are perceived to be successful?
 - ▶ If yes, do you think that system or service could be adapted to work in your local area?
- ▶ In what ways do you think the state could invest more in transportation-supportive services for WIOA customers?

- ▶ If you could wave a magic wand, what is the ideal transportation system/service you would want to make available to customers?
- ▶ What resources would you need to create your “ideal” transportation system/service offerings?
- ▶ In an ideal world, what are the possibilities for transportation services for WIOA customers? What would be needed to make that a reality?

Other

- ▶ Is there anything else you would like to tell us about transportation for WIOA customers in your local area?

Appendix C: Expert Panel #1 Protocol

WIOA PY21 Evaluation

Task #3: Convene a Technical Advisory Panel of Employment and Transportation Experts in New Jersey

Expert Panel Questions

- ▶ With specific emphasis on southern/rural counties in New Jersey, what are the primary challenges with transportation as they relate to accessing services from the public workforce development system?
- ▶ Currently, what do you think is working well with transportation services available to Title I and Title IV customers? [What is the best way to provide transportation assistance to the people you work with? What do they need the most? Why does this work for them? (what about this makes it easier for your clients than other ways?)]
- ▶ Is there a current transportation model and/or program in operation that you think is exemplary and/or worth further investigation and investment?
- ▶ What is perceived to be the biggest issue with transportation in New Jersey's southern/rural counties for Title I customers? What is perceived to be the biggest issue with transportation in New Jersey's southern/rural counties for Title IV customers?
- ▶ Potential issue areas: Accessibility, reliability, timeliness, diversity in routes, funding for needed services, etc.
- ▶ Broadly speaking, what are the perceived areas for improvement for transportation services in New Jersey's southern/rural counties?
- ▶ Have you tried any local transportation or do you know of any transportation initiatives that have been "home-grown" strategies? Were they successful? Why or why not?
- ▶ Do you have a sense of the extent of the unmet need for transportation services in New Jersey's southern/rural counties?
- ▶ What are the primary sources of funding for transportation assistance within WIOA and DVRS? Is this funding adequate? Are the regulatory requirements around transportation overly cumbersome?
- ▶ Are there other models of transportation services/ programs that you believe have worked well in other areas and/or states?
- ▶ What resources would be necessary to invest in a new transportation strategy/program/pilot in New Jersey's southern/rural counties? Who are the players that need to be involved?
- ▶ What else do you think we should know as we study the issue of transportation for job seekers, especially job seekers with disabilities, to access public services and employment?

Appendix D: Expert Panel #2 Protocol

WIOA PY21 Evaluation

Task 3: Convene a Technical Advisory Panel of Employment and Transportation Experts in New Jersey

Expert Panel Questions

Information/Awareness

- ▶ Our previous panel called out the need for updated and centralized transportation information (routes, schedules, fares, etc.) to be available online. Do you have suggestions for where that information should live/who should be responsible for updating it? What kind of information would be most helpful for your customers/clients?
- ▶ What would a transportation awareness campaign look like for your customers/clients? How could an awareness campaign be dispersed to be made most effective and far-reaching?
- ▶ How can current transit options highlight their service features in a more accessible manner?
- ▶ Something we heard from you all is that transportation can be an invisible issue. Do you have thoughts on how this fundamental barrier can be highlighted to be more of a policy priority?

Engagement

- ▶ We heard from this group that employers are not interested in participating in conversations about transportation. How can employer engagement issues be addressed more proactively? Is there a role for NJDOL or another institution in pushing the conversation? What is the role, if any, of employers in your opinion?
- ▶ We heard obstacles like Access Link's pickup windows and three-quarter-mile rule. We also heard of physical barriers like sidewalks and intersections on the way to bus stops being unsafe. NJ TRANSIT/Access Link and

the Department of Transportation need to be involved in this conversation. Do you have contacts and/or suggestions in how to bring these entities to the table?

Working with Customers

- ▶ In the last panel, we heard about the distinction between a transportation route being inconvenient versus not being possible. In working with customers, how do counselors, if at all, distinguish what is an acceptable route for an individual to get to a job? (Is asking people to take three buses too much? What is the threshold if there is one?)
- ▶ One suggestion we heard was for transportation to be an issue to be discussed at the beginning of the job search process, rather than a detail to be worked out after securing a job. Do you agree with this approach? In your experience, would identifying transportation at the start of the process be a disincentive to potential opportunities or a reasonable consideration to assessing a job posting viability?

Data

- ▶ We heard from some of you that capturing transportation barriers/challenges in existing systems like AWARE and AOSOS can be a challenge. We also understand that the field is not required. What kind of information would you want to collect about transportation to highlight the degree to which this can be a barrier for individuals in accessing services and employment?

Micro-transit and Other Models

- ▶ Implementation of micro-transit in rural areas – who/what entities need to be at the table/who needs to buy in to this new model of service to move these plans forward? How can funding be set aside/guaranteed to create and maintain a micro-transit system?
- ▶ What, if any, obstacles do you foresee in expanding micro-transit solutions, such as Via's shuttle-based services, in a rural area?

- ▶ Are there any other models of transportation services/ programs that you believe have worked well in other areas and/or states?

Other

- ▶ Is there anything else you think we should know about transportation for job seekers – especially job seekers with disabilities – to access public services and employment in the state of New Jersey?

Appendix E: Transportation Stakeholders

- ▶ Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center*
- ▶ Center for Independent Living, South Jersey
- ▶ Community Health Law Project
- ▶ Cross County Connection Transportation Management Associations - Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties*
- ▶ GOTrenton!
- ▶ New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired*
- ▶ New Jersey Travel Independence Program*
- ▶ New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOL), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS)*
- ▶ NJDOL, Employment Accessibility Services*
- ▶ NJDOL, Office of Research and Information*
- ▶ NJDOL, Workforce Development*
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Atlantic County*
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Burlington County
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Cape May County*
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Cumberland County*
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Salem County
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Westampton DVRS
- ▶ One-Stop Career Center local staff - Wildwood/Cape May DVRS office*
- ▶ South Jersey Economic Development District
- ▶ South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization
- ▶ The Arc of Atlantic County*
- ▶ The Arc of Burlington County
- ▶ The Arc of Cape May
- ▶ The Arc of Cumberland County
- ▶ The Arc of Salem County
- ▶ Via JC

Note: An asterisk indicates that this organization participated in one or both of the Heldrich Center's transportation expert panel discussions.

Appendix F: Transportation Expert Panel Summary Report

Evaluation of New Jersey's Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Services in Program Year 2021 (PY21)

Summary Report of Expert Panel Discussion #1

December 2023

Prepared by

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

Introduction

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey has been tasked by the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJLWD) to conduct an evaluation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for Program Year 2021 (PY21). For this evaluation, NJLWD requested the Heldrich Center explore both how job seekers in New Jersey use transportation services and the intersection of transportation services and access and uptake of job search services, job training, and take-up of other related public services, especially among New Jerseyans with disabilities. Many populations in the New Jersey do not have easy and/or reliable access to transportation. While transportation is a challenge for many individuals, it is perceived to be a significant barrier for people with disabilities. The goal for this evaluation is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the extent of transportation challenges for WIOA customers in New Jersey and to explore potential solutions based on promising or proven models from around the state and across the country.

To understand the transportation landscape more thoroughly in New Jersey, the Heldrich Center facilitated a panel discussion comprised of transportation experts, workforce development professionals, and other key stakeholders. The discussion focused on transportation

services and systems in New Jersey, specifically as they relate to the WIOA Title I and Title IV populations and the accessibility of workforce development services that assist individuals with obtaining employment. To the extent possible, the discussion centered on challenges and potential solutions for rural areas of New Jersey, including Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties.

For this evaluation, the Heldrich Center is guided by three primary objectives:

- ▶ Identify transportation service challenges for WIOA customers in New Jersey participating in WIOA services at the One-Stop Career Centers (and related services delivered at other locations);
- ▶ To identify and highlight promising transportation programs and/or services that could be expanded or replicated in five New Jersey southern/rural counties where transportation is perceived by local policymakers as a significant challenge to WIOA service participation and employment; and
- ▶ To offer meaningful, tangible recommendations to NJLWD, and to rural counties, on how to modify WIOA service delivery in light of the transportation challenges that exist for WIOA customers in those areas.

The Heldrich Center's expert panel discussion with transportation and employment experts throughout the state informs each objective identified in the WIOA PY21 evaluation plan.

Panel Overview

The Heldrich Center convened transportation experts that represented various entities knowledgeable about the transportation landscape in New Jersey. The panel was held on November 15, 2023, from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. The Heldrich Center research team invited 45 transportation stakeholders to participate in the

discussion, representing a variety of perspectives through which to think about transportation and access to workforce development, and other public services, and how access varies by types of job seekers, specifically how job seekers with disabilities are affected. The panel had representation from stakeholders in New Jersey's southern/rural counties to provide input specifically on transportation issues related to rural New Jersey. Out of 45 invitations sent, and two email reminders, the expert panel was attended by 15 participants representing the following entities:

- ▶ New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJ TIP)
- ▶ Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University
- ▶ New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI)
- ▶ Cross County Connection TMA
- ▶ The Arc of Atlantic County
- ▶ NJDOL, Office of Research and Information
- ▶ NJDOL, Employment Accessibility Services
- ▶ NJDOL, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- ▶ NJDOL, Cumberland County Division of Employment and Training
- ▶ NJDOL, Cumberland, Salem, and Cape May Workforce Development Board and Business Services
- ▶ NJDOL Atlantic and Cape May Counties, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- ▶ NJDOL Wildwood and Cape May County, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The Heldrich Center team utilized a series of discussion questions to stimulate group discussion around topics such as challenges with transportation, exemplary models of services, barriers to accessing transportation services, and more. The full transportation expert panel discussion protocol can be found in Appendix F-1. The Heldrich Center's discussion protocol was deployed as the starting point for the group discussion; however, expert panelists brought to light discussion topics and questions of their own, which guided the panel as well. The panel was an opportunity for transportation and employment stakeholders to share their expertise and

understanding for discussion and learning purposes and provide insights into the transportation dynamics that many individuals face when trying to access employment and employment services in New Jersey's southern counties.

Panel Discussion Summary

The Heldrich Center team began the panel discussion by providing background on the WIOA PY21 evaluation and its associated objectives and shared a brief overview of transportation-focused research studies that have previously been conducted. Utilizing work by the [Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center](#) at Rutgers University, the Heldrich Center team summarized a 2012 study, *Role of Public Transportation as Job Access Mode: Lessons from Survey of People with Disabilities in New Jersey*, which surveyed 489 individuals with disabilities seeking employment and working with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services at the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development. The study highlighted that transportation plays a critical role in enhancing job access for people with disabilities. According to study results, perceived barriers to transportation included: availability and cost of transportation services, safety, environmental barriers, Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant transit equipment, signage, announcements, and access to service-related information. The Voorhees Transportation Center's previous work also highlights some of the dynamics of New Jersey's transportation landscape and the associated barriers and challenges of navigating transportation for individuals with disabilities seeking employment.

Before commencing the discussion portion of the event, the panel was asked to engage in a level-setting exercise to provide greater clarity on the perceptions of transportation as an issue. The Heldrich Center deployed a poll to all panelists to gauge the degree to which transportation was a challenge and the perceived barriers to addressing that challenge in New Jersey. **Panelists identified transportation as a major challenge for both accessing employment and accessing public services.** Panelists further identified **funding and financial constraints, staffing constraints, and the need for partners** as some of the key barriers to expanding transportation services. Lastly, transportation

was overwhelmingly deemed a high priority for policy improvements and change. The full listing of poll questions and results can be found in Appendix F-2.

Following the administration of the poll, the Heldrich Center team highlighted four transportation models of service for consideration by the panelists. Two New Jersey models and two national models were included in the profile:

- ▶ Via Jersey City,
- ▶ GOTrenton!,
- ▶ Travel Washington Intercity Bus Program, and
- ▶ Trip Model, Riverside, CA.

These models are perceived as effective in their respective regions/cities, which leaned more toward serving urban areas. Panelists were asked to consider the potential challenges and logistics of adapting such models to fit a more rural setting. With this shared baseline assessment of the challenges, barriers, and potential transportation models of interest in mind, the Heldrich Center kicked off the discussion with stakeholders.

The Heldrich Center team asked panelists to discuss their perceptions of the biggest transportation challenges facing individuals seeking employment, particularly individuals with disabilities. An initial response to this discussion question was the difficulty of finding relevant and up-to-date information online about available services. Another response to the question focused on **Access Link's** three-quarter-mile requirement. Access Link is only available to individuals if their pickup and drop-off points are within a three-quarter-mile radius of an eligible bus route or light rail station. This requirement was cited as a major barrier, particularly for individuals living in rural areas. A participant also added that lack of accessibility of available routes with Access Link, NJ TRANSIT, and public transportation at large are related challenges to the provision of transportation services to individuals with disabilities. Another panelist added that due to population density being so low in New Jersey's southern/rural counties, traditional fixed-route models of service, particularly bus service, do not work. Moreover, a general lack of awareness of the issue of transportation, along with a lack of awareness of service

availability and service features, were all cited as barriers in addressing the complex challenges of transportation in the state.

The Heldrich Center team then posed a question about transportation models and/or strategies that stand out as having worked well in New Jersey. A panelist spoke about the provision of WIOA Youth services, including payment for youth participants to go to driving school. Another panelist mentioned that expanding Access Link would build upon an existing model of service that is perceived to work well by individuals using the service. Building upon the New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJTIP) was also referenced as a model that currently works well in the state for improving access by increasing knowledge and understanding of how to use public transportation by people with disabilities. Further, it was mentioned that individualized education and training about transportation, as offered by NJTIP, could be expanded and focused on youth with disabilities, specifically ages 18 to 21, post-graduation. This was identified as an area warranting further investment. Another participant mentioned that county-based transit systems are perceived to work well at the local level. There was a suggestion to expand these services, acknowledging that additional funding is often needed to maintain and/or scale up such service offerings. Lastly, a participant cited that clients' ability to use their New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities budgets and/or add transportation expenses into individuals' New Jersey Individualized Service Plans for Uber and Lyft rides is also perceived to have worked well.

In panelist conversations, it was also cited that a challenge specifically identified for WIOA Title IV customers working with Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) counselors is that the issue of transportation is potentially not addressed early enough in an individual's engagement with workforce development services. The suggestion is to refine job search parameters early in the job search process to be more suitable to an individual's access to transportation. The panelist suggested outlining a clearer intake and/or placement process that is, at least partially, transportation-focused to ensure that there is greater alignment with the accessible transportation

Table F-1: Map of Preliminary Themes and Findings

	Themes	Findings
Types of transportation	Access Link	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Difficulty finding relevant, up-to-date information ▶ Restrictive pick-up and drop-off points of three-quarter-mile radius within an eligible bus route or rail station ▶ Lack of accessibility for available routes ▶ Lack of awareness of service features and availability ▶ Enrollment challenges for individuals and families ▶ Eligible applicants frequently denied due to unpredictable criteria ▶ Challenges with obtaining proper medical documentation, reaching customer service, scheduling rides, and navigating pick-up window of services
	County-based shuttle services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Difficulty meeting needs across county boundaries ▶ Frequently lacks capacity and/or adequate funding to serve as connector to NJ TRANSIT
	Employer-based transit services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Existing employer-based transit services (e.g., bus shuttles) are positively perceived ▶ Employers appear uninterested in funding and/or participating in discussions about local transportation
	Micro-transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Frequently cited as the best option for urban and rural communities ▶ Recommended as a transportation strategy to be piloted in rural counties
	NJ TRANSIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Lack of accessibility for available routes ▶ Lack of awareness of service features and availability ▶ Limited by traditional fixed routes based on low population density
Service provision		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Transportation not addressed early enough during engagement with workforce development services ▶ Differences of opinion around transportation services not being available compared to being inconvenient ▶ Frequently leverage DDD budgets and/or add transportation expenses into NJISP for ride-sharing ▶ Transportation services provided often only cover employment, not daily living

Table F-1: Map of Preliminary Themes and Findings (continued)

Themes	Findings
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="589 279 1409 344">▶ Refine job search parameters to account for transportation needs early in the job search process <li data-bbox="589 373 1409 401">▶ Improve current operations and expand existing model of service for Access Link <li data-bbox="589 430 1409 457">▶ Expand county-based shuttle services to bridge the gap in public transportation <li data-bbox="589 487 1458 552">▶ Expand individualized education and training services available in the state offered by NJTIP <li data-bbox="589 581 1425 646">▶ Leverage Via model in rural areas to service the community with on-demand ride-share options <li data-bbox="589 676 1370 703">▶ Banks and utilities can offer non-traditional loans for transportation services <li data-bbox="589 732 1398 865">▶ Hold conversations about state and local transportation services, especially the implementation of pilot projects, with NJ TRANSIT, New Jersey Department of Transportation, Metropolitan Planning Organization, municipalities, DVRS counselors, and those who use transportation services

options available to the individual and the location of the job placement. This alignment will make certain that a potential job is a match on multiple fronts, thereby increasing the odds of a successful placement.

The Heldrich Center team then asked the expert panelists about the perceived challenges and strengths to the existing processes for enrolling individuals in transportation services. A panelist referenced the difficulty of enrolling people in Access Link and how it is sometimes unpredictable who will be accepted and who is denied Access Link services. Additionally, another participant added that there is often confusion from individuals and their families about signing up for Access Link with proper medical documentation, reaching Access Link customer service, scheduling Access Link rides, and navigating the pickup window of Access Link services.

It was mentioned then that Cumberland County has a local transportation system that was intended to bridge the gap of services NJ TRANSIT did not supply, but in practice, the local transportation system serves as the primary transportation system and connector of services due to the very rural landscape of the county. The local system does not have the capacity and/or adequate funding to meet the needs currently placed on it. With this localized transportation system in mind, the Heldrich

Center team further inquired about employer-based pilot programs and/or micro-transit systems in southern New Jersey. A panelist explained that employers are largely not interested in funding and/or participating in discussions about local transportation; however, there is interest in operating shuttle buses for workers to and from Philadelphia, which does not benefit local residents. Another panelist agreed that generally there is an observed lack of interest from employers regarding employee transportation services, as the prevailing perception is that it is the state or NJ TRANSIT’s responsibility to address transportation issues. In terms of employer-related transit services, a panelist cited the **Pureland East-West Community Shuttle** in Gloucester County as an example of a transportation system that makes multiple stops, including the Pureland Industrial Complex, which houses companies employing over 8,500 people. This model of service that connects individuals to hubs of employers is regarded positively.

Next, the Heldrich Center queried the panelists about who or what entities needed to be involved in a pilot program of an innovative transit solution for New Jersey’s southern/rural counties. A panelist mentioned creative funding solutions, including grants from banks, South Jersey Gas, and Atlantic City Electric for funding “non-traditional” service elements, such as transportation. Additionally, NJ TRANSIT, the New Jersey

Department of Transportation, and the Metropolitan Planning Organization, were cited as needing to be involved in conversations about transportation challenges and the necessary funding to address such challenges. The panelist went on to say that the counties and municipalities also need to be involved, as addressing these complex transportation challenges will be a huge undertaking. Relatedly, it was made clear that DVRS counselors in local areas also need to be part of the conversation, as they are intimately aware of the nuances and challenges their customers face with transportation on a regular basis. Lastly, panelists suggested that it is critical to include the perspectives and voices of the individuals who will actually use the transportation services when considering any kind of new transportation pilot program. Panelists went on to identify that current major sources of funding for transportation include NJ TRANSIT funds, WorkFirst NJ Work Supports, and the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, Division of Family Development (DFD).

The Heldrich Center further asked about panelists' estimation of the unmet transportation needs in the state. A panelist shared that there are plans under way to pilot a micro-transit system in the Camden and Gloucester County areas that cross county boundaries, which is perceived to be critical in terms of finding employment opportunities as well as for daily living needs. It was noted that county boundaries are perceived to be an obstacle when navigating local transit systems. Another panelist explained that estimating the unmet need is difficult because there is a difference between transportation not being available and transportation being inconvenient, particularly in more dispersed geographic locations.

The Heldrich Center's last question asked about recommendations for further exploration regarding improving transportation in New Jersey. Access Link was cited as a good concept in theory, but the current operations are regarded as flawed and there are items that need further attention such as Access Link's wait times, route limitations, and transfer points. However, the panelist explained that with Access Link, the framework for a reliable transit system was already in place so long as improvements were addressed. The Via model was then noted to be promising for rural areas to serve the

community with on-demand ride-share options that do not involve fixed routes, which are perceived to be not cost effective for rural areas in particular.

The panel discussion ended with the Heldrich Center explaining the next steps for the research study and how the transportation and employment stakeholders could continue to be involved in the conversation.

Preliminary Key Takeaways

The following are the high-level preliminary takeaways from the expert panel discussion on transportation:

- ▶ Finding information about available transportation services online can be difficult. Overall, there is a lack of understanding and awareness of service availability and service features amongst the population in need of such services.
- ▶ The qualifications for the Access Link program, particularly the three-quarter-mile rule, places significant limitations on the number of individuals who are able to access services, particularly in the rural areas of the state. The Access Link program is regarded as helpful; however, aspects of the program, including pickup windows, sign-up, customer service, and more, need to be improved so that the program can serve a greater number of people in the state.
- ▶ Existing and traditional service models, such as fixed-route bus service, do not meet the needs of the population in New Jersey's southern/rural counties. There is a desire to explore new and/or convert existing services to operate as more flexible micro-transit systems in rural areas to meet the perceived demand. There is a perception that micro-transit models will serve a lot more people with the proper adaptations, investment, and buy-in from relevant stakeholders.
- ▶ Transportation is perceived to be an invisible issue that has not received the level of attention and investment needed to address the challenges outlined by the expert panelists. The Heldrich Center's study is regarded as a step in the right direction for drawing more attention to this fundamental barrier that keeps individuals, particularly individuals with disabilities, from finding and keeping meaningful employment opportunities.

Next Steps

The Heldrich Center will conduct a series of in-depth interviews with stakeholders and transportation and employment subject-matter experts to further explore the preliminary takeaways identified from the first expert panel discussion. The Heldrich Center will convene a second panel of transportation and employment stakeholders in January 2024. This session will be conducted on Friday, January 19 at 12:00 p.m. The Heldrich Center team plans to use this session to verify, validate, and clarify the findings from the first expert panel, the review of the literature, and learnings from in-depth interviews with panel members and subject-matter experts. The findings from the second panel, as well as all other research activities in this evaluation, will be included in a final report to NJDOL in March 2024.

Appendix F-1: Transportation Expert Panel Discussion Protocol

- ▶ With specific emphasis on southern/rural counties in New Jersey, what are the primary challenges with transportation as they relate to accessing services from the public workforce development system?
- ▶ Currently, what do you think is working well with transportation services available to Title I and Title IV customers?
- ▶ Is there a current transportation model and/or program in operation that you think is exemplary and/or worth further investigation and investment?
- ▶ What is perceived to be the biggest issue with transportation in New Jersey's southern/rural counties for Title I customers? What is perceived to be the biggest issue with transportation in New Jersey's southern/rural counties for Title IV customers?
- ▶ Broadly speaking, what are the perceived areas for improvement for transportation services in New Jersey's southern/rural counties?
- ▶ Have you tried any local transportation or do you know of any transportation initiatives that have been "home-grown" strategies? Were they successful? Why or why not?

- ▶ Do you have a sense of the extent of the unmet need for transportation services in New Jersey's southern/rural counties?
- ▶ What are the primary sources of funding for transportation assistance within WIOA and DVRS? Is this funding adequate? Are the regulatory requirements around transportation overly cumbersome?
- ▶ Are there other models of transportation services/programs that you believe have worked well in other areas and/or states?
- ▶ What resources would be necessary to invest in a new transportation strategy/program/pilot in New Jersey's southern/rural counties? Who are the players that need to be involved?
- ▶ What else do you think we should know as we study the issue of transportation for job seekers, especially job seekers with disabilities, to access public services and employment?

Appendix F-2: Transportation Expert Panel Poll Questions and Results

To what extent is transportation a challenge for accessing employment in New Jersey?

- ▶ Major challenge: 91%
- ▶ Minor challenge: 9%
- ▶ Not a challenge at all: 0%

To what extent is transportation a challenge for accessing public services in New Jersey?

- ▶ Major challenge: 100%
- ▶ Minor challenge: 0%
- ▶ Not a challenge at all: 0%

What are the barriers to expanding transportation services for special populations? (multiple choices allowed)

- ▶ Staffing constraints: 55%
- ▶ Funding/financial constraints: 91%
- ▶ Lack of interest: 18%
- ▶ Need additional partners: 64%
- ▶ Don't know where to start: 9%
- ▶ Other: 18%

Would you characterize transportation as an issue that should be a high, medium, or low priority for policy improvements/change?

- ▶ High priority: 91%
- ▶ Medium priority: 9%
- ▶ Low priority: 0%

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About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

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