



FOOD SAFETY AND SECURITY Fact Sheet

Demand Responsive Transportation to Increase Food Security


Background

Transportation policy can have a positive impact on community food access and food security, helping people secure sufficient nutritious foods. Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention highlights the effect that [affordable public transportation](#) has on increasing access to quality food options and reducing rates of food insecurity. Despite the benefits of and demand for inexpensive public transportation, transit projects often [require large financial investments](#); may be difficult to place in [rural areas](#); and are limited to operating at set times and routes. Demand Responsive Transit (DRT) is an alternative to public transportation that allows users to [utilize smaller vans or buses](#) without any fixed schedule or route. There is a wide variety of transportation models increasingly used by rural communities. Research that compiled different models used by rural communities utilizing [§330A grants](#) (from the Public Health Services Act) identified [fifteen different transportation models](#). By supporting affordable DRT options, community members have been better able to access necessities such as healthcare. The policies used throughout the case studies below could be applied in healthy food priority areas to increase access to healthy foods.

Success Stories

Arlington, Texas

Arlington uses [two](#) DRT options: [Handitran](#) and [Arlington On-Demand](#). Both services are provided through a public-private partnership with the [rideshare app Via](#), which also provides services in many other cities such as New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. The City of Arlington receives state and federal funding for these two programs through its participation as an “Urban Transit District” under [Chapter 458 of the Texas Transportation Code](#). While chapter 458 was enacted and revised in 1997 through [Senate Bill 898](#), the rural and urban transit districts were first introduced in 1995 through [House Bill 2588](#). Therefore, under the language of House Bill 2588, to say that the City of Arlington is an Urban Transit District [simply means](#) that the City is “a local governmental body or a political subdivision of the State of Texas which operates a public transportation system in an urbanized area with a population between 50,000 and 200,000, according to the most recent federal census.” The [effect of House Bill 2588 \(1995\)](#) was to reestablish the Public Transportation Fund, used



by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), to be used to support these transit districts. In 2023, the City [received more than \\$15 million in funding for these programs](#) —spending almost \$12 million on “purchased transit,” [most likely including](#) services from Via. While this legislative scheme was not intended to increase food access directly, it has served to increase mobility among the public and particularly among elderly individuals, as discussed below.

Handitran serves as a DRT option for elderly residents. People over age 65, as well as people with disabilities, are eligible to use the Handitran services. There is a \$10 application fee and each ride costs \$2, with the option of buying a \$55 monthly pass. The Handitran service has been offering door-to-door rideshare services since 1981, and runs Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and on Saturdays between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. The service also extends its routes a mile and a half outside City limits.

Arlington On-Demand is for all residents of Arlington and costs anywhere from \$3 to \$5 depending on the distance traveled. There are also weekly and monthly ride passes that cost \$25 and \$80 respectively and allow a user to ride up to four rides per day. The Arlington On-Demand service began in 2017 and operates within City limits.


Greater Salt Lake City Area, Utah

In [1969](#) the Utah State Legislature [codified §11-20-1 of the Utah Code](#) which provided local municipalities with the authority to create their own local transit district — a type of “Special District” under Utah law. Shortly thereafter, the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) was created by residents of Salt Lake City and nearby communities. In 2007, this code was updated and amended by [House Bill 65](#), which reorganized much of the code into [Part 8 of the chapter on Special Districts](#) within the annotated code marked as §§17B-2a-801–17B-2a-828. Special districts created by local governments have [the authority](#) to enter into contracts to carry out their purposes, collect fees and taxes, issue bonds, and other powers deemed necessary by the districts. As a special district, the UTA’s DRT program [receives state and local funding](#), and is controlled by a board of trustees. Similar to the legislative history in Texas, there is no indication that these provisions were passed with the goal of increasing food access in mind, however, UTA has successfully used DRT options to increase mobility for its residents, empowering them to access broader healthy food options.

The UTA introduced its “[UTA On Demand](#)” DRT service [in 2019](#), using Via. UTA on Demand operates in five zones extending past Salt Lake City bounds, including: Southern Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City Westside, Tooele County, South Davis County and West Provo/Orem. Importantly, these services help connect users to already existing public transit routes – further increasing access by using already developed transit infrastructure. One-way tickets/rides for multiple riders are priced at \$2.50. In 2024, [UTA On Demand reached 1 million rides](#) demonstrating the success of the program.

Mobile Markets

While Mobile Markets fall outside the traditional definition of DRT, they serve the similar function of increasing food access for community members by bringing the food to the people, rather than the people to the food. [Mobile Markets](#) act as farmers markets on wheels — bringing much needed healthy food options to communities on a scheduled basis. [Surveys](#) suggest that people strongly support the use of mobile markets to



increase their consumption of local produce. There is also strong evidence that Mobile Markets are effective in [increasing access to healthy food choices](#) and for increasing food access among communities, [especially for low-income seniors](#) and those lacking access to traditional grocery stores. Furthermore, Mobile Markets are much [more cost effective](#) than brick-and-mortar stores and can service multiple communities due to the ability to relocate quickly. In Duluth, Minnesota, the nonprofit organization Community Action Duluth has been operating its [Mobile Market](#) since 2021 and provides low-cost fresh produce to residents throughout its City. This Mobile Market allows for payment with [cash, card, EBT and offers discounts](#) for SNAP beneficiaries, further increasing access to health foods.

Conclusion

Local governments and community-based organizations seeking to improve public health through increasing access to nutritious food should consider the role of transportation policy. Rural communities could use the [Rural Transportation Toolkit](#) and engage with key stakeholders, including the state or local transportation or transit agency. One option to explore is contracting with micro transit resource [Via](#) (or similar entities). Via has worked with hundreds of cities to increase residents' access to low-cost transportation. Their apparent success across the country shows that this service has been vetted and trusted by other local governments. Via has also successfully been used by [rural communities](#) through the use of state or local funding to drive down consumer cost. Via therefore may be a useful partner as the communities explore DRT options for residents to increase food access and alleviate food insecurity.

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