

# Native Americans on the Move

## Challenges and Successes



TCRP Project H-38:  
Developing, Enhancing, and Sustaining Tribal Transit Services

TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD  
OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

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Montana  
Blackfeet Tribe of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation of Montana  
Burns Paiute Tribe of the Burns Paiute Indian Colony of Oregon  
Catawba Indian Nation (aka Catawba Tribe of South Carolina)  
Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma  
Chickaloon Native Village  
Chickasaw Nation, Oklahoma  
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma  
Coeur d'Alene Tribe of the Coeur d'Alene Reservation, Idaho  
Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation,  
Montana  
Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Washington  
Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon  
Coquille Tribe of Oregon  
Cowlitz Indian Tribe, Washington  
Craig Community Association  
Crow Tribe of Montana  
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians of North Carolina  
Flambeau Reservation of Wisconsin  
Fort Belknap Indian Community of the Fort Belknap Reservation of  
Montana  
Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians of Maine  
Hualapai Indian Tribe of the Hualapai Indian Reservation, Arizona  
Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma  
Kalispel Indian Community of the Kalispel Reservation, Washington  
Kaw Nation, Oklahoma  
Kiowa Indian Tribe of Oklahoma  
Klamath Indian Tribe of Oregon  
Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of  
Wisconsin  
Lummi Tribe of the Lummi Reservation, Washington  
Makah Indian Tribe of the Makah Indian Reservation, Washington  
Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin  
Mescalero Apache Tribe of the Mescalero Reservation, New Mexico  
Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Minnesota: Grand Portage Band Gulkana  
Village  
Minnesota Chippewa Tribe: Leech Lake Band  
Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island  
Navajo Nation, Arizona, New Mexico & Utah  
Northern Cheyenne Tribe of the Northern Cheyenne Indian  
Reservation, Montana

Oglala Sioux Tribe of the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota  
Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin  
Osage Tribe, Oklahoma  
Paiute-Shoshone Indians of the Bishop Community of the Bishop  
Colony, California  
Paiute-Shoshone Tribe of the Fallon Reservation and Colony,  
Nevada  
Poarch Band of Creek Indians of Alabama  
Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, Michigan and Indiana  
Ponca Tribe of Nebraska  
Pueblo of Cochiti, New Mexico  
Pueblo of Santa Ana, New Mexico  
Quinault Tribe of the Quinault Reservation, Washington  
Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, Minnesota  
Santee Sioux Tribe of the Santee Reservation of Nebraska  
Seminole Nation of Oklahoma  
Seneca Nation of New York  
Shoalwater Bay Tribe of the Shoalwater Bay Indian Reservation,  
Washington  
Sitka Tribe of Alaska  
Snoqualmie Tribe, Washington  
Southern Ute Indian Tribe of the Southern Ute Reservation, Colorado  
Spirit Lake Tribe, North Dakota  
Squaxin Island Tribe of the Squaxin Island Reservation, Washington  
St. Regis Band of Mohawk Indians of New York  
Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North & South Dakota  
Stillaguamish Tribe of Washington  
Squamish Indian Tribe of the Port Madison Reservation,  
Washington  
Susanville Indian Rancheria, California  
Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians of North Dakota  
Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), Massachusetts  
Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska  
Yakama Nation, Washington



# Introduction

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## **Introduction**

There is growing interest among Native American tribes to provide transportation services for their people. In 1999, the Community Transportation Association of America reported that only 18 of the 562 federally recognized tribes received any funding from the Federal Transit Administration's program for rural transit.<sup>1</sup> That number has grown to over 100 tribes providing some type of transit service using a variety of funding programs. Transit programs range in scope from tribes operating one vehicle to provide local access to human services programs on the reservation to systems operating 40 vehicles to provide access to employment, services, and education over long distances. Annual operating budgets range from \$40,000 to nearly \$2 million.

This booklet provides an overview of the state of tribal transit programs throughout the country based on preliminary observations from the research effort. The intent is to provide tribal leaders and planners with basic information about the variety of tribal transit programs, challenges they are likely to face, how other tribes have overcome these challenges, and resources which are available to tribal governments. More detailed information will be provided in a forthcoming Guidebook and a Research Report. The Guidebook will provide resources for tribes seeking to begin or enhance a transit program. The Research Report will document the overall research study and the detailed findings related to tribal transit programs.

Even with this growing interest and wide range of operating programs there are still many Native American communities that have not developed a transit program. The purpose of this booklet is to present a framework for understanding the challenges and information about how tribes can and have overcome the challenges.

Native Americans face many challenges. Previous studies have found that the average low-income population on reservations is about 17 percent compared with the national average of 12 percent. However, some reservations have low-income populations of 40 percent or more. Unemployment has been reported as high as 80 percent for the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations.<sup>2</sup> Many tribal members lack transportation to access basic services such as health care and jobs.

Many tribes have made use of the Federal Transit Administration Tribal Transit Program (49 U.S.C. 5311( c)) to begin or sustain transit services on reservations. Although the program is relatively small, this funding has enabled many tribes to begin transit service and open opportunities for tribal members. Tribes have developed working relationships with local colleges, human service programs, and other local governments to establish sustainable transit programs. While tribal transit programs have grown significantly and have been successful, there are still many unmet transportation needs among Native Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> Boyles, B. et al. "Native American Transit: Current Practices, Needs, and Barriers," Transportation Research Record 1956, Transportation Research Board of the National Academies, Washington, DC 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Boyles, B. et al.





# Why Tribes Operate Transit Services

Native Americans living on reservations and tribal lands face many difficulties not encountered by the larger population in this country. The remoteness and isolation of many tribes creates transportation challenges to access essential services. Access to employment often involves similar challenges for those not employed locally by the tribal government.

Unemployment and low-income households are significantly higher among the Native American population. Many families lack reliable transportation and are not able to maintain employment because of the lack of transportation. Employment opportunities on the reservation are often limited and tribal members must find jobs off the reservation. Even those who are able to find jobs may not be able to keep the job because their car breaks down and they have no other option.

Tribal members may be unable to keep medical appointments because of a lack of transportation leading to adverse effects on their health. For example, members of the Crow Nation must travel over 60 miles one-way for dialysis treatments.

Local tribal community colleges on reservations have recognized the need for transportation to access educational opportunities. The Salish Kootenai College started their own bus service to ensure that students would be able to attend classes. The College has since partnered with the tribal transit program to continue to provide access to the campus. Stone Child College on the Rocky Boy's Reservation saw a similar need and dedicated a van to provide transportation for students to and from classes.

Even basic shopping opportunities are often located off the reservation. The Mescalero Apache Tribe saw the need to provide access to grocery stores for their members and started a service to provide access to adjacent communities.

"We had a member who was a non-traditional college student and needed to take a class to complete her degree in Great Falls, 160 miles away. By riding the bus, she was able to attend the class two days a week and complete the course."

C. John Healy  
Fort Belknap



Transit programs allow tribes to provide access for their members to these essential services and opportunities. A coordinated service provides the most efficient use of available funds and allows tribes to provide greater service than might be possible through a variety of individual transportation programs. As various transportation programs work together, tribes have been able to pool scarce resources and successfully implement transit programs to meet many different transportation needs of their members.



# Developing and Enhancing Tribal Transit

Whether working to develop a new passenger transit service or enhance an existing service, it is critical to have a vision or specific concept of what that service will be like. Almost anyone can create a plan, but transforming it into reality requires a person, or more likely a group of people, who are energetic, passionate, and knowledgeable about the political realities and resources of the tribe and believe in the benefits of transit.

To develop or enhance the plan for transit, there are seven suggested key steps. These steps are summarized below.

## 1. Recognize Need and Develop a Vision

Some person or group or department must sense a need for more transit service and be the spark that ignites interest in others. A vision must be formulated on what the future service might look like. A simple vision may be all that is needed such as “We need a ride to go grocery shopping and a way to go to the clinic” or the vision may be much more comprehensive.

## 2. Involve Tribal Leaders

Finding out from tribal leaders who should be involved and how to go about achieving the vision is critical to success. No matter what the vision is, it will, by necessity, have to fit tribal goals and resources. Ideally, working closely with tribal leaders will help find that “champion” or person who can help achieve the vision.

## 3. Identify Stakeholders and People Who Will Benefit from Achieving the Vision

The purpose of identifying stakeholders and people who will benefit is to form a group of people who can quantify the need, identify the resources, and formulate an action plan. Examples of stakeholders include Indian Health Service, Community Health Representatives, Head Start, Mental Health Services, schools, and community colleges.

## 4. Conduct a “Passenger Transit Brainstorming/Organizing Meeting”

Bring together the stakeholders and key tribal leaders to share ideas on how to achieve the vision of developing or enhancing tribal transit. The goal is to establish a task force of people who are motivated and will formulate a specific action plan.

## 5. Hold Task Force Meetings

The task force should focus on preparing an outline of an action plan. The essential elements of an action plan are:

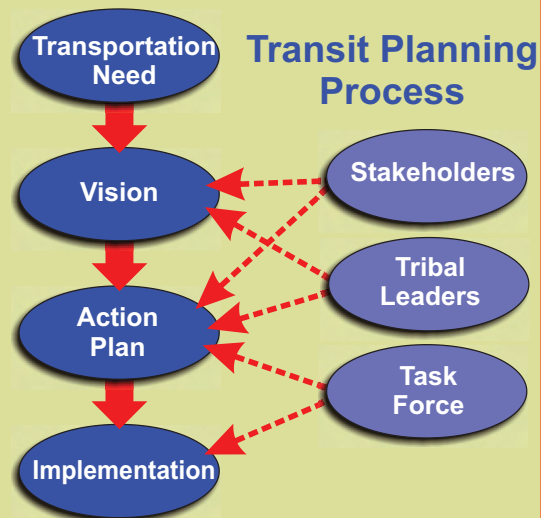
- a. Identify and quantify need.
- b. Identify current providers of services.
- c. Identify gaps in services.
- d. Prepare alternatives to fill gaps in services.
- e. Identify resources, both operational funds and capital resources, to fill the gaps.
- f. Prepare service implementation plan based on available resources.

## 6. Determine Responsibilities to Implement the Action Plan

The task force may determine that they do not have the time or resources to conduct the action plan. It may be possible to find a department in tribal government that has some or all of the staff resources to conduct the work program and prepare the action plan, or it may be necessary to hire additional people to implement the plan.

## 7. Conduct Planning Work Program

In this step the specific budgets for service and capital equipment, as well as specific operating procedures, are prepared. Specific actions are taken to obtain the funding and resources to begin the transit program. Funding sources must be identified and deadlines established to meet grant and budget schedules.



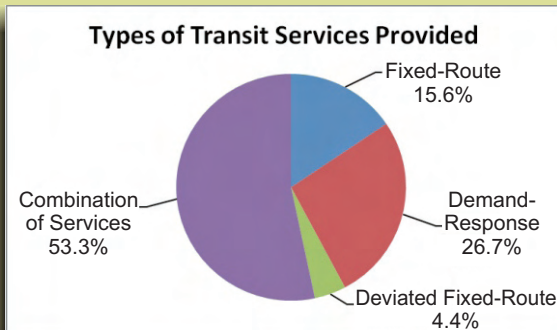
# Native American

Native American transit services consist of a variety of types. They can be mainly categorized into Fixed-Route, Demand-Response, Deviated Fixed-Route, and a combination of services.

- **Fixed-Route** is a type of service where the routes, stops, and schedules do not vary.
- **Demand-Response** is a type of service where routes and schedules vary according to service requests received.
- **Deviated Fixed-Route** is a type of service that operates along a fixed path, but can deviate from the fixed path for door-to-door pick-ups and drop-offs according to service requests.
- **Carpool and vanpool programs** are used to provide access to employment.

Over one-half of the tribes interviewed operate a combination of services as shown in the accompanying graph. These types of service are used to meet a wide range of transportation needs including access to employment, medical facilities, education opportunities, and recreation sites.

Demand-response service is common because it is flexible and can satisfy the needs of specific groups such as elders and persons with disabilities along with the general public. This type of service works well for low-density areas characteristically found on reservations.



## Yakama Nation Tribal Transit (Pahto Public Passage)

Type of Service	Fixed-Route
Number of Vehicles	2
Annual Budget	\$400,000

Pahto Public Passage—the transit service provided by Yakama Nation—is provided five days a week from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. with a single fixed route. Transportation is provided in White Swan, Harrah, Wapato, Mabton, and Toppenish (the largest city on

the reservation). The fixed route makes connection with People for People Community Connector, which serves multiple counties in the central Washington area.

Since the Yakama Nation Tribal Transit Program began on September 4, 2007, both data and personal stories have exemplified the need for public transportation services. The rise in ridership has indicated a real need from the community members.

The Yakama Nation's Tribal Transit program success is in identifying the needs and support for transportation services on the reservation, involving active participation from stakeholders, receiving FTA grant awards that have helped operate this transportation service, and partnership with People for People—a local nonprofit organization that helps operate the new transportation system. This transportation is a vital link for residents/tribal members without transportation to access employment, education, and services such as health care, social services, shopping, and cultural events.



# Transit Services

## Blackfeet Transit

Type of Service	Demand-Response
Number of Vehicles	6
Annual Budget	\$180,718

Blackfeet Transit has been providing transportation service since 1978. Blackfeet Transit operates a demand-response system for Browning and the surrounding communities within the Blackfeet Reservation. The system operates Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. This service is open to the general public.



Blackfeet Transit has been growing since its inception in terms of ridership and funding. In 1995, Blackfeet Transit provided approximately 6,500 passenger-trips. This has significantly increased to 38,000 one-way passenger-trips in FY2009. Blackfeet Transit provides a vital link to people with disabilities, people needing access to medical appointments, senior citizens, people transitioning from welfare to work, and people needing other services. The transit agency attributes its success to it being the only public transit service that serves the Blackfeet Reservation.

## Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon

Type of Service	Deviated Fixed-Route
Number of Vehicles	3
Annual Budget	\$ 42,900

The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon contract for transportation services operated by Yamhill County Transit Area (YCTA). A deviated fixed-route service was implemented to meet the need for scheduled

service with the flexibility to serve a broader area. The service is open to anyone. The YCTA service area is from Grand Ronde to Willamina with connections to Portland's TriMet from McMinnville and with Salem Area Mass Transit District (SAMTD) from Salem.

## Chickasaw Nation

Type of Service	Demand-Response/Fixed-Route
Number of Vehicles	11 Medical/5 Road to Work Program
Annual Budget	\$821,200

The Chickasaw Nation provides two types of transportation programs—the Road to Work program and the Medical Transportation Program. The Medical Transportation Program is a demand-response type of service that provides medical transportation as well as delivery of prescriptions. Medical

transportation is provided to and from medical facilities as needed. The Road to Work program consists of two scheduled fixed routes that provide transportation to and from employment centers. The service is open to the general public, but gives priority to Native Americans.





# Tribes with Public





# Transit Services



# Challenges for

Some of the most difficult socioeconomic conditions in North America are found on Indian Reservations in the United States. A lack of transportation infrastructure such as roads and passenger transit (buses/vans/carpools), as well as physical isolation and other challenges contribute to desperate conditions on some reservations. Besides the infrastructure and physical isolation, there are institutional and cultural challenges that make developing and enhancing transit difficult for some tribes and reservations. While many of these challenges are not unique to tribes and may be found in other rural areas, they are often accentuated in tribal settings.

## **Tribal Sovereignty**

There is no single template for how federally recognized tribal governments are structured and organized. Historically, federal policies attempted to encourage such uniformity, but tribal diversity has been a hallmark of Native America. These differing government structures result from tribal cultural differences and historical events such as Spanish land grants and numerous treaties, executive orders, and legislative enactments. An implication of this reality is that federal, state, and local agencies must adopt a government-to-government relationship with each tribe that reflects the tribe's particular governing context. Tribal sovereignty is an often used but infrequently understood concept. The fact that tribal authority long predates the creation of the United States federal and state governments has several important implications. Tribal government authority is not derived from or part of the United States Constitution. This independence is closely protected and the subject of numerous negotiations between federal, state, and local governments. Many tribes have found this to be a challenge, particularly when dealing with state governments and federal agencies.

## **Remote Location of Reservations**

First, there is the reality of the physical distance of many reservations from urban centers. This remoteness from urban services and amenities means tribal members often have to travel long distances to secure medical care, employment, and other goods and services.

## **Low Population Densities and Development Patterns**

In addition to the physical isolation and location of reservations, the low population density of reservations means that efficient routing is difficult because of long distances between passengers who need a ride. Transit programs on reservations often end up having low passenger productivity. Residential areas are often isolated from other activities and require residents to either walk long distances or have some type of transportation.

## **Funding**

Tribal members may have to rely on transportation programs for access to jobs and services, but lack the ability to pay a reasonable portion of the cost of that transportation service. This inability to pay means that tribal transit services must find sources of funding other than the rider. A lack of local revenues often makes finding grants and other sources of funds imperative. Some of the sources of funding may already be available and in use on the reservation, but often the funds are spent in a piecemeal way and are not coordinated to leverage the best use of the funding.

## **Institutional Challenges**

One of the key institutional barriers is the “fit” of transit into existing typical tribal departments. Transit is not completely a “roads and bridges” activity and has many elements of a social service. Yet it is not completely a social service, being highly capitalized and providing services that are open to all. Hence, there is not a clear institutional framework for transit activities. Turnover among elected officials and staff occurs frequently within tribal governments. This leads to a lack of continuity and institutional history for tribal transit services and potential changes in program emphasis.

## **Turfism and Lack of Coordination**

Not unique to Indian reservations, the desire of department directors to serve their client needs is paramount and sometimes runs counter to the best use of scarce resources. Often buses are not fully used during the day or there are empty seats when providing services. Departments that have secured buses or vehicles for transportation of their clients are often reluctant to share for fear that their clients will not get the service they need.



# Tribal Transit Programs

## Leadership and Vision

It would not be uncommon to find that few of the current generation of tribal leaders have had significant experience with public transit, either as a rider or as a tribal official. Again this is not unique to tribes, but political leaders who do not have experience using transit are generally not aware of the transportation needs and the ability of a transit program to meet those needs. This lack of awareness and attention means that the effort to develop or enhance transit is rarely initiated by tribal leadership, but rather is initiated by persons in need or some department director who is made aware of funding opportunities in the form of grants or contracts or is aware of a gap in services.

## Volunteerism and Civic Involvement

It is notable that in Indian Country where tribal ways are the norm, the difficulty of mobilizing the average citizen on the reservation for participation in volunteer committees or civic affairs is often a barrier to positive change. Volunteerism is necessary to develop and enhance transit, especially in the initial planning stages where a variety of ideas and opinions about transit needs is helpful to shape the service.

Coupled with the lack of volunteerism and the lack of civic involvement, there is a lack of active civic organizations such as United Way, Chamber of Commerce, and other community betterment organizations. Organizations of this type often bring the technical and analytical skills necessary to the planning function.

## Lack of Technical Capacity

Developing or enhancing a transit service requires analytical skills to assess demand and evaluate budgets, but it also requires consensus-building skills. These skills, while becoming more prevalent, are not in abundance on reservations. Unfortunately, training for the skills necessary for planning, implementing, and operating transit in tribal settings is not widely available.

## Performance Monitoring

It is not uncommon for managers of client-specific services such as elder transportation not to share information with public transit services, thereby limiting opportunities for coordination and better use of tribal resources. Coupled with the lack of data sharing is the lack of data or analysis of existing services. Sketchy performance data and monitoring of activities are weaknesses often found where data may be collected for reporting, but that is the extent of the use of the data. The data are used to make reports, but are not used to monitor performance or analyze strengths and weaknesses of current operations.

## Vehicle Maintenance

A significant issue, notable when observing the condition of some vehicle fleets associated with tribes, is the lack of maintenance capability or the lack of funding devoted to maintaining the fleet. This applies not only to day-to-day maintenance, but especially to special equipment such as wheelchair lifts and any associated warranty work that must be done. The distance to qualified mechanics can be significant and is a challenge that managers must overcome to keep fleets operating safely.



## Lack of Pedestrian Infrastructure

The pedestrian infrastructure is often not conducive to safe walking, particularly by elders and persons with disabilities. For a community to be transit-friendly, it must first be pedestrian-friendly. While there is a high percentage of trips made by walking on most reservations, the infrastructure—in the form of sidewalks, lighting, and street crosswalks—is generally not safe.





# How the Challenges

Tribes have been successful in overcoming challenges through a variety of approaches. Success is often attributed to leadership provided by tribal staff and officials, as well as partnerships to overcome the limited resources available. In all cases, overcoming the various challenges required strong leadership within the tribe.

## Leadership

Tribes that have been most successful are those that had leaders step to the plate, identify problems, and organize others in the effort to provide needed services.

The Standing Rock Public Transit (SRPT)—provided by the **Standing Rock Sioux Tribe**—attributes its success to the support it receives from the local leadership and collaborative partnerships. Other factors for its success are the staff's persistence in seeking alternative funding sources and networking opportunities with Dakota Transit Association (DTA).

The **Orutsararmiut Native Council (ONC)** is located in Bethel, Alaska approximately 340 miles west of Anchorage. Bethel is a remote and isolated location that is accessible only by air in the winter. The ONC leaders recognized the needs of their people and took action to start a transit service by partnering with the City of Bethel. ONC was able to receive funding through the tribal transit program, and the city received funding through the State. The Bethel Public Transit System began service in November 2008.

For years, **Navajo Nation Transit** has provided fixed-route service throughout the reservation in northeastern Arizona. The population is spread throughout the reservation and access is provided to employment centers and basic services. The tribal leadership saw the extensive transportation needs of the Navajo Nation and established the regional transit service to help meet those needs. In addition to tribal funding, funds were obtained from the Arizona Department of Transportation.

## Partnerships

Even with strong leadership, tribes have found it necessary to develop partnerships to make efficient use of available resources.

The need for public transportation on the Coeur D'Alene Reservation was reflected in the high percentages of elders, unemployment, households below the poverty level, people without a driver's license, and households without cars. The **Coeur d' Alene Tribe** started a service in 2004 with one bus to meet that need. In 2005, Kootenai County passed the 50,000 population mark and desired to develop a public transit service. The Tribe and the County worked together to combine resources. One of the most important aspects for the success of Citylink—the transit service—is the unique partnership the tribe has with the Kootenai Metropolitan Planning Organization, the State of Idaho, and the County. The local government provides funding, and the Tribe operates all service.

The **Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation (CSKT)** measures its transit success by the origin of its transportation voucher program that transitioned into a public transit service. In May 2002, CSKT received a grant from the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) to begin a transportation voucher program. This brought to the forefront the need to assist more clients who lacked transportation. In 2003, CSKT accessed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to purchase two vans. A formal transit service began in April 2003 with a grant from the Montana Department of Transportation. CSKT has continued to develop partnerships and now provides transportation for the community college and cooperates with the Missoula Ravalli Transportation Management Association for vanpool service to Missoula.

"One of our biggest challenges has been to get enough funding to meet the transportation needs."

Corky Sias  
CSKT



**Fort Belknap Transit Service (FBTS)**—provided by the Fort Belknap Indian Community—has been successful because of the Tribe's success in expanding transit service from the senior center to the general public.



# Have Been Overcome

In 2003, the Tribe started planning for a transportation service for the senior citizens centers. In 2004, the Tribe was awarded an FTA Section 5310 Grant to purchase three 10-passenger mini-buses. The Tribe was then awarded funds from the state. In 2006, the Tribe applied for and was awarded a Technical Assistance Grant through Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA). In 2009, the Tribe received \$340,000 under the FTA American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) for a transit facility and the purchase of needed equipment.

**Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation** contracts their transportation service with Okanogan County Transportation and Nutrition (OCTN). The success of this program is due to the partnership between the Tribe, the OCTN, and the Okanogan Behavioral HealthCare and Medical Center. OCTN, which originally served only seniors, has seen a significant increase in use by the general public. In 2007, OCTN added intercity services between Omak and Coulee City through the Colville Reservation to meet some of the increased demand for services.

The **Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma** provides a needed transportation service in southeast Oklahoma. This demand-response transit service is provided for tribal members and the general public to access various services. The Choctaw Nation coordinates with four public transit systems and various tribal programs to avoid duplication in service.

**Menominee Regional Public Transit**—operated by the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin—has been successful because of the partnership and coordination with both tribal and non-tribal entities. Partnerships have allowed Menominee Regional Public Transit to extend their service area, allowed transportation services to run more efficiently, and increased ridership.



## Long Distances and Isolation

Physical issues create myriad difficulties in providing the services that people need, which make providing services difficult and costly.

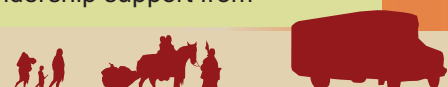
The **Northern Cheyenne Reservation**—located in southeastern Montana—is approximately 100 miles east of Billings. The Northern Cheyenne Tribe applied for and was awarded a grant by the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) to do a technical assistance project that helped identify the needs, looked at the feasibility of providing public transit services, and involved key players such as the Tribal Council, key stakeholders, Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), human service agencies, and Northern Cheyenne Reservation residents in the planning of a transit system. Based on the study, the Tribe applied for a grant through the FTA 5311 (c) Tribal Transit Program and was awarded \$157,000 in FY2007 for operating the new service. After dealing with a variety of issues such as a change in tribal administration and having to re-sign all the documents for FTA, the Tribe started their service in April 2009 and provides service on the reservation and to Billings.



*Photo courtesy of Billings Gazette*

**Community Transit Services**—provided by the **Asa'carsarmiut Tribal Council**—provides a vital link for residents/tribal members without transportation to access employment, health care, social services, and shopping. One of the factors that has made Community Transit Services successful is that they provide transportation services to the public instead of limiting services to tribal members. Another important aspect is that the Tribe provides transportation to the local airport, which is a mile out of town. The transit service is provided even when temperatures drop to 30 or 40 degrees below zero. Another major success of the tribal transit program is transportation to the nearest subregional clinic, which is 20 miles away.

The **Makah Indian Reservation** is extremely isolated at the most northwest tip of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. The reservation at Neah Bay is 60 miles from the closest town (Forks), 75 miles from Port Angeles, and 150 miles from Seattle. Makah Transit connects with Clallam Transit, which connects to Port Angeles and Forks. The success of the Makah Public Transit is attributed to the support from the Makah Tribe, the Washington State government, community members, and ridership support from patrons.



# Funding Resources

There are a wide variety of funding programs available for tribal transit services. Descriptions of the most common sources of funding for tribal transit programs include the following:

**Rural Transit Assistance Program (Section 5311)** – Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funding for rural transit services, administered through the state DOT, to cover 50 percent of operations and 80 percent of capital purchases. The funding is eligible to tribes through submission of a grant application to the state DOT.

**Public Transportation on Indian Reservations (Section 5311 c)** – FTA funding for federally recognized tribes. Tribes receive funding through a national competitive process administered by FTA. The funding is eligible for capital, planning, and operations at 100 percent FTA funding with no local match.

**Transportation for Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities (Section 5310)** – FTA funding for private nonprofit groups to improve transportation for elderly and disabled individuals, administered through the state DOT, to cover 80 percent of capital purchases (vehicles). The funding is through a state-level grant process.

**Urbanized Area Formula Program (Section 5307)** – FTA funding for transit entities in urban areas. Areas with over 200,000 in population are limited to 80 percent of capital purchases through a grant formula program. For urban areas with populations between 50,000 and 200,000, funding may be used for 80 percent of capital purchases and 50 percent of operations. The tribes would be eligible as part of an urban transit system.

**Job Access Reverse Commute (Section 5316)** – FTA funding for urban and rural areas, administered through the state DOT, to cover operations and capital purchases to improve transportation for low-income individuals to get to employment. The funding is eligible to tribes through submission of a grant application to the state DOT.

**Enhancement** – Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) flexible funding through a state DOT competitive grant process. The funding is eligible to tribes for the construction of bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

**Planning Funding (Sections 5303, 5304, and 5305)** – FTA funding for states and MPOs for planning activities. The funding is eligible to tribes through a competitive grant program administered by the state DOT.

**Older Americans Act Title VI** – Title VI authorizes funds for supportive and nutrition services to older Native Americans. Funds are awarded directly to Indian tribal organizations, Native Alaskan organizations, and nonprofit groups representing Native Hawaiians. To be eligible for funding, a tribal organization must represent at least 50 Native American elders age 60 or older.

**Medicaid** – This funding is a joint federal/state program that provides health insurance coverage to certain categories of low-income individuals (including children, pregnant women, parents of eligible children, and people with disabilities). The funding can be used for non-emergency transportation to and from medical appointments.

**Indian Reservation Roads (IRR) Funding** – The Indian Reservation Roads Program provides funding to tribes that may be used for transit planning and capital expenses as well as other purposes.

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)** – States receive the TANF formula grants to provide cash assistance, work opportunities, and necessary support services for needy families with children. States may choose to spend some of their TANF funding on transportation and related services for program beneficiaries.

**Head Start Program** – The program provides comprehensive services for economically disadvantaged preschool children. Funds are distributed to tribes, public agencies, and nonprofit agencies to provide child development and education services, as well as supportive services such as transportation.

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Native Americans** – Grant Funds for Social and Economic Development Strategies may be used for transportation in support of the grant programs.





# Technical Assistance Resources

Tribes have access to many resources for assistance in developing, enhancing, and sustaining tribal transit programs. These assistance programs include planning grants, training, information resources, and technical assistance programs.

## **Tribal Technical Assistance Program**

The Tribal Technical Assistance Program provides training and technology transfer for Native American tribes. The program was initially formed in 1993 with four centers and has been expanded to seven centers. Each center is responsible for a region of the country. (website: [www.ltap.org](http://www.ltap.org))

## **Federal Transit Administration**

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) administers the Tribal Transit Program that provides funding annually for planning, capital, and operation of tribal transit services. Each of the regional offices has a tribal liaison who is available to assist tribes with grant applications and reporting requirements. (website: [www.fta.dot.gov](http://www.fta.dot.gov))

## **Community Transportation Association of America**

The Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) is a membership organization that serves as an advocate for community transportation nationally. In addition to the advocacy role, CTAA provides technical assistance to rural and tribal transit systems. Each year, announcements are made requesting applications for technical assistance projects. The program selects three tribes for long-term assistance projects each year. CTAA also publishes magazines and a resource document each year. (website: [www.ctaa.org](http://www.ctaa.org))

## **State Departments of Transportation**

Each state receives federal funding for transit planning. Tribes are eligible for these funds through the state. Tribes have cooperated with state DOTs to use a combination of tribal transit-planning funds from FTA and transit-planning funds from the state to increase the funding available for planning efforts. Some states are also able to provide technical assistance for tribes. Vehicles may be purchased through state contracts, either through the FTA Section 5310 or 5311 programs or using tribal transit funds with an agreement to use the state contract for vehicle purchases. The states also receive funding for the Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP), which can provide funding for training programs. Some states have a designated tribal liaison.

## **Transit Cooperative Research Program**

Each year, the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) conducts a series of research projects. While most are not specific to tribal transit programs, many apply to small and rural transit services and have very useful information for tribes to plan and operate transit services. The reports are available at no charge. (website: [www.tcrponline.org](http://www.tcrponline.org))

## **University Transportation Centers**

The federal government funds transportation research centers at various universities throughout the country. The Small Urban and Rural Transit Center (SURTC) (website: [www.surtc.org](http://www.surtc.org)) at the University of North Dakota and the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University (website: [www.wti.montana.edu](http://www.wti.montana.edu)) focus on transportation issues in rural areas.

## **Membership Organizations**

Most states have a transit association that serves as an advocate for transit services in the state, but often organizes training programs and may be a source for technical assistance. The Intertribal Transportation Association organizes training programs and is an advocate for transportation issues in Indian Country.



# Summary

Perhaps nowhere in North America is the need for mobility and travel solutions so great as on Native American reservations. In 1999, the Community Transportation Association of America reported there were only 18 tribes operating transit programs funded through the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Today, the number of tribal transit programs has grown to well over 100 with additional tribes in the process of planning transit services. The increase in tribal transit programs is the result of a combination of factors including the recognition of significant needs and the availability of funding. The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) authorized funding specifically for tribal transit programs. A portion of the funding for rural transit systems was dedicated to tribal transit. Tribes were able to apply directly to the FTA for transit funding with no requirement for a local match. From 2006 to 2010, 140 tribes received direct funding through this program. The funding has provided for planning, vehicles, facilities, and operations of transit service.

This booklet identifies many of the issues and challenges facing tribal transit programs. In addition, a process is outlined for development and enhancement of tribal transit with many resources identified, which are available for technical and financial assistance. A critical step in the process is establishing a vision for the transit services to be provided. Tribal leaders must be committed to the vision and support the efforts of staff to implement that vision through a long-term plan.

Native Americans have significant transportation needs. Poverty levels among Native Americans are higher than the national average with some reservations having 40 percent or more of their population living under the poverty level. As can be expected, many do not have reliable transportation. Many reservations lack employment opportunities, have limited educational opportunities, have limited medical facilities, and do not have basic shopping opportunities. In many cases these destinations are located long distances from the tribal community—increasing the transportation challenges.

While tribal transit programs face many challenges, tribes have overcome these challenges to provide successful transit services. A number of tribes have partnered with other organizations to obtain funding and serve a greater number of people. These partnerships include working with local community colleges and contracts with local transit agencies or local governments. Many of the successes identified by tribal transit programs are related to these cooperative efforts which have increased the amount of available funding, established sustainable levels of funding, reduced duplication of services, and improved efficiencies of the transit program.

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“Transit has significantly turned around our village. We have employed five people, provided access to jobs for five people, and provided access to the University of Alaska Fairbanks extension and health facilities in Tok.”

Howard Mermelstein - Tetlin Village

*This booklet summarizes research conducted under the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Project H-38, which identified many issues facing tribal transit programs and described successful ways that some tribes have overcome these challenges. The results of the project will include a guidebook to help tribes plan and develop effective transit service.*