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What Caregivers Should Know About Senior Transportation Services

Six options to get rides for your loved one when you're not available to help

If you find yourself doing more driving for a parent or loved one who can no longer get behind the wheel safely, you're not alone. Among family caregivers in the United States, 80 percent — more than 42 million people — provide transportation for an older adult or for a person with a disability, according to AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving.

While your loved one may accept rides to medical appointments when they can no longer drive, they're probably aware of how much stress you're under and may hesitate to ask for rides that are "unessential," like meeting friends at a restaurant, says Shayna Gleason, a research associate with the International Transportation Learning Center, a nonprofit focused on improving public transportation.

"Having a variety of convenient and safe transportation options makes it easier for people to age in place," says Christy Kwan who helps local leaders [design age-friendly communities](#) as a policy advisor at [AARP's Livable Communities](#). "Walkable neighborhoods, public transportation and ride-sharing services connect people to social activities, jobs, medical care and community services that support their independence."

To help your loved one stay connected to their friends and community, look to local resources. There may be more than just expensive cabs, Uber and Lyft available.

Will the transportation meet your needs?

When you're evaluating what transportation options might be available, Gleason suggests discussing these questions with your loved one to evaluate together how useful each service will be:

When do they want to use the transportation? If they're planning to go to weekend concerts, evenings out with friends or holiday gatherings with family, you'll need to find out what kind of transit is available at those times.

How do they want to plan? How important is being spontaneous to your loved one? Are they OK with booking several days or a week ahead, or do they want the flexibility to travel on demand?

Where would they go? Some services may not cross town or county lines, so you'll want to see what destinations they need to access.

What kind of assistance do they need? Some services will help your loved one in and out of vehicles and buildings. If they use special equipment such as walkers or wheelchairs, will drivers be able to help them?

Who's driving? If it's important to your loved one that they travel with a familiar face, ask companies if they are able to provide the same driver.

6 senior transportation options

Options typically are most plentiful in urban areas and least plentiful in rural areas. To find out what's available where you live, look into these six options:

1. Buses are affordable but not always convenient

Public transportation systems vary widely and might include everything from buses to trains to trolleys. What all public transit systems have in common, however, are fixed schedules and routes that can make it easier for your loved one to plan outings.

If your loved one isn't familiar with the system, or is intimidated by using it, many public transit agencies offer what's known as mobility or travel training. "There are even some programs around the country that have what they call travel buddies — experienced riders who volunteer to travel with you for the first few trips that you make to ensure that you remember what you're supposed to do and how to pay your fare," says Virginia Dize, codirector of the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center.

Pros. Older adults and people with disabilities are typically eligible for free or discounted rides, which might also extend to their accompanying caregivers.

Cons. Fixed-route public transit may require your loved one to walk long distances or along routes without sidewalks. The bus or train stop may not be protected from the weather.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires public buses and trains to be accessible, keep in mind that wheelchair lifts may be broken, and escalators and elevators may be out of service, Gleason notes. It's therefore a good idea to verify that their route remains accessible when they need to use it, either by calling the transit agency or by browsing its website for information about service interruptions.

2. Paratransit serves disabled riders

The ADA requires public transit systems to provide service for riders who are unable to use fixed-route buses and trains. Wheelchair-accessible vans or minibuses transport qualified riders from "curb to curb," which means they'll pick your loved one up outside their home, for example, and drop them off in front of their destination.

However, paratransit only operates within three-quarters of a mile of a regular bus route and during the same hours. So, if your loved one lives far from a public bus route or needs a ride when the public bus isn't running, they're out of luck.

Pros. While eligibility requirements may be strict, "there is such a thing as conditional eligibility," says Gleason. "For example, if you can see well enough to use the fixed route during the daytime but not at night, you might be eligible for paratransit in the evenings." Personal care attendants can ride along for no additional cost. Companions are often allowed to accompany riders but may have to pay their fare, Gleason notes.

Cons. Riders may have to book at least a day in advance and leave ample time to get to their destinations, as multiple riders may be picked up and dropped off. "There can be situations where you're away from home for five or six hours just to do your little bit of business," Dize says.

3. Microtransit offers shared rides on demand

Microtransit is an emerging type of public service for local trips that is a cross between public paratransit service and private ride-hailing apps, Gleason explains.

Like paratransit, rides are shared and typically take place in small-format vehicles like shuttles or minibuses. Unlike paratransit, however, there are no eligibility requirements.

Pros. Rides usually are “on-demand,” which means you can use an app to book them when you need them — similar to a ride-hailing app like Uber, but less expensive since they are usually operated by public transit agencies.

Cons. Microtransit isn’t available everywhere, and service typically is offered only within designated “zones.” Traveling outside of the designated service area typically requires transferring to a fixed-route public transit system.

4. Partnerships offer flexibility for paratransit riders

Some cities provide “on-demand” paratransit in partnership with taxis or transportation network companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft. The idea is to make paratransit more convenient by allowing riders — specifically, those who qualify for paratransit service, like riders with disabilities — to book rides on demand instead of making advance reservations, and by allowing riders to travel directly to their destination by receiving an individual instead of shared ride.

Pros. Subsidies are offered and users can book directly through a taxi service’s call center or through a TNC’s app.

Cons. Partnerships exist only in select cities. And even with subsidies, trips may be too expensive for some riders. There may be long wait times for wheelchair-accessible vehicles, plus drivers may not undergo formal passenger assistance training or receive regular drug testing, Gleason says.

5. Transportation is available for doctor’s appointments

Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) is [a Medicaid benefit](#) which covers travel to medical appointments. Rides typically take place in [wheelchair-accessible vehicles](#) — vans and minibuses, for example — and usually are booked through NEMT brokers, who act like dispatchers by taking trip requests from passengers and sharing them with partnered providers who subsequently schedule trips and

complete them. You should contact your state's Medicaid program to find out which broker it uses.

Pros. Private insurance, including some Medicare Advantage plans, may provide NEMT.

Cons. "You have to qualify for it, and it has to be for medical purposes," Dize says. Riders may only get a limited number of rides per month, you must book in advance and it may be a shared ride. While it is covered by Medicaid, Medicare only reimburses for rides in limited circumstances.

6. Volunteer programs offer a personal touch

Typically run by nonprofit or faith-based organizations, these volunteer programs connect volunteer drivers with older adults who need transportation. The scope of programs, fees and how services are scheduled vary. Probably the biggest hurdle that volunteer transportation faces is a lack of volunteers, according to Katherine Freund, founder and president of ITNAmerica. To recruit more of them, she says ITNAmerica has established [America's Volunteer Driver Center](#) to recruit volunteer drivers for programs across the country.

Pros. Volunteer programs may pick up the slack in areas without robust transportation options. They're often free, and riders frequently have the same driver for more personal — and personable — service.

Cons. Rides might be restricted to medical appointments or other trip types. Drivers may drive either their own cars or agency-owned vehicles, which means they may or may not have wheelchair-accessible rides and they might not be able to help their riders into buildings.

How to find transportation in your community

Transportation professionals known as mobility managers can help you find and coordinate local transportation options in your community. To find one, consult your local aging services organization, typically the Area Agency on Aging, says Bill Wagner, deputy director of the National Center for Mobility Management (NCMM), which helps create transportation solutions.

“Some communities are moving toward ‘one-call, one-click’ ... models that coordinate between transportation providers so that if one option doesn’t work out, the person in need of a ride isn’t left hanging,” says Gleason, who recommends checking to see if your state has what’s called a ‘coordinated public transit human services transportation (HST)’ plan. These plans help communities address transportation gaps for older adults and individuals with disabilities. “It’s worth seeing ... what kinds of mobility management initiatives are a part of that.”

In addition to the resources listed below, try calling and asking for a mobility manager at your public transit agency or health care and hospital system.

Area Agency on Aging. Area Agencies on Aging address the needs and concerns of older adults. To find your local Area Agency on Aging, search [Eldercare Locator](#) by ZIP code or call 1-800-677-1116.

Rides in Sight. This national transportation database from ITN America shows the cost, eligibility requirements and hours of operation in your area, as well as the availability of wheelchair-accessible vehicles. [Search online](#) or call the toll-free hotline at 1-855-607-4337.

National Center for Mobility Management has a searchable [Community Transportation Map](#) of providers with information on public transit systems, volunteer driver services, mobility management programs and other transportation providers serving your area.

Dial 211. Operated by United Way, the service offers referrals to transportation as well as other services. Call 211 or [search their site](#). In addition to the resources listed above, try calling and asking for a mobility manager at your public transit agency or health care and hospital system.

AARP was founded in 1958 and has over 38 million members. It is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for people over the age of 50. AARP is well-known for its advocacy efforts, providing its members with important information, products and services that enhance quality of life as they age. They also promote community service and keep members and the public informed on issues relating to the over 50 age group.

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