



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## Baby Boomers and Rural Transit

By Nick Pappas

**B**y 2050, one in five Americans will be considered elderly as the 65+ population doubles to 80 million. While a majority of this increase will be in suburban communities adjacent to major metropolitan areas, a good number of small and rural areas will be equally impacted. A growing concern among the “baby boom” generation centers on the availability of transit to support their independent lifestyles as they age. However, small or rural communities may not have the capacity to meet this need. Is your transit agency prepared to absorb this upcoming demand? By understanding the trends in population as well as the attitudes of the elderly (or soon-to-be elderly) regarding transit, your agency can be better prepared to meet the needs of your community.

### National trends

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the period of fastest growth among the elderly will occur between 2010 and 2030 as the baby boom generation enters their elderly years. During this period, the number of elderly will grow by an average of 2.8 percent annually. This is in contrast to the average annual growth rate of this age group of 1.3 percent over the past 20 years. Add to that the following facts that more elderly women are living alone (due to the life expectancy discrepancy between men and women), that the poverty rate increases with age, and that the elderly as a group are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse (a sign of relative transit dependence), and it becomes apparent that the need for



transit will likely increase over the next two decades for this segment of the population.

### State trends

As the nation ages, Kansas is expected to follow suit. Between 2010 and 2030, the elderly population will increase by 4 percent. Although the counties most impacted are Johnson and Miami (Figure 1), a fair number of rural counties are also expected to have substantial increases in their elderly populations. The counties expected to have an increase above 5 percent during this 20-year period include Butler, Douglas, Franklin, Harvey, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Leavenworth, Linn, Miami, Osage, Pottawatomie, and Sedgwick. While all of the urbanized counties already have public transit in place, this projection could be significant for rural counties such as Jackson and

Miami, where much more transit service may be required.

### Boomers’ and seniors’ travel behavior and attitudes toward transit

As the numbers increase, so are the expectations of those passengers. According to a survey conducted by Harris Interactive, 82 percent of baby boomers place a high importance on their mobility and worry about being stranded when they are unable to drive, or worry that, as they get older, they will be unable to get around altogether.

When questioned about public transit, four-in-five older adults agree that public transportation provides them with the mobility and freedom to do what they most want to do, with the same number agreeing that public transportation is a better alternative to driving alone, particularly at night. However, two-thirds of older Americans believe that their community needs to provide more transportation choices for older adults, such as easy-access buses and senior citizen mini-van services. Further, nearly half are unaware of public transportation services that serve senior citizens in their community. Consequently, nearly three-in-four report that they have never used public transportation services in their community, most living in small or rural areas.

However, there is an opportunity to increase usage. The Harris Interactive study found that nearly three fifths of older Americans would ride public transportation more often than they currently do if it were more readily available. In addition, there are a variety

of incentives that would increase transit usage, such as accessibility, comfort, and discounts at businesses near transit stops to name a few. (See sidebar above.) Clearly, the growing elderly population is interested in transit. Aside from providing incentives, what else can your agency do to attract this market?

### Meeting the need

According to Sandra Rosenbloom, director of the Drachman Institute and professor of planning at the University of Arizona, there are three primary long-term strategies your transit agency can adopt to improve elderly mobility:

- First, your agency should promote regionalization. Since most services—such as medical facilities or grocery stores—are located in larger communities, coordination at the regional level can dramatically enhance elderly mobility from more rural areas nearby that lack such amenities. Currently, this effort is being implemented by the Kansas Department of Transportation in pilot areas throughout Kansas.
- Second, your agency can target some of your public transit services directly to the elderly—increase the frequency of service in the middle of the day, educate drivers on how to provide assistance for disabled riders, locate routes that serve the origins and destinations of the elderly, purchase vehicles that are designed for the elderly, and market to that age group.
- Third, your transit agency can support alternative transportation options. Such options include ride-sharing, introducing voucher programs, and strengthening the role of for-profit transportation providers. By increasing the transportation choices of the elderly who reside outside your service area, mobility can be increased for those who need it the most.

### Conclusion

There will be a growing need for transit service by the elderly in the next 20 years. Statewide, a 4 percent increase in the elderly population by 2030 means transportation providers may need to increase/adjust service or be ready to promote alternative forms of transportation for this growing segment of society. You can go a step further by promoting regional coordination with other transit agencies. By implementing these strategies now, your agency will be well prepared for the upcoming “boom” in transit demand.

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### Source

- Harris Interactive. 2000. “The Attitudes of Older Americans Toward Mobility and Transportation.”