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# Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue



G A O

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# Further Steps Needed to Improve Cost-Effectiveness and Enhance Services for Transportation-Disadvantaged Persons

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## Why GAO Is Focusing on This Area

Millions of Americans are unable to provide their own transportation or have difficulty accessing public transportation. Individuals who are “transportation disadvantaged” may include people who are elderly, have disabilities, or low incomes. In 2003, GAO reported that eight federal departments had 62 programs providing transportation services to this population. At that time, GAO was unable to identify spending on transportation services for more than half of these programs. However, spending for 29 programs totaled more than \$2 billion in fiscal year 2001.

Following GAO’s recommendation to increase federal agency participation, a 2004 Executive Order expanded the existing Interagency Transportation Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility to include 10 federal agencies and charged it with promoting interagency cooperation and establishing mechanisms to minimize program duplication and overlap. A 2004 GAO report found that some federal agencies were developing guidance and technical assistance for transportation coordination as recommended by GAO, and the Coordinating Council had launched the “United We Ride” transportation coordination initiative. These actions notwithstanding, program overlap and fragmentation continue today.

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## What GAO Has Found to Indicate Duplication, Overlap, or Fragmentation

Agencies providing transportation services to transportation-disadvantaged persons often provide similar services to similar client groups, leading to potential duplication and service inefficiencies when coordination does not occur. Interagency forums for coordination at the federal, state, and local levels have expanded in recent years, but participation has varied among federal departments and program requirements have not been aligned to facilitate coordination. To improve cost-effectiveness and transportation services, federal departments should facilitate coordination by identifying and assessing programs, collecting information on expenditures, and developing or disseminating guidance and policies.

GAO and others have reported that the variety of federal programs providing transportation services to the transportation disadvantaged has resulted in fragmented services that can be difficult for clients to navigate and narrowly focused programs that may result in service gaps. Further, services can be costly because of inconsistent, duplicative, and often restrictive program rules and regulations.

**Further Steps Needed to Improve Cost-Effectiveness and Enhance Services for Transportation-Disadvantaged Persons**

- GAO identified 80 existing federal programs in eight departments that provided funding for transportation services for the transportation disadvantaged in fiscal year 2010 (see table).<sup>1</sup>
- Programs may provide bus tokens, transit passes, taxi vouchers, or mileage reimbursement, for example, to transportation-disadvantaged persons for trips to access government services (such as job-training programs), the grocery store, medical appointments, or for other purposes.

As in prior work, GAO could not determine the total amount spent, because agencies often do not separately track transportation costs from other program costs. However, GAO obtained fiscal year 2009 funding information for 23 programs, which spent an estimated total of \$1.7 billion on transportation services that year. Further, the Medicaid program in the Department of Health and Human Services spent \$704 million in fiscal year 2010—the first year for which such information was available.

**Number of Programs GAO Identified That Provide Transportation Services to Transportation-disadvantaged Persons, by Federal Department, as of October 2010**

Federal department	Number of programs identified
Agriculture	2
Education	11
Health and Human Services	30
Housing and Urban Development	11
Interior	7
Labor	9
Transportation	7
Veterans Affairs	3
<b>Total*</b>	<b>80</b>

Source: Federal departments and GAO analysis of the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (October 2010).

\*The Corporation for National and Community Service—an independent federal agency—also funds three programs that provide transportation services.

The Interagency Transportation Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility—the venue charged with promoting interagency coordination—

<sup>1</sup>Two new programs in the Departments of Agriculture and Housing and Urban Development have not yet awarded grants, but will have transportation as an eligible use of funds. These have not been included in the count of programs.

has developed an action plan and a policy statement to encourage and facilitate coordination, but action by federal departments—individually and in concert—will be necessary to better coordinate programs and eliminate duplication and fragmentation at the federal level. For example, because neither the Coordinating Council nor most federal departments have an inventory of existing programs providing transportation services or their expenditures, they lack the information to identify opportunities to improve the efficiency and service of their programs through coordination. Available information is outdated and incomplete. Additionally, departments have not aligned program requirements. For instance, a 2009 report by the National Resource Center for Human Service Transportation Coordination found that three federal departments providing transportation services—the departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education—had yet to coordinate their planning processes or requirements with the Department of Transportation.<sup>2</sup> GAO found that these steps still had not occurred as of the end of 2010. These departments account for 50 of the 80 existing programs identified.

With limited interagency coordination and direction at the federal level, the “United We Ride” initiative and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) have encouraged state and local coordination. For example, certain FTA transit programs require that projects selected for grant funding be derived from locally developed, coordinated public transit-human service transportation plans.<sup>3</sup> The National Conference of State Legislatures reported in 2010 that 25 states had created councils to improve coordination among state and local grantees.<sup>4</sup> Some states also have regional or local councils. These councils are generally responsible for identifying available transportation services, conducting needs assessments, and determining how gaps should be filled. However, participation by non-FTA grantees—which is optional—has varied, limiting these efforts.

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<sup>2</sup>See Report to the Secretary of Transportation, National Resource Center for Human Service Transportation Coordination (March 2009).

<sup>3</sup>See Formula grants for special needs of elderly individuals and individuals with disabilities, 49 U.S.C. § 5310(d)(2)(B); Job Access and Reverse Commute formula grants, 49 U.S.C. § 5316(g)(3); New Freedom Program, 49 U.S.C. § 5317(f)(3).

<sup>4</sup>National Conference of State Legislatures, State Human Service Transportation Coordinating Councils: An Overview and State Profiles (Denver, Colo., February 2010).

## Actions Needed and Potential Financial or Other Benefits

Federal coordination of transportation services can lead to economic benefits, such as funding flexibility, reduced costs or great efficiency, and increased productivity, as well as improved customer service and enhanced mobility, as GAO and others have reported. To realize these benefits, GAO now suggests departments undertake actions in two key areas to help identify opportunities to eliminate duplication and fragmentation and improve coordination:

- *Program information.* To reduce fragmentation, overlap, and duplication, federal departments on the Coordinating Council should identify and assess their transportation programs and related expenditures and work with other departments to identify potential opportunities for additional coordination such as the use of one-call centers, transportation brokerages, or shared resources, among other options. The Coordinating Council should develop the means for collecting and sharing this information by establishing agency roles and responsibilities and developing a strategy to reinforce cooperation.
- *Policies and guidance.* Federal departments also have more work to do in developing and disseminating policies and grantee guidance for coordinating transportation services. This is important because state and local grantees typically look to their administering departments for guidance on issues such as coordination. Some stakeholders indicated that policies for cost sharing among programs still need to be developed. Another noted that some coordination policies, such as vehicle sharing among service providers, could be better disseminated.

In 2003, GAO discussed three potential options to overcome obstacles to the coordination of transportation for the transportation disadvantaged, two of which would require substantial statutory or regulatory changes and include potential costs: making federal program standards more uniform or creating some type of requirement or financial incentive for coordination. As a result, at that time GAO recommended expanding the Coordinating Council and better disseminating guidance. Subsequently, the Coordinating Council was expanded and several coordination initiatives were launched, and progress has been made in coordination efforts, particularly at the state and local level. However, to assure that coordination benefits are realized, Congress may want to consider requiring key programs to participate in coordinated planning.

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## Framework for Analysis

GAO reviewed prior work listed below on the coordination of transportation services and the Job Access and Reverse Commute program. GAO interviewed department officials with the FTA and United We Ride and contacted the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, Justice, Labor, and Veterans Affairs. GAO also spoke with the National Resource Center for Human Service Transportation Coordination, the National Council on Disability, American Association of Retired Persons, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and Project ACTION, and reviewed relevant reports. Finally, GAO searched the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance for 2010 to confirm that programs identified in 2003 still exist and offer transportation services and to identify new programs funding these services. Program information was verified with department officials, who provided spending data.

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## Related GAO Products

*Federal Transit Administration: Progress and Challenges in Implementing and Evaluating the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program.* GAO-09-496. Washington, D.C.: May 21, 2009.

*Transportation Disadvantaged: Progress in Implementing the New Freedom Program Has Been Limited, and Better Monitoring Procedures Would Help Ensure Program Funds Are Used as Intended.* GAO-07-999R. Washington, D.C.: July 19, 2007.

*Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Actions Needed to Clarify Responsibilities and Increase Preparedness for Evacuations.* GAO-07-44. Washington, D.C.: December 22, 2006.

*Federal Transit Administration: Progress Made in Implementing Changes to the Job Access Program, but Evaluation and Oversight Processes Need Improvement.* GAO-07-43. Washington, D.C.: November 17, 2006.

*Disaster Preparedness: Preliminary Observations on the Evacuation of Vulnerable Populations due to Hurricanes and Other Disasters.* GAO-06-790T. Washington, D.C.: May 18, 2006.

*Transportation-Disadvantaged Seniors: Efforts to Enhance Senior Mobility Could Benefit from Additional Guidance and Information.* GAO-04-971. Washington, D.C.: August 30, 2004.

*Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Federal Agencies Are Taking Steps to Assist States and Local Agencies in Coordinating Transportation Services.* GAO-04-420R. Washington, D.C.: February 24, 2004.

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*Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Some Coordination Efforts Among Programs Providing Transportation Services, but Obstacles Persist.* GAO-03-697. Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2003.

*Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Many Federal Programs Fund Transportation Services, but Obstacles to Coordination Persist.* GAO-03-698T. Washington, D.C.: May 1, 2003.

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