



## **Listening & Storytelling for Inclusive Transit: Older Adults' Transportation Needs (AARP Virginia)**

In May 2025, M: PACT: LAB initiated a project with AARP-Virginia to collect and elevate the voices of older adults in Virginia's Region 10 to better understand their experiences, challenges, and needs related to local transportation. Mariia Zimmerman of MZ Strategies was the M: PACT project manager.

Region 10 includes the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa, and Nelson Counties. This effort was designed to humanize transit users and help older adults be more open to using transit, address challenges and barriers to older adults' use of transit options within Region 10 and to inform future outreach strategies to help overcome those barriers. Information gathered through this project may also be used to inform a future pilot transit project led by the Thomas Jefferson Planning Development Commission (TJPDC) to address a particular need or gap in service availability.

M: PACT and AARP-VA partnered with staff at the City of Charlottesville, TJPDC, Blue Ridge Health District, JAUNT and PATH/CAA to coordinate stakeholder outreach conducted primarily through individual interviews, focus groups, and information provided by JAUNT's recent rider survey.

Two focus groups were conducted in September 2025. The presentations, agendas and list of participants are archived in the shared Project folder managed by TJPDC. Each focus group consisted of 8-10 community members over the age of 55, many of whom experience some type of disability, and who provided gender and modest racial diversity. While the majority were at least occasional transit riders, some did not currently use transit, about a quarter of those taking transit use it more than 3 times a week and a few were new to taking transit in Region 10.

This memo provides a summary of key take-aways that emerged from outreach conducted, with a sampling of actual quotes provided. Information shared has been kept anonymous, and participants were compensated with a Food Lion gift card. PATH/CAA were responsible for coordinating consent forms. Attachment A provides a set of fictional "Rider Profiles" that was created with information shared during this process including examples and statements shared by interviewees.

Transit is incredibly important to this rapidly growing population. Many different types of disability exist. Ensuring that service, including information and processes for making reservations is accessible to people with a wide variety of disabilities is important. Within this generation, the majority have primarily relied on driving and so overcoming barriers to using transit, including negative perceptions and the lack of basic information about how to access and use transit, is especially important. PATH/CAA play an important role in the region to help increase awareness and comfort with transit use. Continued efforts to partner with social services, medical providers and others who engage frequently with this population are important. People may need a little extra help to understand how their need for transit can be met, or the steps required to meet eligibility requirements.

## Overall Takeaways from Older Adults' Transit Listening Sessions

Fifty-two percent of focus group participants gave regional transit a C grade, one-third (33%) gave it an A or B grade and 15% a D grade.

### What transit means to older adults

- Essential for independence, health, and daily needs, even among those who still drive
- Strong appreciation for compassionate drivers and dispatchers when service works well
- Broad support for having multiple service types (fixed-route, microtransit, paratransit)

### Biggest service gaps to fix first

- Hours and span: need evening, weekend, and true 7-day service on key routes; county return-trip cutoffs (around early afternoon) are especially harmful for medical access; CAT riders would like more frequent service in the urban areas.
- Frequency and reliability: hourly headways and missed connections deter use; on time performance matters for medical and work trips
- Coverage: gaps in growing areas and residential complexes; limited midday options on key corridors; some counties lack service entirely

### Demand-responsive and paratransit pain points (JAUNT and Micro CAT)

- JAUNT Reservations: long holds, dropped calls, scheduling errors, lack of immediate confirmation; difficulty booking same-day rides
- Professionalism and respect: reports of unprofessional call center behavior and inconsistent treatment by some MicroCAT drivers but strong praise for JAUNT drivers

- Accessibility: MicroCAT riders identified the need for more clear policies and driver training regarding the use and handling of mobility aids and the ability to request appropriate vehicle types (e.g., low-profile wheelchair-accessible vans)
- Return trip reliability: anxiety about getting home from medical appointments given limited afternoon service on JAUNT

#### Safety, access, and amenities

- Unsafe or poorly placed CAT stops on high-speed, multi-lane roads; need for safer crossings and better coordination (complete streets) to support all transit users
- Long walks to CAT stops are a barrier; regular stops at large apartments and community hubs requested, ideally for both sides of the road to enable safer access, which is especially important to older adults and those with disabilities
- Desire for shelters, seating, lighting, and restrooms near key hubs with priority on better/more shelters
- Unclear rules for rider parking/park-and-ride locations including whether it's allowable to park at adjacent commercial parking lots

#### Information and wayfinding

- Printed schedules and larger, more visible signage are needed for riders without smartphones
- On-bus aids: new-rider instructions, automated next-stop announcements, clearer stop names
- Real-time tools: text/app arrival info is valued but under-publicized

#### Equity and dignity

- Perception that commuter-focused services too often take priority over disabled riders' needs
- Reports of discriminatory or disrespectful experiences on microtransit undermine trust
- Emphasis that public services must serve all users equally and reliably

#### Destinations that matter most

- Medical care (hospitals, clinics, labs), pharmacies
- Essentials (grocery stores, food banks), Target
- Community and recreation (downtown, libraries, senior centers, YMCA)
- Employment and daycare/school trips
- Airport connections within on-demand zones

## Near-term priorities participants want agencies to act on

- Immediate focus should be on same-day on-demand service, better integration, and rider-facing tech that improves reliability and communication
- Extend hours, add weekend/7-day service, and improve mid-day frequency on key CAT routes
- Expand coverage to growth areas and major residential complexes; better city-county integration
- Modernize JAUNT reservation system: create online/app booking, enable shorter hold times, provide accurate ride confirmations and ride status notifications, and enable riders the ability to book weekly or re-occurring ride requests
- JAUNT riders would like to be able to make same-day schedule requests; if the Micro CAT pilot expands additional driver training and consistent policies for using/storing mobility aids is requested
- Upgrade CAT bus stop amenities; better signage and communication regarding parking options for those who park and ride
- Restore or add printed schedules; promote existing real-time tools; add on-bus announcements

## Fares and funding

- Strong support for fare-free service; some openness to low-cost/means-based fares to fund expansion and equity improvements

Bottom line: Older adults and those with disabilities want a reliable, dignified, and accessible system that prioritizes medical and essential trips, balances frequency with coverage, and fixes the reservations experience. Investments in longer hours of service, greater regional coverage, improved safety and visibility of stops, and modern rider info will deliver the biggest gains in independence and trust for this population.

## A sampling of participant quotes to underscore key themes

- “I’m a new resident and I’m investigating transportation because I’m considering the idea of aging in place instead of moving to a facility. Transportation is a big part of that because one day all of us will stop driving.”
- “Sometimes the trade off feels like it’s that nobody cares about disabled people, they just prioritize commuters to the exclusion of disabled people.”

- “As far as MicroCAT, my issue is that I have a mobility disability and on their app, they don’t have low profile vans and high profile vans. When you call to request a wheelchair van, they usually send a high profile van and not a low profile. I feel like they should have that ability to choose on the app.”
- “There was one MicroCAT driver that insisted that we put my spouse’s walker in the backseat of the van and she said that it wasn’t her job to do that. So, I ended up straining my back because I am also disabled. It’s hard to navigate the MicroCAT vans with mobility aids.”
- “I do like the JAUNT services except for there is no public transportation in Louisa. So if you’re working somewhere, you can get a ride to work through Jaunt but not home. It’s hard to keep a stable job. Sure, you can get a ride from a coworker, but I don’t like to rely on people like that. It would be helpful if Jaunt had extra hours, and I understand issues with labor and budget, but it would be helpful.”
- “Jaunt restricts when we can get service, so it can be really difficult to schedule doctors appointments. When we have surgeries or procedures at the main hospital at UVA, we have to be home by 1:15. There aren’t a lot of buses that work for our timing. It has been a real nightmare. We’ve had to book private vans for \$75-100 one way.”
- “The frequency of the buses means that if you miss one, you have to wait for an hour.”
- “I used to use the bus quite a bit. For some reason, CAT took the schedules off the bus stop signs, so they’re obviously aiming at young people with smartphones, which is very discriminatory to me.”
- “I love the people at Jaunt. I don’t have family in the area, but I have several families – one of those being Jaunt. They work with me beautifully.”
- “Sometimes I take the 8 o’clock bus and that driver, she’s so nice. I will get to my appointment 1.5 hours early. Everyone on Jaunt has been very, very friendly. The drivers do a good job. They can’t control when an appointment time is, but they sure do a good job of getting you on and off the bus. I’m in a wheelchair, so they have to tie you down and everything. So, it’s nice that they do a good job.”
- “I just moved to Charlottesville 3 months ago and had to stop driving before that due to my vision. I filled out the ADA form that you need to complete before using Jaunt. I am not sure if that applies to MicroCAT. My first and last experience was I called MicroCAT and they said they weren’t available. I got my ADA form back and called Jaunt and they said they weren’t available. So I then had to use Uber. I am not sure if

I am doing something wrong.”

- “My fiancé is in need of JAUNT. He works at UVA and has completed the documentation he thought was needed. But they returned the application saying it wasn't sufficient. We don't understand that.”
- “Sometimes, when you're calling near the end of the day and you're in the queue, sometimes the call drops or you're on hold for a long time. This makes it hard to schedule doctor's appointments where I can't confirm with the doctor if I can make it or not.”
- “There is no grocery store for those of us who live downtown, so we need transit to get us to where these stores are located.”
- “I'd love to have bus service to access fitness and recreational hubs on the weekends.”
- “I think free fares are great, I'm a new resident and I've been bragging to people about it.”

*NOTE: Nondisclosed recordings of the two focus groups were uploaded to the Mpact YouTube channel but are not publicly available. Participants were informed that information would be kept confidential. Contact Mpact if you would like to access recordings.*

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