

ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 4
November 2020



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Executive summary

As part of its 20-year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) sought to better understand how transportation affects and is affected by equity. MnDOT developed a pilot project to conduct community conversations with various groups, agencies, and organizations (hereafter referred to as “organizations”) working with and representing underserved communities in Minnesota.

Beginning in 2017, MnDOT launched district-specific efforts to engage communities through conversations to inform equitable transportation planning and practice. MnDOT coordinated in-person conversations between its staff and representatives from community organizations, first in District 2 in 2017, then in District 8 in 2018, and then in District 1, District 4, and District 6 in 2019. These community conversations help MnDOT develop a deeper understanding of the people who live in the different districts, determine which key communities MnDOT needs to learn more about, and identify organizations that work with and represent those key communities.

The conversations in District 4—and the other districts—included a wide range of topics selected to enhance MnDOT’s understanding of the role transportation plays in people’s lives and the opportunities or consequences people face based on available transportation modes. In addition to its continued work internally and with districts to implement changes based on the findings, MnDOT intends to share its District 4 findings with partners from this initiative to help inform their work.

Methods for the study

For the District 4 community conversations, MnDOT engaged in 31 conversations with representatives from 34 organizations with strong ties to key communities identified in a regional demographic analysis (54 organizations were contacted in total). MnDOT engaged with the following types of communities:

- Currently **underrepresented** in transportation decision-making processes
- Experiencing **known inequities** in transportation access or outcomes
- Facing **unique transportation needs** not well served by current approaches

Teams of two interviewers visited with the 34 organizations in person and asked questions using a semi-structured interview guide, where interviewers followed a common conversational structure but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

Themes and findings

Several themes emerged from the community conversations in District 4, including that transportation is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, health care, childcare, affordable housing, and recreation. Further, the available modes within the transportation system in District 4 both create and limit access to jobs, school, medical appointments, social services, shopping, and social events.

These themes are summarized below and discussed further in later sections of the report.



People and community connections

Participants in the conversations often highlighted how access to services and amenities affects the communities they represent and work with, such as people with low incomes, people of color, older adults, and people with disabilities.

- **People with low incomes:** Owning a private vehicle is expensive. Without a private vehicle, it is difficult to access jobs, grocery stores, pharmacies, medical appointments, and social and community activities. However, alternative options to owning a vehicle (e.g., public transit and ride-hailing services) are limited, especially outside of the larger cities in District 4.
- **Black, Indigenous, and people of color:** Participants expressed a lack of trust in government and talked about a lack of diverse representation in government and other local decision-making groups. Additionally, participants discussed language barriers as a transportation challenge for people whose primary language is not English.
- **Older adults:** Older adults may require transportation services to access medical needs, purchase goods, and to attend social activities. However, there are limited transportation options available providing curb-to-curb or door-to-door assistance to access the transit vehicles.
- **People with disabilities:** People with disabilities are among the communities transported the most often by transit providers. However, conversation participants described limited transportation options available with wheelchair access or other mobility accommodations.
- **Access to basic needs and services in rural areas:** Over three-quarters of the conversations included descriptions of the rural nature District 4 and how it affects people's ability to access basic needs and services such as employment and economic opportunities, health care, childcare, and affordable housing, grocery stores, and recreation.



Transportation and infrastructure barriers

Participants shared that the modes available within the transportation system create and limit opportunities for communities in District 4.

- **Private vehicles:** Private vehicles are the preferred or most critical method of transportation for the communities in District 4. Certain community members such as people with low incomes or new immigrants may not own a personal vehicle or have a driver's license so they rely on taxi services and friends and families for rides.
- **Public transit:** Public transit is an important but limited transportation option for older adults, low-income residents, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people without private vehicles. Barriers to using public transit include limited hours of operation, infrequent service, long wait and travel times, and the cost of using transit services.
- **Walking and bicycling:** Walking and bicycling may be critical methods of transportation for certain community members during warmer months, but these are often limited to locations with bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure including connected sidewalks, trail systems, and bicycle programs.
- **Other transportation modes:** Other modes of transportation, including volunteer drivers, formal and informal ride-sharing, ride-hailing, medical transportation services, and veterans' services fill critical gaps for accessing locations when available.



Public engagement limitations

Most commonly, participants said information and opportunities to provide input are not shared directly with organizations or community members. Additionally, frequently used methods of engagement may not be meeting the needs of communities such as immigrants, veterans, and older adults. Participants in several conversations said they would feel more informed if they were directly engaged (e.g., face-to-face, throughout a project's lifecycle) and communications were:

- Offered to communities through formats they are most likely to use (e.g., holding meetings where communities already gather)
- Accessible and meaningful (e.g., using plain language, providing translations, stating the impact on the community)
- Centralized (e.g., through a centralized information hub, or automated alert system)



Equity impacts

When asked what equity means to their organizations, more than half of participants discussed equity in terms of equality of access and equality of opportunities. Other equity definitions shared by participants included a lack of bias, treating everyone as equals, a focus on the highest-need groups, equitable access to the decision-making process, and matching services and resources with needs. A few participants defined equity specifically as the equal provision of services or equal share of resources.

Participants described the importance of transportation in equitable access to employment and job opportunities, critical services such as medical care, and other community amenities. Additionally, a lack of investment in transportation can have a disproportionately negative impact on specific communities, including on people with physical disabilities, people with low incomes, people who do not drive, and people who rely on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

Conversations also highlighted specific opportunities for MnDOT and its partners to advance equity in transportation, including the following suggestions to increase:

- Coordination with human service providers
- Access and funding for public transit
- Access to private vehicle transportation
- Focus on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure
- Coordination with local governments and transportation partners

Recommendations

The District 4 management team, District 4 staff, and staff from the MnDOT Central Office reviewed these findings from the community conversations and developed potential strategies to address challenges and

advance equity. Results from the review and observations from MAD consultants resulted in the following recommendations for MnDOT:

- 1. MnDOT should work with transit providers, local government planning departments, and transit partners including Regional Transit Coordinating Councils to expand transit services and improve coordination in District 4.**
- 2. District 4 should update its district public engagement strategies based on the equity conversation findings.**
- 3. MnDOT should collaborate with local partners to address key communities' walking and bicycling needs.**
- 4. MnDOT should coordinate with local partners during their planning processes to address land use and economic development needs.**
- 5. MnDOT should continue to measure the impacts of its efforts to increase transportation equity.**
- 6. MnDOT should continue to establish and build relationships with groups, agencies, and organizations not traditionally engaged in transportation conversations**

These recommendations are discussed in more detail beginning on page 44 of this report.

Origins of the equity effort

In January 2017, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) released its updated, 20-year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan (SMTP).¹ During the process of updating the plan, MnDOT sought input from stakeholders and the public about what to include in the plan. Participants in those conversations said MnDOT needs to advance equity, citing a range of disparities related to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical abilities. In response, MnDOT listed two activities to advance equity in its SMTP 2017–2020 Work Plan:

- Study how transportation affects equity and identify transportation strategies and approaches that will meaningfully reduce disparities
- Pilot tools and strategies to better incorporate equity into project-level decision-making

To help advance equity in work planning, MnDOT chose to conduct community conversations designed to provide a qualitative, experienced-based perspective of how transportation affects equity. MnDOT coordinated in-person conversations between its staff and representatives with community organizations, first in District 2 in 2017 and then in District 8 in 2018. In 2019, the conversations continued in District 1, District 4, and District 6. These community conversations have gathered information about equity concerns from a variety of groups and organizations, built relationships for MnDOT, and provided a pathway for continued engagement and initiatives to address equity issues.

MnDOT contracted with Management Analysis and Development (MAD)² for assistance with these community conversations, specifically to:

- Build MnDOT’s capacity to conduct conversations
- Coordinate in-person conversations with organizations that serve communities in MnDOT’s District 4
- Analyze the data gathered from conversations
- Report interview findings and recommendations

Methodology

The project consisted primarily of in-depth interviews with groups, agencies, organizations, and businesses—all collectively referred to in this report as “organizations”—that work with and represent key communities of interest for the District 4 Community Conversations.

The main purposes of the interviews were to:

- Better understand the organizations’ perspectives about how the transportation system, services, and decision-making processes help or hinder the lives of people in West Central Minnesota

¹ Minnesota Department of Transportation, “Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan,” January 2017, <http://www.minnesotago.org/final-plans/sntp-final-plan>.

² MAD is the State of Minnesota’s in-house that provides neutral, third-party management consultant services to public sector agencies. For more information, please visit <http://www.mn.gov/mmb/mad>.

- Build relationships with organizations whose work aligns, directly or indirectly, with equity and transportation
- Identify actions to address transportation inequities

Identifying key communities

MnDOT conducted an analysis of the 12 counties in District 4, examining the current demographics and trends in the district and focusing on populations with known inequities.³ MnDOT used the analysis to further identify and prioritize key communities to include in this equity project.⁴ Communities include those:

- Currently underrepresented in transportation decision-making processes
- Experiencing known inequities in transportation access or outcomes
- With unique transportation needs not well served by current and usual approaches

MnDOT District 4 staff, Central Office staff, and other partners identified potential organizations to serve as interviewees. The organizations MnDOT selected all work with and represent the project's key communities. MnDOT identified additional organizations by asking interview participants for suggestions of others to interview.

MAD contacted the organizations by phone and email, asked them to participate in the project, and scheduled interviews. Interviews were conducted from August 2019 through November 2019.

Interview teams

All MnDOT interview teams included at least two people. The teams visited the organizations in person and asked questions using the semi-structured interview guide described in the section below on data collection and analysis. Depending upon the specific interviews, the interview teams included combinations of District 4 staff; Central Office staff from the Office of Transportation System Management (OTSM), the Office of Active Transit and Transportation (OTAT), and the Office of Communications and Public Engagement; and consultants from MAD. Most involved two interviewers from District 4.

In July 2019, MAD conducted an interview training session for participating MnDOT staff. Nearly all the staff participated in person, and a few others were trained by phone. The training goals included:

- Explaining the purpose and process for the interviews
- Providing qualitative research instructions, including note-taking guidelines
- Distributing project and interview materials
- Practicing interviewing
- Explaining the interview scheduling process

³ See Appendix C on page 45.

⁴ See Appendix D on page 55.

Data collection and analysis

MnDOT and MAD developed a semi-structured interview guide,⁵ meaning interviewers followed the guide but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

Interview topics included:

- Experiences in traveling for day-to-day activities, such as work, school, medical appointments, social and recreational activities, shopping for goods and services, and accessing social services
- Barriers and facilitators relevant to transportation that affect community members' ability to meet their needs
- Transportation safety concerns for the communities
- Opportunities and challenges for the communities when engaging with government
- Perspectives of the organizations on both equity and how transportation can advance equity

MAD collected the interview notes and conducted preliminary analysis to identify potential themes. When categorizing the notes, MAD used a first stage of coding to test the themes from its preliminary analysis and then added new codes as additional themes arose organically from the full set of interview notes.⁶ MAD confirmed the accuracy of both preliminary and organic themes by monitoring how many times an interviewee made comments that fit in a theme and in how many interviews the topic came up. MAD then reviewed and recoded the data as necessary to ensure consistency in coding for the main themes and additional subcodes, which also emerged organically. MAD used these themes and their subcodes to develop findings.

Implementation meetings

The District 4 management team, District 4 staff, and Central Office staff participated in a virtual implementation meeting on June 2, 2020, to review the study's findings. Prior to the meeting, MAD invited meeting attendees from District 4 and Central Office to complete a survey that asked respondents to select which findings are within the agency's sphere of influence. The meeting participants generated potential solutions in small groups, and then the larger group voted on which of these solutions should be the highest priorities for the agency.⁷

Participants from the June 2, 2020 session met again on July 7, 2020 to validate recommendations from this report, align the recommendations with ongoing MnDOT plans and initiatives, and further assess the opportunity for realistic action. On July 21, 2020, the group reconvened to develop action items that advance the recommendations, identifying who at MnDOT should take what steps and when to advance the recommendations. MAD consultants created an action plan document summarizing the information for District 4.

⁵ See Appendix E on page 61.

⁶ MAD analysts coded data according to theme. If data could not reasonably fit a theme, analysts coded it as miscellaneous or created a new code to fit the new theme.

⁷ See the recommendations section on page 42. For the full list of ideas participants suggested during Implementation Meeting 1, refer to Appendix F on page 68.

Organizations interviewed

Response rate

MnDOT invited 54 organizations to participate in a conversation and 34 agreed, for a response rate of 63 percent. Of the 20 organizations that were not interviewed, 17 did not respond to interview requests during the data collection period and 3 declined the invitation.

Types of organizations

Table 1 lists the types of organizations interviewed. Most organizations interviewed were nonprofit organizations.

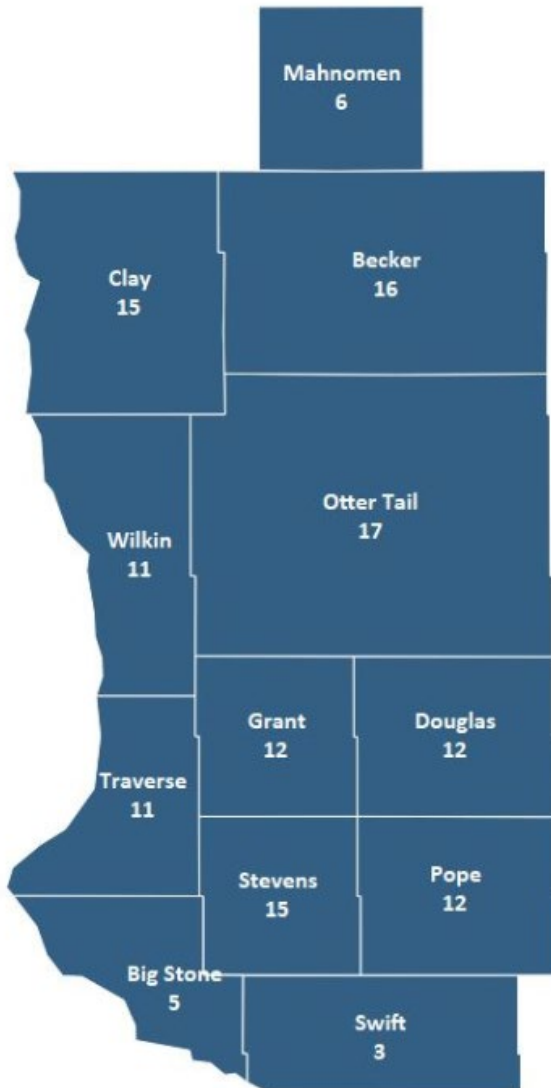
Table 1. Types of organizations participating in the conversations

Organization type	Number interviewed
Nonprofit	18
Local government	8
Public schools	4
Transit agency	3
Higher education	1
Total	34

Counties represented

Figure 1 counts how many of the 34 organizations interviewed have a presence in each of the 12 counties in District 4. Most organizations interviewed worked with or represented key communities in several counties, so the counts by county in Figure 1 exceed the total of 34 for organizations interviewed. The counties served by the most organizations were Otter Tail (17), followed by Becker (16), Clay and Stevens (both at 15), and Grant and Pope (both at 12).

Figure 1. Number of organizations interviewed based on the District 4 counties where they are active



Key communities represented

Figure 2 illustrates the key communities and the number of the interviewed organizations that represent or served them. Key communities are groups that are:

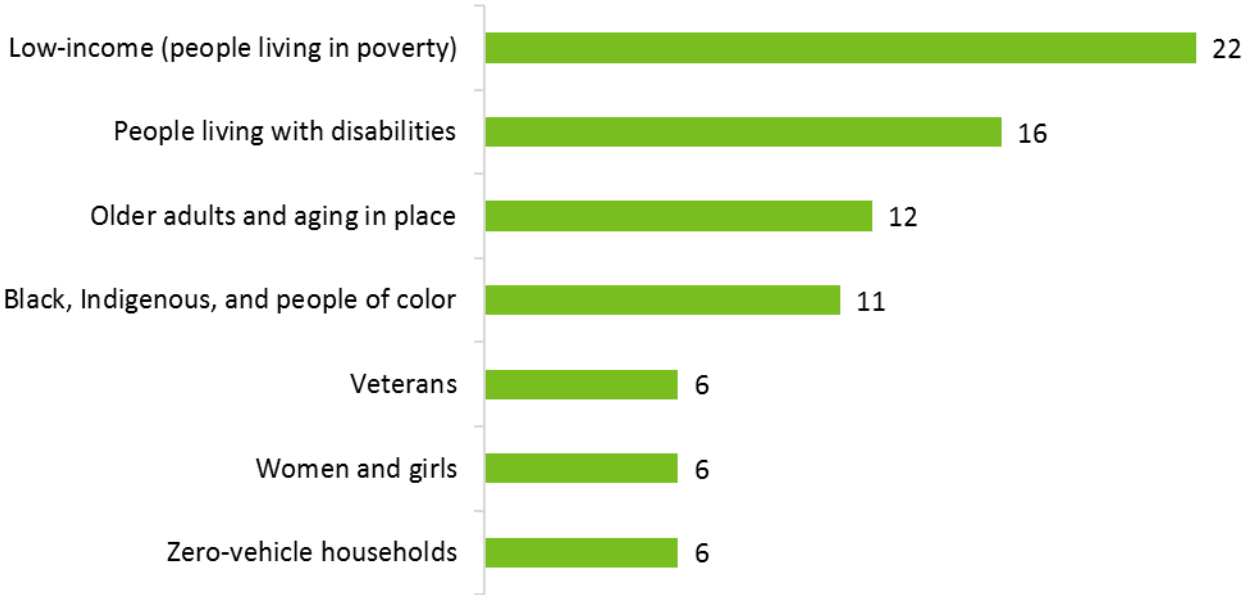
- Currently underrepresented in transportation decision-making processes
- Experiencing known inequities in transportation access or outcomes
- Facing unique transportation needs not well served by current and usual approaches

Key communities are not mutually exclusive. A person can belong to one or many of the key communities identified.

All of the key communities identified at the onset of the initiative were represented by at least one of the interviewed organizations. Many of the organizations worked with more than one key community, so the

number of organizations in Figure 2 exceeds the number of organizations interviewed. Organizations serving and made up of people with low incomes; people with disabilities; older adults; and Black, Indigenous, and people of color were highly represented, followed by organizations serving veterans, women and girls, and zero-vehicle households.

Figure 2. Number of organizations interviewed based on the key communities they serve



Note: Counts by key communities exceed the total of 34 organizations interviewed because many of the organizations serve more than one community.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the community conversations in District 4, including that transportation is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, health care, childcare, affordable housing, and recreation. Further, while transportation provides access to jobs, school, medical appointments, social services, shopping, and social events, the available modes within the transportation system create and limit opportunities for communities in District 4.

This section describes the findings from the community conversations. Information is organized into four categories:

- **People and communities** highlights how transportation interacts with many other factors of life, including where people live, where they work, and their income, race, ethnicity, age, and abilities.
- **Transportation and infrastructure** looks at the modes available within the transportation system and how those modes create or limit opportunities.
- **Public engagement** focuses on how government can interact with Minnesotans to create a more equitable transportation system.

- **Equity** provides perspectives on equity from conversations—how to define equity, how it relates to transportation, and strategies interviewees suggested to improve equity.

Because many topics from the community conversations are interrelated, they may appear in more than one findings area.

How to interpret the findings

Some discussions were with one individual associated with one organization, while other discussions included people from multiple organizations or people from one organization but serving multiple roles. In order to be clear and accurate, analysts used the following terms:

- **Participant** refers to an individual.
- **Organization** refers to a specific organization.
- **Conversation** is a general term used to describe the interviews.

In addition to using proportions such as one-fourth or two-thirds, this report uses the terms below to describe how many participants, organizations, or conversations mentioned a topic:

- **A few** is generally two or three.
- **Several** is generally more than a few, but less than one-fourth.
- **Most** is more than half, but less than three-quarters.
- **A large majority** is more than three-quarters, but less than 90 percent.
- **Nearly all** is greater than 90 percent.

People and communities

District 4, located in the west central section of the state, comprises twelve counties: Becker, Big Stone, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Mahnommen, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Traverse, and Wilkin. Less than 5 percent of Minnesota’s total population resides in the district, with about one-quarter of the district’s population located in Clay County (62,040 people). Five cities have more than 5,000 people residing in each, with Moorhead (located in Clay County) being the largest city by population with 43,440 people. Moorhead and Clay County constitute a significant part of the federally designated Fargo Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), home to an estimated 232,660 residents on both sides of the Minnesota-North Dakota border.⁸ Fergus Falls (located in Otter Tail County) is the next largest city with 13,754 people.⁹

Participants in the conversations often highlighted how access to services and amenities affects communities they represent such as people with low incomes, older adults, people with disabilities, and people identifying as Black, Indigenous, and people of color. According to participants, because the district is mostly rural, travel and access to these services is more difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Another common theme across the

⁸ Based on 2017 US Census estimates using 2013–2017 American Community Survey five-year data.

⁹ For more information on key demographic factors in the district see Demographic Analysis in Appendix C on page 51.

conversations was that transportation in District 4 is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, health care, childcare, affordable housing, and recreation. The following sections highlight the topics most often discussed in the community conversations.

“Transportation, childcare, housing, and jobs are all related. You can’t solve one thing independently.”

People with low incomes

“In poverty, you can’t always plan ahead. There isn’t really advertising. There is nothing that says this is how to get here to there. How do I know? I was helping a parent and I couldn’t find the transit number. In general, people hodgepodge and make do.”

In District 4, the average median household income is \$54,797 (in 2017 inflation-adjusted dollars), which is lower than the statewide median household income of \$65,699. Clay County has the highest median household income (\$61,409) while Big Stone County has the lowest (\$48,299). About 11 percent of people in District 4 live below the federal poverty level, with the highest proportion of people in poverty living in Mahnomon County (10 percent). Mahnomon County also overlaps with the White Earth Nation. Median household incomes also vary by race or ethnicity with Black or African American households reporting the lowest (\$16,007) and white households reporting the highest (\$58,471). American Indian and Hispanic or Latinx households also reported lower household incomes compared with the rest of the district.¹⁰

Over half of the conversations discussed challenges people with low incomes encounter. A few participants cited the limited social services available and how difficult it is to afford basic amenities. Most frequently, however, participants discussed the high cost of owning a private vehicle and the barriers associated with not owning one. Without a private vehicle, several participants said, not only is getting to a job more complicated, but also getting to grocery stores, pharmacies, medical appointments, and social and community activities. Participants in these conversations discussed how the alternative transportation options such as public transit and ride-hailing services are lacking, especially for those who do not reside in the larger cities in District 4 such as Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, or Moorhead. Specific challenges discussed for people with low incomes include:

- The cost to use transportation services
- Limited service areas and operating hours
- Lack of availability or high cost of intercity and regional travel to reach necessary services
- Difficulty traveling with small children

Not having access to a private vehicle or being unable to afford other transit options increases a person’s reliance on family and friends for all transportation needs.

Black, Indigenous, and people of color

According to 2017 US Census five-year estimates, since 2000 there has been a 47 percent increase in people identifying as Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific

¹⁰ For more information about economic development in West Central Minnesota, go to https://mn.gov/deed/assets/rp_region4_2019_tcm1045-133254.pdf.

Islander, or two or more races (compared to a statewide increase of 72 percent). The racial group that increased the most was Black or African American residents, rising 222 percent, and the number of residents who identify with two or more races increased by 73 percent.

Nearly 7 percent of the District 4 population are Black, Indigenous, or people of color. American Indians account for the largest group (3 percent of the total population) followed by Black or African American residents (1 percent of the total population). Because it overlaps with the White Earth Nation, Mahnomen County has the largest proportion of American Indians in District 4, at 43 percent. Becker County has the second largest proportion, at 8 percent. Additionally, 3 percent of District 4's population identifies as Hispanic or Latinx, with Stevens and Swift Counties having the largest proportions (both at about 5 percent).

Participants in nearly half the conversations discussed challenges by people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color, especially for immigrants and new Americans whose primary language is not English. Most often, participants said language barriers are a challenge in using transportation services—either in understanding written transit routes and schedules or communicating with the transit dispatchers to schedule a ride. In a few conversations, participants talked about a lack of diversity on available public transit and said immigrants may not feel comfortable using it either because they do not see others who look like them or they do not feel welcome. When asked about safety concerns regarding transportation, one organization that works with immigrant communities said, “New Americans who have been surveyed said they don’t feel comfortable riding the bus. They feel discriminated against.”

Other challenges mentioned include lack of affordable housing near schools and grocery stores, difficulty accessing community and human services, lack of trust in government and a lack of diverse representation, and racial tension and discrimination.

In several conversations, participants from organizations working directly with immigrant communities described their efforts to address challenges. One organization said they are seeking funding to provide transportation services to new Americans and refugees while another provides welcome packages to new immigrant families and offers community tours. Other examples shared included:

- Using driver education manuals to teach English
- Translating transportation and other public information materials
- Direct case worker intervention to coordinate and connect people to resources

“Some cultures are sensitive to coming forward with their needs and want privacy. Sometimes awareness must be done through family members.”

Older adults

The proportion of people age 65 and older in District 4 is 19 percent, which is higher than the statewide proportion of 14 percent. According to the Minnesota State Demographic Center, older adults (i.e., ages 50 and

above) comprise 44 percent of rural Minnesotans, compared with 32 percent of urban Minnesotans.^{11 12} Additionally, the proportion of people 75 and older in the district is projected to increase 41 percent over the next ten years.¹³ The statewide trend is similar.

About one-quarter of the conversations discussed mobility challenges for older adults in the region and how critical transportation infrastructure affects their ability to access basic needs and services. Most of the participants noted older adults require transportation service to access medical needs, purchase goods, and attend social activities. For older adults who need curb-to-curb or even door-to-door assistance to access the transit vehicles, options can be limited. A few also talked about the cost of transportation for older adults who are living on fixed incomes. According to the Minnesota Housing Partnership, the West Central Minnesota region contains the second-highest percentage of senior renters (people ages 65 and older) after the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and 56 percent of the senior renters spend more than 30 percent of their incomes on housing.¹⁴

“Older adults with health issues can’t always make the transit schedule work to arrive at their appointments. They often must rely on a caregiver to buy food, refill prescriptions, attend religious and social events, and attend medical appointments.”

People with disabilities

Participants in one-quarter of the conversations discussed transportation challenges for people with disabilities. About 13 percent of residents in District 4 have a disability, which is slightly higher than the statewide proportion of 11 percent.¹⁵ The regional transit organizations that participated in the conversations said people with disabilities are among the communities they transport the most often. According to a few participants, this is because there are limited transportation options available if a person is in a wheelchair or has other mobility challenges preventing them from using a private vehicle.

Options other than private vehicles available in District 4 can include volunteer drivers, medical transportation services, and veterans services rides, but those options may not be licensed or physically able to transport people who use wheelchairs or electric mobility scooters. The Disabled American Veterans of Minnesota (DAV

¹¹ For more information, see “Greater Minnesota: Refined and Revisited.” Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2017. https://mn.gov/admin/assets/greater-mn-refined-and-revisited-msdc-jan2017_tcm36-273216.pdf.

¹² To define rural and urban settings, the State Demographer’s report used an assignment scheme known as Rural Urban Commuting Areas (RUCAs) to classify census tracts based on population size, density, and daily commuting. For more details, see pages 6–12 of the State Demographer’s report.

¹³ Projections calculated by the Minnesota State Demographic Center: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/labor-force/>

¹⁴ “State of the State’s Housing 2019,” Gabriel Norton, Minnesota Housing Partnership, 2019. For more information, go to the full report: http://www.mhponline.org/images/stories/images/research/SOTS-2019/2019FullSOTSPrint_Final.pdf.

¹⁵ The American Community Survey asks respondents to answer questions covering six disability types: hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, cognitive difficulty, ambulatory difficulty, self-care difficulty, and independent living difficulty. Respondents who report any one of the six disability types are considered to have a disability. See more at <https://www.census.gov/topics/health/disability/guidance/data-collection-ac.html>.

MN), for example, provides veterans in District 4 and around the state with free transportation to federal Veterans Health Administration facilities. DAV MN operates 34 vehicles in 20 communities throughout the state.¹⁶ However, according to the participant in the DAV MN conversation, their driver guidelines do not allow drivers to transport veterans who use wheelchairs or electric mobility scooters because they are volunteers. One participating county veteran services office described similar limitations to the van transportation they provide. One transit provider said people with disabilities use their services the most “because a van for a disabled person is a lot of money and that money is needed elsewhere in their budgets.” The transit providers MnDOT spoke with do offer free or reduced fares for people with disabilities. The transit provider for the Fargo-Moorhead area (i.e., MAT Bus), for example, offers free rides to disabled veterans. However, few have door-to-door services and instead provide curb-to-curb service, meaning a person with a disability must first get to a pickup location.

Other transportation challenges highlighted by participants include:

- Lack of curbside assistance to access transit vehicles
- Mobility limitations due to lack of snow removal and sidewalk accessibility concerns
- Lack of intersections with a stoplight, pedestrian signals, or audible signals

Access to basic needs and services in rural areas

With 246,629 people, less than 5 percent of Minnesota’s population lives in District 4. According to the Minnesota State Demographic Center, most of the district’s twelve counties are entirely rural or a mix of small towns and rural areas.¹⁷ Over three-quarters of the conversations included descriptions of the rural nature of the district and how it affects people’s ability to access basic needs and services such as employment and economic opportunities, health care, childcare, and affordable housing, grocery stores, and recreation.

“Opportunities for recreation, improved quality of life, and education are advanced with good transportation options. The entire community benefits if we can get people to jobs and education and opportunities to be healthy.”

Employment and economic development

Over three-quarters of the participants discussed the relationship between transportation and access to employment and economic development, including land use.

In District 4, 64 percent of the working-age population 16 years and older are in the labor force (the statewide rate is 70 percent). While Clay County has the highest labor force participation rate (71 percent), Otter Tail County is the largest employment center in the region, according to the Minnesota Department of Employment

¹⁶ For more on transportation services from the Disabled Veterans of Minnesota, see <https://davmn.org/transportation/>.

¹⁷ For more information, see “Greater Minnesota: Refined and Revisited.” Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2017. https://mn.gov/admin/assets/greater-mn-refined-and-revisited-msdc-jan2017_tcm36-273216.pdf

and Economic Development (DEED).¹⁸ The unemployment rate for the district as a whole has tracked closely to the statewide rate, but it varies more comparing by race. The unemployment rates have been more than three times higher for people who identify as black or African American or American Indian or Alaskan Native compared with people who identify as white only and other BIPOC racial groups.¹⁹

Also according to DEED, the region has more workers than available jobs, meaning more people must travel to other regions in Minnesota or across the North Dakota border to find employment. For Clay County residents who are employed, nearly half (49 percent) work primarily in Fargo, North Dakota. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) work primarily in Moorhead.²⁰

While the size of the workforce has increased since 2013, the district's labor force participation rate has decreased slightly over the last several years, and over the next ten years it is projected to continue to decline by 1 percent.²¹ The 55 to 64 age group is projected to decline the most (27 percent), while the 75 and older age group is projected to have the largest increase (41 percent).

In over one-third of the conversations, participants talked about the challenges related to employment in West Central Minnesota. Most frequently, participants discussed the limited transportation options people have for getting to jobs, especially those who work during the evenings or late at night at second- or third-shift jobs (for more information, go to the Public transit section on page 26). Because most transit options have limited service routes and operate during weekday business hours, District 4 workers may not be able to get to jobs outside of those hours without access to a private vehicle. One participant noted that "it's difficult to work the second shift because the buses have stopped running." Another participant added, "Some folks can only go one way and depend on family or a coworker to get back." Additionally, several participants described how the shift jobs at production and manufacturing facilities tend to be farther away from the regional city centers and available housing where more transit options exist. In a few conversations, participants noted that new or expanded public transportation options within and between communities would increase access to employment opportunities and promote job mobility for more people.

When asked about challenges community members face, several participants discussed the lack of jobs paying livable wages in the region, which may mean people have to travel much farther to find opportunities. A few added that the low-wage jobs and lack of available jobs contribute to the poverty and homelessness they observe among the communities they work with. According to one participant, "Trying to get people to higher-paying jobs is an ongoing challenge." Another said that "earning a living wage would help and then [the community members] could do whatever they want."

Related to the lack of job opportunities, a few participants discussed the loss of local grocery stores and other shopping amenities outside of regional centers such as Moorhead, Detroit Lakes, and Fergus Falls in the northern part of the district and Morris and Alexandria in the south. According to participants in a few conversations, however, the relatively large towns of Morris and Alexandria have also been losing amenities. An

¹⁸ For more information about economic development in West Central Minnesota, go to https://mn.gov/deed/assets/rp_region4_2019_tcm1045-133254.pdf.

¹⁹ Based on 2013–2017 America Community Survey five-year estimates

²⁰ Based on 2015 U.S. Census estimates for primary job locations.

²¹ Minnesota State Demographer's Office: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/labor-force/>

organization in Morris said since the local Skopko closed, “There are also not a lot of options for clothes shopping in town other than second-hand stores and we need to go online to buy clothes.” As a result, people who live in the more rural areas and smaller towns in District 4 must travel farther to find options.

“There is a food desert²² in the area and food costs are higher. If [people] cannot not eat healthy, they are eating convenience store foods.”

In over one-third of conversations, participants discussed how land use planning creates challenges for those with limited transportation options, depending on the services needed and how cities or towns have been laid out. For example, newer buildings such as schools and hospitals are being built on the outer edges of communities and farther away from affordable housing available for people with limited incomes and transportation options. According to one participant, “It’s a challenge for those who have low incomes or people with disability that do not drive. It’s very difficult for them to get where they need to go. The way we’ve built our communities makes it difficult.” Other land use challenges discussed by several participants included:

- Areas of cities and towns that lack contiguous sidewalks (i.e., sidewalks that do not connect to destinations or that stop abruptly) (For more information, go to the Walking section on page 32.)
- The difficulty of getting into and out of downtown areas without a private vehicle
- Major roads or train tracks that separate communities from services and amenities

“In general, within the region, downtown-type locations are fairly easy for people to get around. It’s plenty easy to drive, walk, bike, use transit services in those downtown locations. When you get outside of those areas, the further out you go the less true that is.”

Medical and human services

The ability to get to medical care appointments and other health and human services²³ is a primary reason people need reliable transportation. In just over two-thirds of conversations, participants discussed access to these services, and nearly all of those participants described the difficulties people in District 4 face in just getting to appointments.

“It takes so much to access any service.”

Without a private vehicle or the ability to ride with family and friends, the distances many people in the district must travel become even greater barriers. Participants discussed community members who travel to larger communities such as Bemidji, Fargo, St. Cloud, and the Twin Cities metropolitan area to receive specialty care. Participants said people frequently rely on a range of providers: special medical transportation, public transportation agencies, volunteer driver programs, specialized service programs, and emergency medical transportation providers. For medical transportation and other eligibility-based ride services, however, several

²² According to the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services (ERS), food deserts are neighborhoods that lack have health food sources such as “supermarkets, supercenters, grocery stores, or other sources of healthy and affordable food.” For more information about food deserts, go to the Economic Research Services website: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>.

²³ “Human services” refers to services and resources available for people in order to meet their needs such as treatments, counseling, and social services.

participants noted eligibility and reimbursement challenges. Other challenges described by participants included:

- Inaccessible vehicles (e.g., inability to transport people in wheelchairs)
- Providing only curb-to-curb assistance (e.g., services are unable to assist people with disabilities or older adults in getting from their home into the vehicle)
- Coordinating transportation between multiple providers

“Because we cover such a large geographical area, and specialty services aren’t available everywhere, getting people from point A to point B is hard, especially when we need to get them to their specialist. There are many hoops to jump through to get funding for special transportation.”

Participants in several conversations talked about people missing medical appointments or delaying care because they cannot get to the provider. According to a conversation with one health care service, “A lot of those patients do not have the ability to get there or it is too far or costly...There are a lot of no-shows for appointments due to rides.” A few participants said if a patient misses an appointment, they may not be able to reschedule with certain providers and are then forced to make appointments with a provider farther away.

A few participants talked about the transportation challenges victims of domestic violence or sexual assault face both when fleeing a crisis and trying to regain their independence in the aftermath. One organization that works with women in crisis said they have vans to provide transportation to medical appointments and job interviews on a limited basis, but if the women do not have a car or a driver’s license, they are often “limited by how far they can walk.” The participants added that mobility is complicated further by limited availability of public transit in some areas and if the individuals have young children.

“There are a lot of people who live in the country, not even in a town. Our clients are isolated sometimes in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes it is just a little farm.”

In a few conversations, participants who work with people dealing with mental health issues discussed several challenges. They described a range of situations: the effort necessary to schedule transportation to specialty appointments, people who already suffer from anxiety needing to spend multiple hours on public transit to get to a destination, and in extreme cases, people with behavioral issues who were banned from public transit.

“If people have medical concerns and wake up and have a fever, they can’t call on the back of the card since you have to provide notice. So emergency [or] same day [travel] is a challenge. We have people who literally call the ambulance because they can’t get there any other way. They need help to get from door to door.”

In a few conversations, participants shared various strategies aimed at addressing these challenges, including car donation programs, subsidizing transit costs, and training on how to use the bus services. MAT Bus in Fargo-Moorhead, for example, trains Clay County staff on how to use the transit system so they can then train their clients.

Childcare

Challenges related to childcare were talked about in half of the conversations. Most frequently, participants discussed the challenges people experience getting their children to and from care providers, especially when

relying on public transit. They described challenges related to scheduling multiple rides to multiple destinations over the course of a day, the cost of fares for children, and the limited hours and schedules of public transit, which reduces the opportunities for parents and children to participate in after-school activities. A few transit providers discussed how they have been transporting more children to school and daycare. To better meet demand and ensure safety of the riders, one provider said they try to schedule specific children-only rides.

Several participants also talked about the challenges of finding affordable childcare in parts of District 4 because there are limited providers available. A few noted that families must travel outside of their communities for affordable options.

Housing

Nearly half of the conversations involved discussions about the cost of housing and the need for increased access to affordable housing. According to the Housing and Transportation (H+T) Affordability Index, residents in ten of the twelve District 4 counties spend at least half of their household incomes on housing and transportation combined, with Mahnomon County residents spending the largest proportions (62 percent of income) and Wilkin County residents spending the smallest (48 percent of income).²⁴ Additionally, three of the district's counties were in the top ten counties experiencing the biggest changes between rent and income from 2000 and 2017, meaning rental costs increased while renter income decreased: Big Stone County ranked first (66 percent change), Mahnomon County ranked seventh (37 percent change), and Stevens County ranked ninth (36 percent change).²⁵

“For those families or individuals looking for housing, they often can’t find housing where there is transit and transit doesn’t go to the places with housing they can afford or will otherwise work for them.”

When discussing housing, participants most often talked about the challenge of finding affordable housing that is close to services and amenities and accessible by public transit. A few participants specifically cited more-urban locations including Alexandria, Detroit Lakes, and Moorhead as cities where increased living costs and low renter occupancy rates have pushed low-income families into more-rural areas where there are limited or no transit options. Consequently, a few participants cited homelessness as a major issue for certain communities. In several conversations, participants connected high housing costs in the more-urban locations to other challenges experienced by the communities, including mobility and livable-wage jobs. According to one participant who works with recent immigrants, “the rent is too high. If you go and work, 40 to 50 percent of income is going to rent so it’s hard to buy a car.” A few participants also said more investments need to be made in affordable housing options.

²⁴ For more information on the H+T Affordability Index, go to the: <https://htaindex.cnt.org/>.

²⁵ For more information on rental costs and the complete rankings, go to “State of the State’s Housing 2019: Biennial Report of the Minnesota Housing Partnership.” http://www.mhponline.org/images/stories/images/research/SOTS-2019/2019FullSOTSPrint_Final.pdf.

Transportation and infrastructure

Most critical methods of transportation

Nearly two-thirds of the participants mentioned that private vehicles are the preferred or most critical method of transportation for the communities they represented. Participants noted that the reliance on private vehicles is increased by the distances people need to travel, limited or no transit services, and the inability to rely on biking and walking during winter months. A few participants discussed that community members such as people with low incomes or new immigrants may not own a personal vehicle or have a driver's license so they rely on taxi services and friends and families for rides.

Over half of the participants also noted that public transit is a critical method of transportation for specific communities who do not own a vehicle or are unable to drive. In District 4's larger urban locations where transit is comparatively more available, such as Alexandria, Detroit Lakes, Fergus Falls, and Moorhead, immigrants, older adults, people with disabilities, people in crisis situations (such as women and children leaving domestic violence), and people with low incomes rely on public transit.

For communities that cannot afford transit or are living in more-rural locations with limited or no transit options, walking and biking are critical methods of transportation during warmer months. Participants in a few conversations noted this is most often limited to locations with bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure including connected sidewalks, trail systems, and bike programs. Others discussed that the lack of pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure also affects people's ability to safely rely on these methods.

"If you're driving a vehicle, you're provided a world-class transportation network that's generally pretty easy to get around on...It's all about how we've prioritized. Sidewalks are often treated as luxuries, not as part of the network. We need to provide safe infrastructure for everyone."

According to a few organizations, taxi services (when available) are also critical methods of transportation in the region. One participant noted that in more-rural locations taxi services may be the only option when people do not have access to their own vehicles. Another participant highlighted that the transit systems in certain locations can be overwhelming for some community members, such as people living with a mental illness, who may prefer to travel by taxi to reduce anxiety of coordinating and using transit services.

Private vehicles

In nearly all conversations, participants talked about the importance of private vehicles for the communities they work with and serve. Over two-thirds indicated private vehicles are the preferred or most-used mode of transportation, especially in more-rural areas. According to American Community Survey data, approximately 94 percent of households in District 4 have at least one vehicle.²⁶ Even people without a vehicle of their own often rely on friends or family with a private vehicle to get to medical appointments, church services, the grocery store, or other destinations.

²⁶ Based on 2017 U.S. Census five-year estimates.

Over three-quarters of workers aged 16 and older in District 4 either drive alone or carpool to work, which is nearly the same as the statewide proportion. However, one participant said it is almost impossible to have a job without a private vehicle in Greater Minnesota. Often, the available affordable housing is located farther from a community's services and amenities and in places where transit services are limited or not available. If someone lives in a rural area and their car breaks down, according to one participant, getting into town by bus, walking, or bicycling is more difficult, and in certain areas not even feasible. Another participant said, "a vehicle is power for that person...You can't access anything in some communities without a car."

A few participants said community members would go out more and be more active in the community if they had access to a car or a better way to get around.

Barriers to owning and driving a vehicle

Private vehicles are very important to District 4 residents, but most participants also talked about the barriers to owning and driving a vehicle. Community members with a low income have difficulties affording the costs associated with private vehicles, and others may have trouble obtaining or keeping a driver's license.

Ownership costs

Participants in more than two-thirds of conversations said the ownership costs of private vehicles are a barrier. Participants discussing immigrants and new Americans said that for some, purchasing the vehicle in the first place is a challenge because they might not have credit or the appropriate credentials to purchase a vehicle. Other communities may not have the financial means to budget for a car, or do not have the resources for a down payment.

For those community members who have a car, the associated costs can be a problem. A large majority of participants pointed to the cost of insurance, gas, and maintenance as an obstacle for community members. One organization said their own survey found residents in some counties spending at least 30 percent of their income on vehicle maintenance and other related costs. Another participant noted that ignoring routine maintenance is hazardous not to just drivers but to others on the road. "People are going to worry more about putting gas in their car... than about getting new tires or other maintenance that could make their vehicle safer."

Resources are available for people who need assistance with their vehicles. A few participants mentioned car care programs that can help with repairs. Donated cars might also be available through at least one nonprofit in District 4, but participation in the program or programs like it can depend on availability and other social services programs people are using.

"We have families that can't get...here because a tire went flat and they don't have funds to fix it or [have] the know-how."

Obtaining and keeping driver's licenses

Nearly half of participants talked about the difficulties certain District 4 communities have in obtaining or keeping a driver's license. Newer immigrants, for example, may face language barriers that keep them from getting a license. According to Driver and Vehicle Services (DVS), the written test for a driver's license is available

in Hmong, Russian, Spanish, Somali, and Vietnamese in addition to English.²⁷ However, the official Minnesota Driver’s Manual is available in English and Spanish only. A few participants noted community members with learning disabilities also have difficulty passing the written test.

A few participants said driver testing sites are difficult to find or get to. They added that people may not know what documents are required when they show up to take the test. One participant expressed frustration with the process, saying, “DVS makes it difficult for this population to have a legitimate driver’s license.”

Other participants noted that older adults and people with disabilities may lose their driver’s license due to medical conditions. According to one participant, “Many older veterans are unable to drive because they are losing their licenses. A high proportion are losing their licenses due to medical conditions.” Another said that a person on a limited income whose driver’s license has been revoked or suspended may not be able to afford the fines and fees they need to pay to get their license reinstated.

Public transit

Nearly all participants commented on public transit, often as an important but limited transportation option. In one-third of the conversations, participants said transit services do not exist in parts of District 4. Several government entities, nonprofit organizations, and private companies offer transit service throughout the twelve counties in the district. Public transit users most often schedule pickups and drop-offs in advance by phone or online, either from their chosen locations to their desired destinations or from and to a transit service’s regular stops. This approach—often referred to as dial-a-ride—is common in regions that lack dense concentrations of both riders and popular destinations. The cities of Moorhead, Dilworth, and Morris have regularly scheduled, fixed-route bus services. Additionally, one bus service provides regularly scheduled intercity travel connecting District 4 to other regions.

The following organizations and entities provide public transit in District 4:²⁸

- **Becker County Transit** provides dial-a-ride services in Becker County from Monday through Saturday. This service is provided by Becker County.
- **Jefferson Lines** provides bus services across states with multiple stops in District 4, and is a privately owned company.
- **Moorhead Area Transit (MATBUS)** provides fixed-route services Monday through Saturday in Moorhead and Dilworth in Minnesota and Fargo and West Fargo in North Dakota. MATBUS also provides an on-demand app-based transit service, TapRide, available around the North Dakota State Campus and parts of the City of Fargo, North Dakota.²⁹ Dial-a-ride services are available for individuals with disabilities.

²⁷ “Driver’s License - Class D - New Driver - Over Age 21: Policies and Procedures,” Minnesota Department of Public Safety Driver & Vehicle Services, <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/dvs/Pages/dvs-content-detail.aspx?pageID=554&pageTitle=Driver%27s%20License%20-%20Class%20D%20-%20New%20Driver%20-%20Over%20age%2021.”>

²⁸ Go to MnDOT’s interactive web tool for transit data in Minnesota: <http://mndot.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Minimalist/index.html?appid=2e3d00cf13924ce290386f195c0892e1>

²⁹ For information on TapRide, visit the MATBUS website: <http://matbus.com/routes/tapride-service>

- **Morris City Transit** Provides dial-a-ride services for Morris residents seven days a week, and a three-stop bus service during the business week.
- **Prairie Five Rides** Provides dial-a-ride services in Big Stone and Swift Counties, as well as other counties in District 2. Operated by Prairie Five Community Action, Inc.
- **Rainbow Rider Transit** Provides dial-a-ride services in Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens, and Traverse Counties.
- **Transit Alternatives Otter Express** Provides a dial-a-ride bus service that follows two routes in Clay, Otter Tail, and Wilkin Counties from Monday to Friday. Also provides flexible-route service on Saturdays within Fergus Falls. Funded by Productive Alternatives, a nonprofit agency.
- **Tri-Valley Heartland Express** Provides dial-a-ride services in Mahnomen County, as well as other counties in District 2. A division of Tri-Valley Opportunity Council, Inc., a community action agency.
- **White Earth Reservation Tribal Council** Provides fixed-route and dial-a-ride services on and around the White Earth Reservation. The services also connect to surrounding cities such as Detroit Lakes.

Passenger rail service is also available in the northern part of the district through Amtrak with stations in Detroit Lakes and Fargo.

Organizations noted the importance of public transit specifically for serving the needs of District 4 communities that face transportation challenges and inequities, including older adults, residents with a low income, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people without vehicles in general. While these interviewees cited public transit as important, most said existing transit services fall short of what community members need.

Transit service limitations and barriers

Most conversations included comments on transit service limitations, such as limited hours of operation, infrequent service, long wait and travel times, and cost of transit. Several organizations noted that these challenges are common in regions with low population densities and limited public funding. In a conversation with a public transit provider, a participant said that “although we are trying to serve a great need in the state, we do not have enough resources to meet everyone’s needs.” They added that they have more resources to provide increased bus and van service in the highly populated counties but can only afford to send one bus per day to areas with lower population densities.

Operating hours and routes

When discussing transit, a large majority of organizations commented on the operating hours and available routes. All of the regional public transit providers in District 4 offer transportation services during normal working hours Monday through Friday. Most also offer limited services on Saturdays and less often on Sunday. The organizations providing services in the relatively more populated Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area broadly agreed that transit does meet community demand but only Monday through Friday (e.g., getting to and from the Moorhead and Fargo downtowns). A few organizations operating in the City of Morris (located in the southern part of District 4) also said getting around the city on weekdays with Morris Transit is relatively easy for residents.

Beyond those situations, though, organizations provided many examples of locations and times when transit options are challenging:

Rural routes and hours: Over three-quarters of the organizations said people living in District 4 have limited or no transit options. The options they have are typically limited to dial-a-ride services, which require planning, or infrequent services with fixed routes. The routes that do exist may take users into cities but not offer transit between smaller communities.

Several organizations said that people struggle to go to afternoon or evening appointments, such as medical appointments or chemical dependency groups, because transit is not available to take them home afterward. A few others discussed how people may not be able to attend religious services, such as church on Sundays, because transit options do not operate during those times.

Participants in several conversations also said the most affordable areas to live in may not be near transit options. According to them, this means people are rarely able to leave their house, and they are limited in their ability to work, attend medical appointments, and socialize.

Employer locations and shift times: Because most transit options have limited service routes and largely operate during weekday business hours, District 4 residents may not be able to work at certain facilities or during second or third shifts. A few organizations explained how this can affect certain groups more than others, including immigrants, people with lower education levels, and people who have been unemployed. Some of the same groups that tend to rely more on transit may also be more likely to have jobs with nonstandard hours, their shifts starting or ending at times when transit is unavailable. In particular, several organizations mentioned Moorhead's industrial park as a place with many jobs but poor transit options.³⁰ One transit provider explained that the frequency of rail traffic along nearby train tracks makes it difficult to offer reliable service across the tracks and into the industrial park.

“The challenge is having public transportation that is available when needed. If you have money and a car, you have it made. If you don't, you can't get ahead. You can't get to school or a job. The jobs that a person would get that hasn't worked in a while are going to be at night or early morning.”

Schools: A few organizations explained how limited transit options make it difficult for children to participate in after-school activities or summer programs because there may be no transit options available. One participant said the local school district provides bus transportation home following after-school activities, but only for students who live in town. They do not provide transportation for students living in more-rural areas outside of town because “it would be too cost-prohibitive.” They also described how parents cannot go to evening events, or cannot socialize after them with other parents, because transit will not be available by the time an activity is over.

“For new Americans, after-school activities can enhance life. Getting home is a major challenge. If you can't get home, you can't practice. You can't be a part of a team.”

A few transit providers discussed how they have been transporting more children to school and daycare. To better meet demand and ensure safety of the riders, one provider said they try to schedule specific children-only rides. However, they cannot always guarantee that, so unattended children may be riding buses or vans

³⁰ Moorhead's industrial park is a 300-acre industrial property near Interstate 94 and north of Interstate 29.

with the general public. One transit provider added that having children-only rides limits their capacity to serve other populations.

In a conversation with a Morris-based organization, one participant said members in their community “can place three-year-olds on Morris Transit without any worries.” Another participant in the same conversation said they are aware of young children who take Morris Transit multiple times per day: for example, from their home to a daycare provider in the morning, from daycare to the elementary school, and then from school to daycare again in the afternoon.

Medical care: Although health insurance may pay for some people’s transport to care, many people must rely on transit. A few participants discussed people’s struggles to get to hospitals using transit. One organization said they have heard about hospitals using ambulances for general patient transportation simply because there is no other option.

Overall, the organizations interviewed (that were not transit agencies) encouraged more routes and options, as well as more expansive service hours to increase people’s mobility.

“Improve the routes—do them if you feasibly can. Have routes that you can pick them up and you can go. In Fergus Falls, run up and down Union or Lincoln. Go to the library, courthouse, Walmart. These stops would have high riders. Go once in the morning and once in the afternoon. I would do every hour. Get something in those little towns even once a week to get you to a big-box store.”

Travel times and transit scheduling

Most conversations discussed the long travel times sometimes required to take transit. As noted in the previous section, lack of service to key destinations and needing to transfer can lead to long transit trips. Participants gave examples of seemingly basic trips people might take that when done with transit would take several hours. One person described how it can take a couple hours to go across the border from Moorhead to Fargo area by transit.

Several organizations also expressed concerns about the difficulties in arranging transit. Flexibility is one advantage of dial-a-ride transit that operates outside of regular routes. Riders can call and arrange for dial-a-ride transit to pick them up and drop them off at the locations within the area served. However, riders need to call ahead—typically at least 24 hours in advance—to arrange for rides and then remain with that planned schedule. The closer someone calls to the time they need a ride, the more likely the buses will all be booked. According to one participant, “Coordination of services is an issue. Many times when an individual comes into town they have to make numerous stops as agencies they interact with and [the] services they need are scattered in various towns or parts of the same town.” The TapRide service, according to one organization, is an attempt to solve this issue. Since early 2019, MATBUS has been piloting the on-demand ride service in Fargo, North Dakota. It was started with the help of the United Way of Cass-Clay and local employers.

A few of the organizations made additional comments about the challenges related coordinating transportation with multiple provider for travel between cities, across the region, or across the Minnesota–North Dakota border. Specific challenges include transit providers that are limited to specific geographic boundaries, different rules for scheduling, and no centralized guide for coordinating routes. The lack of flexibility and long travel times

can discourage people from using available transit options, making it difficult to get to work or attend critical appointments.

“The bus leaves Fergus Falls at 5:30 a.m. to get to Fargo, and someone could connect to the MATBUS once they get there. But can they easily get to the bus stop? Those are the sorts of things—the end of trip. There are dial-a-ride options, but people don’t have end of trip to a bus stop. So if someone has a doctor’s appointment in Fargo that’s late in the afternoon, can they get home that day? Those are the challenges people are facing.”

Cost of ridership

Nearly half of the organizations interviewed discussed how many people cannot afford transit options. Even if the cost of a single ride is less than a few dollars, a few interviewees explained that the total cost to a person can be a large percentage of their monthly expenses. One participant said transportation can cost as much as rent. Others said the cost of transit means that some people can only afford to get to and from their workplaces, and do not have the funds to travel for other reasons. While transit agencies may offer bulk-trip discounts such as punch cards and allow children of different age groups to ride for free, organizations said the overall cost of transit still needs to be more affordable.

“The bus costs money, and for those in poverty, even a couple dollars is a couple dollars more than they have.”

Accessibility and logistics

Nearly half of the organizations interviewed talked about different accessibility and logistical barriers that make it difficult for people to use transit.

Physical accessibility: Most often, organizations discussing physical limitations said people in wheelchairs and motorized chairs struggle to use transit options. Transit vehicles cannot always take wheelchairs, which further limits options for many people. One transit agency said that some new motorized wheelchairs have gotten too heavy for their existing lifts, and that they have had to increase the size of their lifts in order to accommodate them. Another participant said people in wheelchairs can struggle to get back into their homes from transit without help.

Language accessibility: Organizations discussing language barriers made it clear that communicating with drivers and reading transit materials are only part of the challenge. Transit provider employees may communicate only in English, which means people whose first language is not English can have trouble requesting rides and accessing these services. Most commonly, organizations suggested that written transit information be made available in more languages, and that more drivers be able to communicate in multiple languages.

Car seats and bags: A few organizations discussed the challenge for people with small children who need car seats; buses and vans do not have these available, which means people need to bring their own. This can be a physical and logistical challenge for them. Similarly, other organizations mentioned how the limit on the number of bags someone can bring on transit can make transit less useful for people.

“The local transit system provides other hurdles—parents must have child seats for their kids and can’t leave [the seats] on the bus while they go to Walmart for groceries. And transit users are supposed to

only buy as much as they can carry in their two hands. How do you do that when you are hauling around five car seats or buying groceries for a week?”

Winter weather impacts

Several organizations said winter weather can create long, cold waits for transit, or force transit providers to stop service altogether. Even if a stop has a shelter, it can be too cold for people to wait outdoors for long. A few participants requested more shelters and more heated shelters to help with this issue. One transit agency explained that poorly maintained driveways or roads can make it impossible for them to offer door-to-door service.

Knowledge and perceptions about transit

Outside of service offerings, organizations also discussed how public perceptions and familiarity with transit can limit or discourage transit use.

Safety concerns

Nearly half of the organizations interviewed brought up different safety concerns that can create barriers to people using services:

- **General safety:** Several organizations discussed overall safety concerns for transit passengers and drivers. A few shared some concerns about confrontational passengers who present a danger to others on the vehicle or while waiting for the vehicle to arrive. One organization reported that they have had some attacks on drivers by passengers.
- **Safety of specific groups:** Several organizations described safety concerns for specific groups, including children, older adults, and people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. Participants worried about children riding the bus without adults, as well as unattended children accidentally knocking down older adults. A few organizations said they have heard from people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color that they feel uncomfortable riding transit because they feel “put down” and discriminated against.
- **Safety of surrounding infrastructure:** A few organizations said the infrastructure supporting transit can be a safety concern. Examples they gave included poor lighting at bus stops, a lack of shelters to wait in during bad weather, uneven curbs, icy sidewalks, and dangerous intersection crossings.

Knowledge of, and familiarity with, public transit options and procedures

More than one-third of the organizations interviewed said people being unaware of or unfamiliar with transit systems is a barrier to usage. Most often they explained how hard it can be to become familiar with transit options. For example, the systems can be complicated, routes and transfers can be difficult to understand, and it can be unclear how to connect routes between regional providers.

“There is nothing that says this is how to get here to there. How do I know? I was helping a person and I couldn’t find the transit number.”

In particular, organizations mentioned older adults and non-native-English speakers as populations that have a difficult time becoming familiar with transit. They may not have the technology or language skills to use existing resources.

To improve knowledge and familiarity with transit, a few organizations recommended more and better advertising for transit services. They encouraged providers to share more information about their rates, routes, and schedules. Other organizations suggested different resources to raise awareness about transit and to make it easier to navigate, including phone apps to navigate the system. One transit agency said it had considered an app, but that many older adults are not yet comfortable with that technology. Other suggestions included transit training sessions at senior living spaces and community events, “travel trainers” who ride with users to show them the system, and educating care providers on what is available for their patients.

Within the discussion around transit familiarity, several organizations mentioned that there are negative perceptions about public transportation that reduce the likelihood and willingness for people to ride. According to the organizations, the negative perception may make some people uncomfortable or embarrassed to use available transit services.

Walking

In nearly all conversations, participants talked about barriers to walking in their communities, such as a lack of sidewalks or sidewalks that do not connect to major destinations, safety concerns at busy intersections or along busy roads, the distance people must travel, and the impact of winter weather conditions. Several participants said people with disabilities face more barriers to walking compared with others.

“If you’re driving a vehicle, you’re provided a world-class transportation network that’s generally pretty easy to get around on. For [bicyclists], you may or may not have a [bicycle] network, and it may or may not be plowed in the winter. And for pedestrians, you may or may not have infrastructure. You often rely on private parties to keep the sidewalks cleared. It’s all about how we’ve prioritized. Sidewalks are often treated as luxuries, not as part of the network.”

Perceptions of walking

Participants said walking was more feasible in the larger regional cities and towns than rural areas where distances between destinations are longer. However, even that perception varied from city to city. For example, Alexandria and Morris are pedestrian-friendly according to participants, but organizations in Detroit Lakes said walking in town can be difficult.

“If you’re a large family, you can’t walk with all the kids, get groceries for a family, and walk back. It’s not feasible.”

Several participants mentioned that their community takes part in the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program,³¹ but even in these communities many parents drive their children to school or students take the bus. One participant observed that the number of students who take the bus has remained flat in their school district over the years, while walking has decreased in favor of parents driving their children to school.

³¹ Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are meant to give all students the ability to walk and bicycle on routes that are safe, comfortable, and convenient. They are multi-state agency initiatives designed to improve safety, reduce traffic, and improve air quality near schools. For more information on SRTS, visit the MnDOT’s website: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/saferoutes/about.html>.

Barriers to walking

Participants in nearly three-quarters of the conversations noted winter weather conditions and safety concerns as barriers to walking. Older adults, people with disabilities, and parents with children were specifically mentioned as groups for whom walking is less feasible. Related to winter weather, icy and snow-covered sidewalks present problems for all pedestrians, but especially those with mobility issues or who use scooters or motorized wheelchairs. The distances people may have to travel only increase the difficulties.

In several conversations, participants discussed cities that lack contiguous sidewalks—sidewalks that do not connect to destinations or they stop abruptly. According to one participant, they have observed people without other transportation options “walking with a dozen grocery bags down the overpass for the freeway. There is no sidewalk and no bike path until you are almost in town.” Several organizations also cited a lack of sidewalk connections to recreation trails. In several conversations, participants said sidewalk conditions are poor and sidewalks have not been maintained. One participant noted that some communities are revitalizing their downtowns, but the remainder of the sidewalk network is inconsistent or sporadic and doesn’t connect to the downtown.

Extended darkness in the winter season can be a problem for pedestrians as well, according to a few participants. Poor lighting in certain places can mean walking to school or waiting for the bus in the dark in the mornings, especially.

Participants in several conversations pointed to dangerous crossings, particularly across highways and other busy city roads, as barriers to walking in their communities. “You may have stretches where there are no marked crosswalks for a long distance,” according to one participant. While another participant said that crossing a specific state highway “is like Frogger.”³² A few participants described dangerous crossings that pedestrians must cross to get to schools and health care facilities, especially those located on the edges of communities. Other pedestrian safety concerns participants discussed included crosswalks with low visibility for cars, the need for more four-way-stop intersections, and a lack of sidewalks or shoulders along certain county and state highways.³³

Participants in another conversation said having to walk is an employment barrier. They mentioned entry-level shift jobs at manufacturing companies that are outside of the normal 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. workday, which makes them difficult to get to for individuals without access to a private vehicle. The manufacturing companies in District 4 are also often located farther away from the downtown areas where walking is more feasible.

“There are many cases where [an] individual would rather not work and collect benefits compared to having walk two miles to and from work. Many individuals cannot work without a car. No one has the motivation to walk miles and miles a day for a \$12/hour job.”

³² Frogger is an arcade game first released in 1981. The game’s objective is to guide a frog through a series of moving obstacles, including cars and trucks.

³³ The safety concerns about specific intersections and sections of road cited by participants were compiled as an action item list and sent to District 4 staff for review.

Bicycling

Participants in one-third of the District 4 transportation equity conversations identified bicycling as a critical or preferred mode of transportation for members of their communities. However, two-thirds of the conversation participants—including some of those who cited bicycles as important for travel—cited barriers that limit or prevent people from using bicycles to get around. District 4 staff won praise from one conversation participant for working to make trunk highways more bike- and pedestrian-friendly in cities, including its plans for Highway 9 in Barnesville and studies of Highways 108 and 59 in Pelican Rapids. A few participants mentioned the recently completed bicycle infrastructure Alexandria, Glenwood, and Starbuck as positive developments.

“Elected officials do not always connect with folks who want to see the [bicycle] network expanded with trails and [lanes] on the street. There is a lack of understanding by elected officials of folks that would like [bicycling] as an option.”

Perceptions of bicycling

A few organizations identified bicycles as a good means of transportation in the area outside of the winter months. None of the comments captured from the conversations explicitly indicated negative attitudes toward bicycling, although one participant said bicycles are very rarely used for travel in some of the region’s cities. A certain percentage of residents in any area will simply be uninterested in bicycling, someone said.

A few conversation participants said bicycling is easier in larger cities such as Moorhead, Fargo, Fergus Falls, Alexandria, and Glenwood, where destination points are nearby and the transportation infrastructure works for bicycles. A few organizations said most bicycling is centered around the universities and colleges in the area. Several said travel by bicycling is hard in general, citing barriers to bicycle use.

Barriers to bicycling

Among the organizations that commented on barriers to bicycling, a large majority cited weather conditions and safety concerns. Several conversation participants also noted other barriers to bicycling, including long distances to destinations, particularly in rural areas, and travel time, particularly for those with multiple jobs and tight schedules. Barriers also included a lack of connectivity among bicycle lanes and trails, and the costs for bicycles, maintenance, helmets, and secure locks. A few noted that some members of the communities they serve are physically unable to bicycle, including many older Minnesotans and some veterans. A few pointed to the impracticality of bicycle travel for parents with young children and shoppers with lots to carry home from stores.

“There are no [bicycle] lanes, many destinations are too far apart for bicycling to be practical, and winter weather makes riding a [bicycle] uncomfortable or dangerous for part of the year.”

In more than one-third of the conversations, participants mentioned weather conditions as a barrier to bicycling. Snow, ice, and cold temperatures make bicycling unsafe and uncomfortable in Minnesota. A few conversation participants noted that some people do bicycle year-round.

In one-third of the conversations, participants cited a lack of bicycle lanes and trails as a safety issue that puts bicyclists in harm’s way of motorized vehicles on area streets and highways. Participants reported that no

bicycle lanes and trails exist in many parts of District 4, and where they do exist, they are limited and do not connect bicyclists to other routes.

A few organizations said bicyclists face safety challenges when roadside shoulders are poorly maintained and have sand, gravel, and potholes. One organization expressed concerns about community members riding bicycles on area roadways in the fall when trucks are hauling the annual sugar beet harvest.

A few participants noted specific routes and locations where bicycle travel is particularly dangerous: Highway 29 in Alexandria between Target and Walmart for bicycles trying to cross the road, Highway 34 in the Detroit Lakes area, and the intersection of Highway 10 and Highway 59.

Other transportation modes

Participants described how other modes of transportation, including volunteer drivers, formal and informal ride-sharing, ride-hailing, medical transportation services, and veteran services, filled critical gaps in access to services. These modes are in many ways overlapping systems, with ride-sharing and ride-hailing serving as critical transportation links for a range of people's needs, including among older adults, people with disabilities, veterans, and for medical appointments.

Volunteer drivers

In more than half of conversations, participants discussed volunteer driver programs such as those funded by Minnesota's Medical Assistance program. For these programs, organizations match volunteer drivers with those in need of rides for a wide range of purposes, including shopping, errands, education, recreation, and nonemergency medical appointments.³⁴ Most of the participants described how volunteer driver programs are a vital yet inconsistent and unreliable form of transportation, with limited availability in rural areas and in the evenings or late at night. As a result, several participants also noted that an expansion of volunteer driver programs—with more capacity, wider eligibility, and wider geographic scope—would improve service for riders.

However, recruiting enough volunteer drivers was noted as a challenge by several participants. A few specifically said the insurance rates and taxable income for reimbursement being greater than the standard charity rate is a barrier to driver recruitment and retention. For example, one participant noted that previously tax-exempt income that volunteer drivers receive is now taxable. Another mentioned that classification of volunteer drivers in the same category as Uber and Lyft drivers has increased insurance rates. In Minnesota, the drivers must report as taxable income any reimbursement amounts greater than the standard charity rate of 14 cents per mile, a rate that falls short of what is needed to cover total vehicle costs.³⁵ With regard to insurance, Minnesota law requires that ride-hailing drivers carry insurance that recognizes they use their vehicle to transport passengers for compensation.³⁶ Lawmakers put the statute in place in response to potential liability challenges

³⁴ For more information about the volunteer driver program in Minnesota, see "Volunteer Driver Programs in Minnesota: Benefits and Barriers," Frank Douma, Minnesota Council on Transportation Access, February 2017, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/189303>

³⁵ For information from the Minnesota Department of Revenue about volunteer drivers and taxes, see https://www.revenue.state.mn.us/individuals/individ_income/Pages/VolunteerMileageReimbursement.aspx.

³⁶ Minnesota Statutes 2018, 65B.472, subdivision 2.

for drivers of app-based ride-hailing services. However, according to research, the law has led to concerns because it is not widely understood how the law applies to volunteer drivers.³⁷

A few participants discussed coordination of services across agencies as another challenge. Riders who use volunteer driver programs often use other forms of transportation as well and have transportation needs beyond those that may be covered by one specific program. Coordinating this network of services is challenging for both riders and drivers.

“Coordination of services is an issue. Many times when an individual comes into town. They have to make numerous stops as agencies they interact with and services they need are scattered in various towns or parts of the same town. The example would be a person from a rural area that has to travel [into town] for their prescriptions, groceries, doctor appointment, and purchase household goods.”

Safety and accessibility were also mentioned as a challenge by a few participants, including safety and screening of drivers and a mismatch between the equipment in a driver’s personal vehicle and a passenger’s need for a specialized car seat or a wheelchair-accessible vehicle.

Ride-sharing

Informal ride-sharing was discussed in half of conversations as an important alternative for those without access to other transportation modes. Friends, family, and neighbors were some of the most common sources of informal rides; a few participants also described direct rides provided by churches and other organizations to their members, and a few others described unlicensed taxi services available in some cities.

“Friends and family are the primary alternate transportation for veterans who can’t drive. They are the fortunate ones who have that network.”

At the same time, the logistical limitations of informal ride-sharing were described by most of these participants as a barrier to broader participation in activities and access to services. When describing the barriers new immigrants can face, one participant said, “Being able to get to English classes [is a barrier]; if you don’t have transportation you can’t do that. A lot of the men when they first get here will live on the farm sites, so coming into town can be a challenge if they don’t have a car. They have to ride with other people. Going to the grocery store takes more planning.”

Several participants described challenges with informal ride-sharing, including residents who have smaller social networks and therefore fewer people to turn to for rides. A few participants raised safety and legal concerns for both passengers and drivers, including the risk of victimization of riders who are dependent on others for transportation and legal liability issues created for drivers.

³⁷ Frank Douma. “Volunteer Driver Programs in Minnesota: Benefits and Barriers,” Minnesota Council on Transportation Access, February 2017, p. 6, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=2ahUKewiskdLV6frhAhWpHjQIHQg6CtsQFjABegQIBRAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cts.umn.edu%2FPublications%2FResearchReports%2Fpdfdownload.pl%3Fid%3D2768&usg=AOvVaw3v8nOxyM0Fq22phHUUETHK>.

“If you have your own vehicle, everything is easy. If they have no vehicle, it is about who they know. Who will trade something so they can get a ride? It could be illegal and potentially victimizes them.”

Ride-hailing

A large majority of participants also discussed ride-hailing services such as taxis, Uber, and Lyft as an important but expensive and unreliable mode of transportation. Participants mentioned in most conversations that while taxis are in several cities in the district, they have limited availability and sometimes limited geographic range and long waits for rides. Similarly, several participants noted that Uber and/or Lyft were available in their areas but had limited availability, while a few others mentioned that Uber and Lyft were not available at all in their areas.

Cost was the most frequently mentioned additional challenge to accessing ride-hailing services. Several participants also noted that these services may not be equipped to meet specific needs such as a child’s car seat or the ability to wait for a patient after a medical appointment. Several participants also mentioned safety concerns and noted that drivers could be picking up riders from unsafe situations, and that even known drivers may have a criminal record. A few participants mentioned that taxi businesses can be unreliable, going in and out of business or in and out of licensure. One participant also noted that a credit card is required to create an account for Uber and Lyft, which creates a barrier for people do not use or do not have credit cards.

Medical transportation

Most participants discussed specific needs for transportation to medical appointments. People rely on a range of providers for medical transportation, including public transportation agencies, volunteer driver programs, and veteran services programs, which all serve a range of transportation needs, as well as by specialized programs including paratransit and emergency medical transportation providers.

Several participants discussed the role of specialized programs and vehicles in providing transportation for people in wheelchairs, those needing curb-to-curb service, or people with service animals. A few participants noted that the routes and schedules of nonspecialized transportation providers were often also impractical for medical transportation. As a result, specialized transportation services are very important to many people in accessing medical appointments. However, a few participants described the overall capacity and availability of these services as inadequate in meeting people’s needs.

Participants described several barriers and opportunities to improve medical transportation. Eligibility and reimbursement for medical transportation was discussed by several participants, who noted that each provider has different eligibility criteria and each payer (whether Minnesota Health Care Programs, the Veterans Affairs health care programs, or private insurers) also had different reimbursement policies. A few participants also said there was a need for more vans, with one specifically mentioning that vans would be a more efficient way to transport people for many long-distance trips because these trips typically have few passengers and drivers would not need a commercial driver’s license.

Specialized services rides

Several participants described van transportation provided by social service providers, such as shelters and recovery centers. Most often, participants discussed transportation services provided specifically to veterans. While veterans use specialized medical transportation providers as well as volunteer driver programs, the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) organization and some county veteran services offices also operate vans specifically to transport veterans.

The DAV provides free transportation to federal Veterans Health Administration facilities. Funding to provide transportation directly through the VA as well as from the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) were mentioned by a few participants, although they noted that funding was limited and that it was particularly difficult to secure funding to pay for the vans themselves. While less expensive than private transportation options, one participant said the MDVA rides can still be relatively expensive for individual veterans and only operate during normal working hours. Alternatively, a few county veteran services offices regularly work to set up van pickup locations to accommodate more veterans in need of transportation. A few participants also said that funding limitations and a driver shortage (in part due to restrictions on who is eligible to drive) ultimately limited the hours and overall capacity for rides.

A few participants also noted other limitations, including:

- Rides that are typically only intercity and would not provide in-town transportation
- Rides that are not door-to-door and require traveling to a central point for pickup
- Vans may not have specialized car seats or other equipment needed for a ride

Finally, a few participants noted that veterans' transportation needs are wide-ranging—people need access to banks, pharmacies, grocery stores, and recreational activities, not just to attend medical appointments—and that the structure of current programs was often not flexible enough to meet these needs due to restrictions on eligible destinations.

Challenges and barriers

Across these alternate modes of transportation, four recurring challenges participants discussed were safety and accessibility, limited availability, funding structures and cost, and service coordination.

Safety and accessibility

Several participants described concerns with the safety and accessibility of these alternative modes of transportation. Both drivers and riders may be unknown to one another, and depending on the program design several participants said the drivers may not be fully or properly screened.

Several participants also mentioned physical accessibility to these modes. People in wheelchairs and people needing car seats were described as having limited access to volunteer driver, ride-hailing, and veterans services ride programs.

Limited availability

While these modes of transportation serve as a vital transportation link, most participants described availability as frequently limited, often by the number of hours open and geographic regions served as well as by the overall capacity of the services.

Funding structures and cost

Funding structures for programs, including veteran services rides and Medical Assistance–funded volunteer drivers, were many times described as a barrier to increasing the capacity of these programs, as was the general lack of available funding for these services. For ride-hailing services such as taxis, Uber, and Lyft, several participants described the direct cost to riders as a barrier to access.

Service coordination

Several participants discussed coordination of services across programs and across agencies—and in the case of Moorhead, across states—as another challenge. Riders may be eligible for multiple programs, such as a volunteer driver program, veteran services rides, medical transportation, and informal ride-sharing organized by churches and other organizations. Piecing together this patchwork of services is a logistical burden for both riders and operators, particularly because riders may be eligible to use a service for some of their trips but not for others.

Public engagement

In over one-third of the conversations, participants said they felt informed about transportation projects. A few participants felt they received enough notification about government projects through social media, radio announcements, newspapers, or other notification processes (e.g., from key contacts, automated systems, attending community meetings). A few participants also said they felt informed about projects because it is part of their job to serve on transportation-related committees, or to meet with transportation partners. During a few conversations, 511³⁸ was also discussed as a useful tool for staying informed for transportation projects. As one participant noted, “Everyone does love the 511 site and app. We are telling families about it and use it for our commutes and to determine whether to close the office due to weather.” Of the participants who said they felt informed, a few participants mentioned that transportation project information is not always readily available, that more communication about decision-making would be beneficial, and that they may not feel as informed if it was not part of their job.

Participants in more than half of the conversations said they did not feel informed about transportation projects. Most commonly, they said they did not feel informed because information and opportunities to provide input are not shared directly with organizations or community members. Instead, these participants cited more passive engagement methods, such as newspaper or radio announcements, as the primary methods of delivering information. As one participant said, “We don’t know much. I think sometimes they’ll put

³⁸ 511 is MnDOT’s web-based and app-based resource for traveler information including road maps with current construction, closures and delays, and weather-related conditions. More information about 511 is available on MnDOT’s website: <http://511mn.org/>.

something in the paper when they're going to start a project if it has traffic impacts. They don't make an effort to push that information out to everybody." Participants in several conversations said they would feel more informed if they were directly engaged and communications were:³⁹

- Offered to communities through channels they are most likely to use (e.g., holding meetings where communities already gather)
- Accessible and meaningful (e.g., using plain language, providing translations, stating the impact on the community)
- Centralized (e.g., through a centralized information hub, or automated alert system)

Information sharing

Nearly two-thirds of the conversations provided insights into how information is received about transportation or other government projects. The most commonly mentioned methods included television, the internet (e.g., social media, email, online news articles, organization websites, and government websites), participation in meetings (e.g., committees, boards, city council, regional, open house), newspapers, and radio. Also mentioned were surveys, brochures, phone calls, and information sent through the mail.

Participants also discussed common communication methods that are particularly effective in some communities, such as immigrants, veterans, and aging communities. These methods included:

- Sharing flyers or newsletters with utility bills, or services already received, such as Meals on Wheels
- Sharing information through word of mouth, or between family members
- Posting announcements on bulletin boards in community gathering spots
- Working with faith-based organizations
- Holding events and conversations in places where community members already congregate, such as cafés, grocery stores, and sporting events

"Immigrant populations receive their information through religious groups. They meet after services for coffee and this is where they bring up any concerns they may have. They do not contact city council or community leaders."

In several conversations, participants discussed considerations that may affect how or whether people are able to access information, such as, if:

- Translations or translation services are available for printed items, or live meetings
- Meetings are held in locations that are easily accessible to community members
- Information is distributed through a wide variety of methods that can be accessed by a wide variety of community members

³⁹ The feedback from conversation participants was gathered by MnDOT prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. MnDOT will adapt recommendations and actions as needed based on state and federal public health safety guidelines.

Current practices and what works

When asked about effective public engagement methods, participants most commonly discussed hosting public meetings (e.g., town hall meetings, transit association meetings, listening sessions, city council hearings) or convening committees, advisory groups, and counsels (e.g., Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils, MnDOT Transit Advisory Committees, community steering committees). Participants also commonly mentioned distributing information through a variety of frequently used outlets, including television, newspaper, radio, and social media. Other effective engagement strategy ideas discussed included:

- Working with community-based organizations to either disseminate information or collect input
- Clearly communicating the impact of a project on a local community

Frequently used methods of engagement, such as public meetings, advisory groups, and media outlets may not be meeting the needs of communities such as immigrants, veterans, and the aging population, as noted above (“Information sharing”). Though there was recognition among the participants that these communities may seek and receive information differently, and prefer different engagement methods, a gap may exist in current distribution methods and opportunities to provide input. This gap is reflected in how participants suggest improving public engagement efforts (see “Ideas for improvement” section).

What does not work

During several conversations, participants commented on public engagement strategies that are not effective. According to them, frequently used methods of engagement, such as public meetings, advisory groups, and media outlets, are not meeting the needs of communities such as immigrants, veterans, and the aging population. A few added that there is a gap in current information distribution methods and feedback opportunities.

Commonly, participants also said certain communities may not feel like their opinions matter because there is a lack of representation of community members at decision-making meetings, or among decision-makers. For example, the participants said community members may not feel like their opinion matters, that decision-makers do not represent community members (e.g., immigrants and new Americans, women, and people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color), and that language can be a challenge for immigrant communities. As one participant noted, “I don’t think they think they can make a difference in decisions being made. [...] [They think], ‘The people in charge will just do what they want.’ The people at a [...] meeting that [I] went to weren’t representative of the population that the [project] would serve.”

Participants also often said providing information through only a few communication mediums leads to ineffective engagement, such as having to be on a specific email distribution list to receive information, embedding information deep within a website, or relying heavily on newspaper or radio announcements to share information. Participants also noted that syndicated media (e.g., news programs) may not cover local projects or issues. A few participants said it was important to understand that active involvement in transportation projects may not be a priority for some community members. As one participant said, “We try to bring clients and staff to whatever listening sessions or other events government entities might have to get input from the community. Most clients are really just in survival mode and not thinking about providing input on issues.”

Ideas for improvement

More than half of the conversations included recommendations for improving public engagement efforts. Most commonly, participants recommended identifying the best methods to reach different communities, understanding that a more tailored approach may be more effective. In addition to identifying the most appropriate method, participants suggested using plain language, creating a meaningful call to action for the community, and identifying an accessible meeting location (if meeting in person). A few participants reiterated that it may be more effective to meet community members in places they already gather. The day of the week (e.g., weekday vs. weekend) and time of day (e.g., during the day vs. evening) were also mentioned as important considerations for engaging different communities.

In a few conversations, participants suggested developing an alert or centralized information system to provide information to community members. One participant who was aware of the 511 information system recommended publishing it in different languages.

A few participants offered to use their established communication channels to better share information about MnDOT projects with communities, including translating information. One participant said their organization would be willing to translate MnDOT announcements and share them with their community members. Another participant said local government and community partners could be sharing MnDOT information with their clients when applicable and be asking more about their transportation needs.

Other suggestions for improving public engagement discussed less often included:

- Incentivizing community members to participate (e.g., offer travel vouchers far enough in advance for community member to plan on participating, begin providing meals if not previously provided)
- Distributing information through community-based organizations that are interested in partnering with MnDOT
- Engaging community members throughout the life of a project (i.e., planning through implementation) to keep them informed, and to inform the project

Equity

Definitions of equity

Participants were asked what equity means to their organizations and provided a range of perspectives. More than half of participants discussed equity in terms of equality of access and equality of opportunities. For one participant, equity means, “Things are available to people and everyone has the same opportunities as others. Most of us are blind to how we are unequal. Fair is not equal.” Many other participants defined equity as a lack of bias, or of treating everyone as equals. A few participants described equity as a focus on the highest-need groups, those facing disproportionate burden. A few other participants discussed equity from the perspective of providing people with options and choices in life. Other equity definitions shared by participants included providing an equal level of service or an equal share of resources and distinguishing from equality where equity is matching services and resources with needs.

“People might need more help to access if they have less resources. Some people may not need any resources. Some families may need a lot more to make it equitable. It is matching level of service with needs.”

Equitable access to the decision-making process, and the use of public input, was also described by a few other participants.

Equity and transportation

Three-quarters of conversations discussed the broad impacts transportation has on equity. Nearly all participants described transportation access as enabling people’s options, choices, and independence in life. Participants also described the importance of transportation in equitable access to employment and job opportunities as well as in equitable access to medical services. A few participants discussed the impacts of transportation on equitable access to food and groceries, housing, and opportunities for recreation and improved quality of life.

A few participants also noted that a lack of investment in transportation can have a disproportionately negative impact on specific communities, including on people with physical disabilities, people with low incomes, people who do not drive, and people who rely on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

“Specifically when it comes to transportation, it’s a challenge for those who have low income or people with disability that do not drive. It’s very difficult for them to get where they need to go. The way we’ve built our communities makes it difficult. There’s no easy way for someone to get to say, Walmart [in Fergus Falls], unless they’re in a vehicle.”

Opportunities to advance equity

Three-quarters of conversations also highlighted specific opportunities for MnDOT and its partners to advance equity in transportation, including the following suggestions:

- **Coordination with human service providers** to coordinate routes and schedules of public transit and specialized transit services to enable people to attend events, activities, and service appointments.
- **Increased access and funding for public transit**, including more evening and weekend transportation options to meet the needs of people with different schedules and a focus on increasing the affordability of transit services.
- **Increased access to private vehicle transportation** through additional driver’s education programs for new drivers and access to donated used cars.
- **Increased focus on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure** throughout the region.
- **More intentional coordination with local governments and transportation partners** on topics including pedestrian infrastructure and land use around transit routes.

“One of the things I’ve been pushing for a long time, with MnDOT in particular, is always including sidewalks when a highway is built to urban standards. There should need to be a justification for why sidewalks shouldn’t be included [in a project].”

Recommendations

The following recommendations are separated into two groups: key recommendations and other recommendations.

The District 4 management team, District 4 staff, and staff from the MnDOT Central Office (CO) participated in a virtual implementation meeting on Tuesday, June 2, 2020 to review the study's findings. Prior to the meeting, MAD invited meeting attendees from District 4 and CO to complete a survey that asked respondents to select which findings are within the agency's sphere of influence. The meeting participants generated potential solutions in small groups, and then the larger group voted on which of these solutions should be the highest priorities for the agency.⁴⁰ Results from this meeting and observations from MAD consultants yielded the following recommendations. MAD consultants also created a separate action plan document that identified the action steps, the proposed implementation timeline, roles and responsibilities, resources, and partners for each recommendation.

1. MnDOT should work with transit providers, local government planning departments, and transit partners including Regional Transit Coordinating Councils to expand transit services and improve coordination in District 4.

Nearly all the conversation participants noted the importance of public transit specifically for serving the needs of key District 4 communities that face transportation challenges and inequities, including older adults, people with low incomes, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people without vehicles. However, most of these participants said existing transit services fall short of what community members need.

In total, nine government entities, nonprofit organizations, or private companies currently offer transit services in District 4. MnDOT staff at the implementation meeting prioritized facilitating increased collaboration between the transit providers and local government planning departments to strengthen their connections to each other. Staff discussed how MnDOT is positioned to engage municipal governments and county board members and facilitate conversations with the transit agencies. Staff members said that more conversations with transit providers would increase local officials' understanding of the transportation needs of their constituents.

Over three-quarters of the organizations interviewed said many people living outside the larger regional cities in District 4 are typically limited to infrequent, fixed-route transit services or dial-a-ride services. Implementation meeting staff brainstormed several ideas for how to strengthen coordination and expand transit services:

- Continue to support the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCC). Staff identified the RTCCs as key partners in improving outreach to communities and increasing awareness of transit services. The West Central Minnesota RTCC, for example, covers nine counties in District 4. MnDOT should encourage increased local support and development of RTCCs through MnDOT's

⁴⁰ For full results from the Implementation Meeting 1, refer to Appendix F on page 68.

relationships with county government representatives. Through coordination with local stakeholders, the RTCCs' goals include filling identified transportation gaps, streamlining access to transportation services, and providing more travel options to many of District 4's key communities.

- Interview larger employers in the region to better understand the transportation needs of their employees, such as adding transit services for employees during second and third shifts, encouraging rideshare programs, and exploring options for public-private transportation partnerships. To help inform the conversations with employers, District 4 should consider reviewing the findings from the district's Manufacturers Perspectives report completed in May 2015.
- Work with transit providers to increase trip frequency and the flexibility of available rides. Strategies discussed by staff included:
 - Working with transit providers to categorize the types and the frequency of rides requested by key District 4 communities. Staff noted there are ride frequency standards for rural transit routes that receive public funding. Having more ridership information could help MnDOT and transit providers identify gaps between the rides key community members are requesting and the existing rural route standards.
 - Increasing trip frequency and flexibility by using transit vans and small buses more often. Compared to large buses, vans and small buses may be able to reach locations with road surfaces that cannot support the heavier vehicles. Vans are more efficient for trips and routes with fewer riders. They can also access more locations like parking lots and pick up and drop off riders in front of their destinations. Any transit vehicle type used, however, should be accessible.
- Collaborate with transit providers and community planners to bundle multiple trips for riders traveling for medical appointments. Conversation participants said people using transit services for medical and specialty care frequently rely on a range of providers: special medical transportation, public transportation agencies, volunteer driver programs, specialized service programs, and emergency medical transportation. Staff at the meeting discussed the need for a single point-of contact for scheduling to better assist people with logistics.
- Coordinate with transit providers, RTCCs, community organizations, and other local partners to develop travel training resources that educate people on how to use transit services in the region.
- Use pre-planned state aid visits with local communities to also discuss transit topics.

This recommendation and the solutions generated by staff are primarily the responsibility of District 4 staff and Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT). However, there may be some work that is specific to other areas within MnDOT.

2. District 4 should update its district public engagement strategies based on the equity conversation findings.

Conversation participants in more than half of the conversations said they did not feel informed about transportation projects. Most commonly, they said they did not feel informed because information and opportunities to provide input are not shared directly with organizations or community members. Additionally, they said that more typical engagement methods, such as newspaper or radio announcements, often do not reach community members. In a few conversations, participants also said certain communities may not feel that their opinions matter because there is a lack of representation of community members at decision-making meetings or among decision-makers.

Staff at the implementation meeting generated several ideas that could be helpful updates for the district's engagement strategies:

- Provide cultural awareness training for District 4 staff so that MnDOT can better understand key communities' needs and best practices for engagement.
 - MnDOT's Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) has resources that could assist District 4. Specifically, OED offers cultural competence training as well as guidance on MnDOT's diversity and inclusion efforts through the Diversity and Inclusion unit. District 4 could also seek out training groups outside of MnDOT that offer targeted trainings on community groups in the region.
 - The staff expressed interest in MnDOT's leadership pursuing more coordinated efforts with other agencies' leadership to bring intensive cultural competency trainings to the entire state workforce.
 - Consider capturing the lessons learned from District 4 project managers who work with the key communities on an ongoing basis.
- Create a district-level public engagement plan and ensure every project has a public engagement plan. Staff at the implementation meeting noted that while District 4 prepares public engagement plans for specific projects, it is not a consistent practice for all projects nor does the district have a formal overall public engagement plan. Developing a district-level plan could help address issues raised by the participants in this study's equity conversations and advance options for improving public engagement for key communities.⁴¹
- Consider a variety of public engagement strategies and techniques, going beyond public meetings and open houses. District 4 currently uses a tailored community-focused approach for specific projects with a goal of engaging stakeholders in culturally appropriate ways. Staff suggested several tactics for additional engagement strategies including:
 - Attending community organizations' meetings and events to listen to key community members' transportation needs. The meetings are also an opportunity to gather input on communications preferences for specific communities District 4 can prioritize accordingly.
 - Sending MnDOT announcements to the equity conversation participants who can share the information using their email distribution lists on behalf of MnDOT.
 - Meeting with the equity conversation participants annually to provide updates, further develop the relationships, and gather additional feedback.
 - Using existing meetings as opportunities to contextualize information for specific community groups.
 - Providing additional or alternative times and methods for people to participate in MnDOT open houses and offer options to attend virtually when in-person options are offered.
 - Because many conversation participants said they did not feel well informed, staff also suggested coordinating with other MnDOT districts (e.g., District 2 and District 8) that work with groups covering large geographic areas.
 - Develop different engagement strategies for year-round residents and seasonal residents. Staff discussed the potential for different engagement strategies based on comments by conversation participants who did not feel informed by MnDOT. It was suggested that MnDOT follow up with the conversation participants who did not feel informed to ask if they and the communities they represent and serve live in the region year-round or seasonally. MAD can provide contact information for these conversation participants to District 4. It was also suggested that MnDOT work with regional lake associations and other local community associations to reach and engage more seasonal residents in District 4.
- Consider working in partnership with community liaisons to deliver MnDOT information and receive feedback. These liaisons could have formalized roles or be volunteers. Community liaisons who have

⁴¹ According to the District 4 public engagement team, a district plan is currently in development.

knowledge of a community's culture and language can help ensure MnDOT communicates in effective and culturally sensitive ways and better understands the lived experiences of people in District 4.

- Staff also suggested that the cultural liaisons be equitably compensated for their efforts. Compensation, for example, could be built into the public engagement contracting process.

This recommendation is primarily the responsibility of District 4, including the district management team, the district public engagement team, and project managers. The planning team can play a support role because planners have contacts with various groups prior to a project manager being assigned. MnDOT CO may be able to offer District 4 guidance on developing the strategies, as needed, and for exploring more flexible contract and grant options for public engagement

3. MnDOT should collaborate with local partners to address key communities' walking and bicycling needs.

Staff at the implementation meeting discussed several pedestrian and bicycle findings where MnDOT does not have direct responsibility or authority. For example, roads identified by conversation participants as needing improvements may be under a city or county government jurisdiction. However, staff said that MnDOT can still be a key partner for local governments in responding to needs.

In nearly all conversations, interview participants talked about barriers to walking and bicycling in their communities, such as a lack of sidewalks or sidewalks and trail systems that do not connect to major destinations, safety concerns at busy intersections or along busy roads and highways, the distance people must travel, and the impact of winter weather conditions. Several participants also said people with disabilities and older adults face more barriers to walking and bicycling compared with others. Staff identified several strategies for MnDOT and local partners to collaborate with each other on pedestrian and bicycle improvements:

- MnDOT and local governments could work together to address accessibility and Americans with Disabilities Act compliance-related needs of key communities. For example, meet with care facilities in the region to better understand their specific concerns.
- MnDOT could incorporate accessibility considerations into MnDOT planning studies.
- MnDOT could seek opportunities to provide assistance and expertise in the early planning stages of development projects in local communities. Staff suggestions included early involvement in plan and plat (i.e. land use) review phases and county safety plans development (e.g., Toward Zero Deaths). Staff also suggested working with local governments to encourage more pedestrian options that connect destinations and street crossings that have updated safety features, such as Rectangular Rapid Flash Beacons (RRFB).
- MnDOT could revisit (and revise, if necessary) strategies for funding bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects through the Cost Participation for Cooperative Construction Projects policy and manual.⁴² If local construction funds are limited, a city or county government may not be able to afford a share of a project.

⁴² Cost Participation for Cooperative Construction Projects and Maintenance Responsibilities between MnDOT and Local Units of Government, <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/policy/financial/fm011.html>.

- MnDOT and local partners could work together to identify major walking origins and destinations for key communities. Staff suggested expanding the scope of Safe Routes to School planning grants to include community-wide pedestrian and bicycling studies.
- MnDOT could help local governments on their maintenance agreements so that clearing sidewalks and keeping wider driving lanes are prioritized after snow events.
- MnDOT could seek opportunities to support active transportation planning in local transportation plans. Staff cited active transportation planning with Otter Tail County as an example to follow in other communities.

This recommendation is primarily the responsibility of District 4. OTAT or other groups in the MnDOT CO may have roles in developing active transportation language for comprehensive plans, exploring funding opportunities, and engaging local partners, as needed. However, the lead party for the bulleted items above will depend on the specific project and context.

4. MnDOT should work with local partners during their planning processes to address land use and economic development needs.

In over one-third of conversations, participants discussed how land use planning creates challenges for those with limited transportation options, depending on the services needed and how cities have been laid out. Staff identified a few key areas that MnDOT could influence:

- Work with the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to increase the flexibility of the application process, application criteria, and funding options to allow more local governments to apply for funds through two coordinated programs: the Transportation Economic Development (TED) Program (administered by MnDOT) and the Transportation Economic Development Infrastructure (TEDI) Program.⁴³⁴⁴ Staff also suggested that the TED application increase scoring for applicants who include plans for pedestrian and bicycling improvements.⁴⁵
- Prioritize alternative funding sources (e.g., set-aside funds) to allocate resources to stand-alone pedestrian projects.
- Encourage local communities to invest in first- and last-mile connections near major employers. For example, several organizations mentioned Moorhead’s industrial park as a place with many jobs but poor transit options.
- MnDOT could seek opportunities to increase communication and get involved more often in the early planning stages of development projects in local communities. Currently, District 4 collaborates with local governments through involvement in comprehensive planning committees, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), Regional Development Organizations (RDO), and tribal governments. Staff said MnDOT could communicate more frequently with local communities on when to submit information to District 4 for review. As with this report’s third recommendation, staff suggestions also included early involvement in plan and plat review phases, and county safety plan development (e.g., Towards Zero Deaths).

⁴³ More information on the Transportation Economic Development Program is available on MnDOT’s website: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/funding/ted/>.

⁴⁴ More information on the Transportation Economic Development Infrastructure Program is available on DEED’s website: <https://mn.gov/deed/government/financial-assistance/business-funding/tedi/>.

⁴⁵ According to MnDOT staff in the Office of Transportation Systems Management, a revised TED application process is being piloted.

- Monitor the progress from a school siting pilot in District 4 and use the lessons learned to inform decisions. This effort is led by the Performance Risk and Investment Analysis (PRIA) Unit within the Office of Transportation System Management (OTSM) and in collaboration with District 4.

This recommendation is primarily the responsibility of District 4. However, staff in OTAT or OTSM may be able to offer District 4 guidance on engaging local partners, as needed.

5. MnDOT should continue to measure the impacts of its efforts to increase transportation equity.

To better understand the results of its equity efforts, staff at the implementation meeting proposed that MnDOT develop a performance monitoring plan to measure effectiveness of its equity work. For example, a performance monitoring system would help document the actions taken to address equity issues, how well actions are being implemented, and ultimately, if individuals and communities are better off. The District 4 management team should create a project team with staff from all District 4 offices to design a performance monitoring plan and start the process. Using an external facilitator would be helpful in the design phase and to address challenges such as measuring multi-year projects and tracking the district's indirect contribution to actions on which MnDOT's partners are the ones taking the lead. So that stakeholders feel heard by MnDOT, the performance monitoring plan should also track whether feedback the conversation participants provided through this study is being addressed.

OTSM staff at MnDOT's Central Office are beginning a related effort in summer 2020 to understand equity in the context of the statewide performance measures. The initiative includes auditing existing statewide performance measures that will look for bias in existing data sources, recommending new data sources as necessary, and reviewing opportunities to include qualitative data in decision making. District 4 should coordinate with OTSM to receive updates and to learn from each other's efforts.

To align efforts, this recommendation is the shared responsibility of the new District 4 project team on performance monitoring and staff in OTSM.

MAD also recommends the following action, which is related to overall findings from the study:

6. MnDOT should continue to establish and build relationships with groups, agencies and organizations not traditionally engaged in transportation conversations

It is important for MnDOT and District 4 to continue to build on the relationships initiated during the transportation equity conversations. At a minimum, MnDOT should share information with groups who have provided input in any public engagement effort, planning study, project (like these equity conversations), or construction project. The conversation participants who agreed to ongoing engagement from MnDOT should be added to stakeholder contact lists for projects of all sizes—not just for large projects. District 4 staff could also consider check-ins with participants (such as transit agencies) at regular intervals, or contracting or partnering with some of these organizations for engagement efforts.

Those who were not contacted for interviews as part of this project appear in Appendix G as a list of potential contacts for District 4 staff.⁴⁶ The appendix also has suggestions from conversation participants who were asked to provide information on who else would be important to talk to regarding transportation equity. Additionally, Appendix H lists other opportunities and initiatives participants in conversations identified as possibly relevant to MnDOT's work in equity.⁴⁷ Using the list of conversation participants and the lists in Appendices G and H, MnDOT could get feedback on the potential solutions that staff proposed at implementation meetings.

This recommendation is primarily the responsibility of District 4. However, there may be some work that is more appropriately addressed at the statewide level or with the support of the other areas within MnDOT.

⁴⁶ Refer to Appendix G on page 73.

⁴⁷ Refer to Appendix H on page 75

Appendix A: List of organizations interviewed

Individuals from the following 34 organizations participated in conversations. Several District 4 interviews included representatives from more than one organization.

- Afro American Development Association
- Becker-Clay-Otter Tail-Wilkin (BCOW) Adult Mental Health Initiative
- Becker County Veterans Service
- Conexiones
- Cultural Diversity Resources
- Dancing Sky Area on Aging
- Detroit Lakes Adult Basic Education
- Disabled American Veterans of Minnesota
- Douglas County Car Care Program
- Early Childhood/Community Education Center—Detroit Lakes
- Fargo-Moorhead Metropolitan Council of Governments (Metro COG)
- Freedom Resource Center for Independent Living
- Immigration Law Center of Minnesota—Moorhead
- Lake Region Healthcare
- Lakes Crisis and Resource Center
- Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota
- Mahube-Otwa Community Action Partnership
- MATBUS
- Morris Area Schools—Community Education
- Morris Intercultural Education Initiative—University of Minnesota Morris
- New York Mills School District #553
- Otter Tail County Veterans Services Office
- Partnership 4 Health SHIP
- Pelican Rapids School District #548
- Productive Alternatives Inc.
- Rainbow Rider
- Someplace Safe
- Tri-County Health
- United Way of Cass-Clay
- West Central Initiative RDC
- West Central Minnesota Communities Action
- CareerForce—Moorhead (CareerForce is a collaborative partnership between the Department of Employment and Economic Development, the Minnesota Association of Workforce Boards, and the Governor’s Workforce Development Board)
- Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership
- Community Education Center—Detroit Lakes

Appendix B: Project team and interviewers

The following people were involved in planning, design, data collection, analysis, and implementation of the District 4 equity initiative:

MnDOT District 4 staff:

- Brian Bausman
- Nate Bausman
- Jane Butzer
- Bryan Christensen
- Nathan Gannon
- Justin Knopf
- Tom Lundberg
- Emma Olson
- Tom Pace
- Katy Reiersen
- Mary Safgren
- Lori Vanderhider
- Shiloh Wahl

MnDOT Central Office staff:

- Amber Dallman
- Olivia Dorow Hovland
- Hannah Pritchard
- Jake Rueter
- Philip Schaffner
- Scott Shaffer
- Jim Skoog

MAD Senior Management Consultants:

- Lisa Anderson
- Jessica Burke
- Jake Granholm
- Ashley Johnson
- Matt Kane
- Kristina Krull
- Mariyam Naadha
- Abra Pollock
- Charlie Sellw

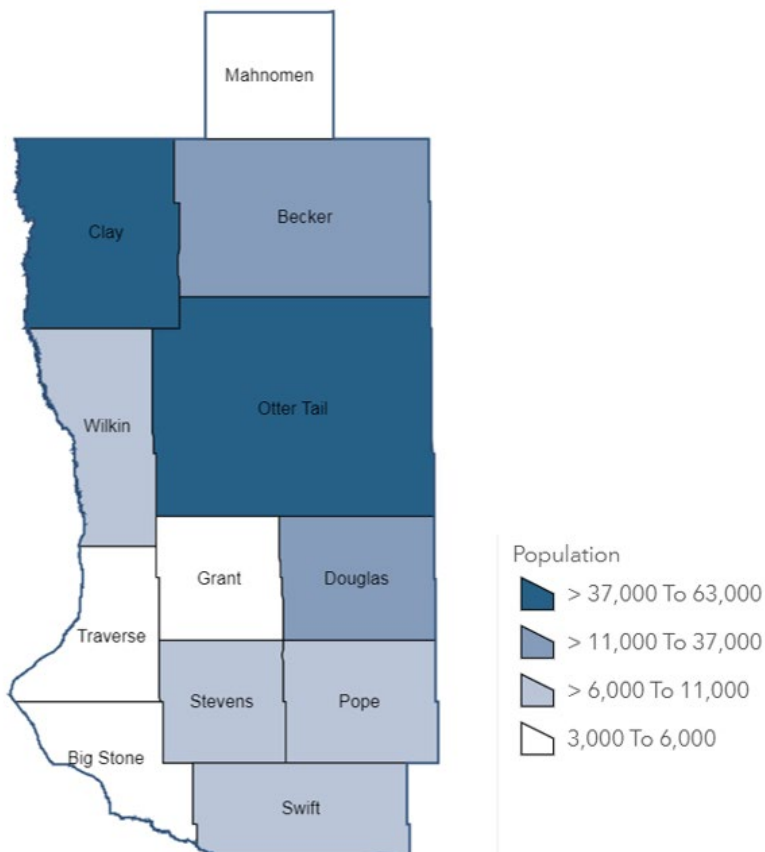
Appendix C: District 4 demographic analysis



Overview

Located in the West Central region of the state, the Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) District 4 is composed of 12 counties: Becker, Big Stone, Clay, Douglas, Grant, Mahnommen, Otter Tail, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Traverse, and Wilkin. This report summarizes key demographic characteristics of District 4. Unless otherwise noted, the figures in this document are derived from the 2017 US Census five-year estimates.

Figure 3. Map of District 4 counties and populations



- **Total district population:** 246,629 people (less than 5 percent of Minnesota's population).
- **Total households:** 101,337, with an average of 2.4 persons per household (same as the statewide average).

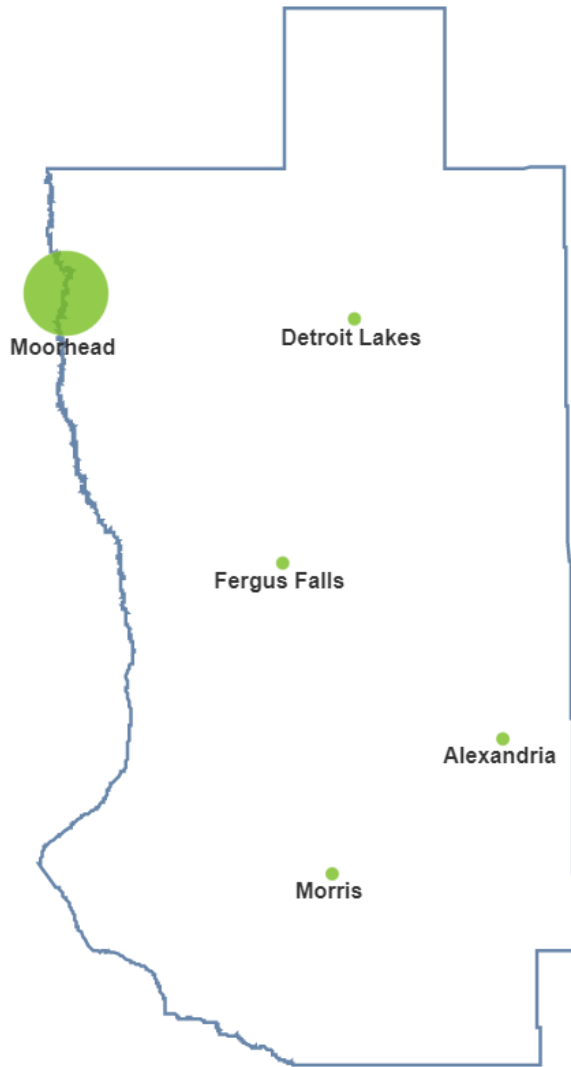
- **Largest county by population:** Clay County (62,040 people) is the largest county by population in District 4. Becker, Clay, Douglas, and Otter Tail Counties comprise over three-quarters (77 percent) of the total district population.
- **Largest city by population:** Moorhead (in Clay County), with 43,440 people. The City of Moorhead is part of the larger Fargo-Moorhead (Fargo, North Dakota) metropolitan statistical area.

Since 2000, District 4's population has increased by 6 percent. Five of the 12 counties grew in population, with Clay County growing the most (21 percent increase). The population decreased in seven counties: Big Stone, Grant, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Traverse, and Wilkin. By comparison, the State of Minnesota grew by 12 percent overall during the same 17-year period.

Table 2. Population by county

Geography	2000 census	2010 census	2017 estimates	Percent change since 2000
District 4	233,025	242,153	246,629	6%
Becker	30,000	32,504	33,552	12%
Big Stone	5,820	5,269	5,039	-13%
Clay	51,229	58,999	62,040	21%
Douglas	32,821	36,009	36,891	12%
Grant	6,289	6,018	5,923	-6%
Mahnomen	5,190	5,413	5,500	6%
Otter Tail	57,159	57,303	57,790	1%
Pope	11,236	10,995	10,932	-3%
Stevens	10,053	9,726	9,759	-3%
Swift	11,956	9,783	9,448	-21%
Traverse	4,134	3,558	3,357	-19%
Wilkin	7,138	6,576	6,398	-10%
State of Minnesota	4,919,479	5,303,925	5,490,726	12%

Figure 4. Map of the largest cities in District 4



One-quarter of the district’s population (25 percent) lives in Clay County. Within that county, the City of Moorhead is the biggest city, with 43,440 residents,⁴⁸ making it more than three times the size of the next largest city in District 4 (Otter Tail County’s Fergus Falls, with a population of 13,754). Table 2 lists the cities in District 4 with 5,000 or more people (based on 2017 estimates).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The combined population of the cities of Moorhead, Moorhead Township, and Dilworth is 46,300.

⁴⁹ Minnesota State Demographic Center: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/population-data/our-estimates/pop-finder2.jsp>

Table 3. Cities in District 4 with a population over 5,000

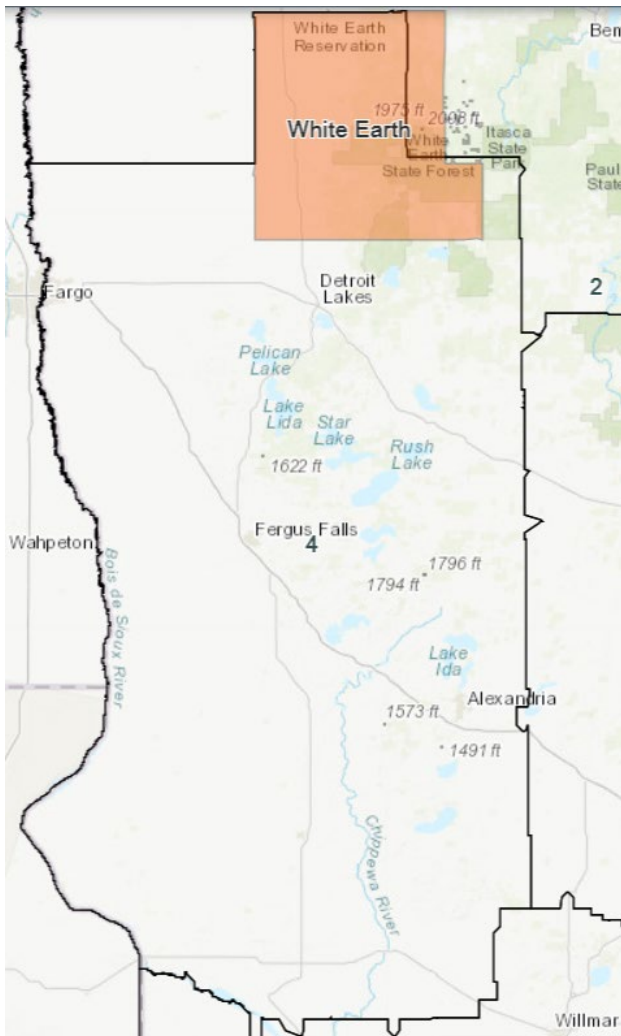
City (county)	Population	Households
Moorhead (Clay County)	43,440	16,895
Fergus Falls (Otter Tail County)	13,754	6,136
Alexandria (Douglas County)	13,673	6,536
Detroit Lakes (Becker County)	9,409	4,321
Morris (Stevens County)	5,513	2,052

Population characteristics

Race and ethnicity

- **Racial groups:** About 7 percent of District 4 residents identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian, two or more races, or another race. American Indian or Alaska Native is the largest group (3 percent) followed by Black or African American (1 percent). White is the largest racial group (93 percent).
 - **American Indians or Alaska Natives:** Mahnomen County partially overlaps with the White Earth Nation, and it has the largest proportion of American Indian or Alaska Native residents in District 4, at 43 percent (Becker County has the second largest proportion, at 8 percent). Adding the Mahnomen County residents who identify as Native American or Alaska Native (43 percent) to those who identify as at least one other race (7 percent), the proportion increases to 50 percent.

Figure 5. District 4 Tribal Nations map



- **Trends for people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color:** Since 2000, the district population for people identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian, two or more races, or another race increased by 47 percent. Statewide, the American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian, two or more races, or another race population increased by 72 percent during the same period. The racial group that increased the most was Black or African American residents, rising 222 percent (from 1,028 to 3,315). The number of residents who identify as two or more races increased by 73 percent (from 2,992 to 5,172).
- **Hispanic or Latino ethnicity:** Three percent of all District 4 residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, with Stevens and Swift Counties having the largest proportions of this population (both at about 5 percent).
- **Birthplace:** Ninety-eight percent of the district's residents were born in the United States and 68 percent were born in Minnesota. Across the entire state, 92 percent of residents were born in the United States and 74 percent were born in Minnesota. For foreign-born, naturalized US citizens in District 4, Asia was the most common region of origin, followed by Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Latin America was the most common region of origin for foreign-born non-US citizens. These trends are similar for foreign-born residents statewide as well.

- **English proficiency:** Nearly all District 4 residents (99 percent) speak English very well. Statewide, the estimate is 95 percent. After English, Spanish is the most common language spoken at home, followed by Somali, Mandarin Chinese, and Russian. Less common languages include Arabic, Cambodian, and Vietnamese.⁵⁰

Age

- **Youth:** Twenty-three percent of the district’s residents are under age 18, which is the same as the statewide average. Mahnomens County has the highest proportion of residents under the age of 18, at 31 percent.
- **Seniors:** The proportion of people age 65 and older in District 4 is 19 percent, with Big Stone and Traverse both having the highest percentages of this population (25 percent). Statewide, 14 percent of the population is age 65 or older.

Disability

- **People with a disability:** About 13 percent of residents in District 4 have a disability.⁵¹ The largest proportion of residents with a disability are in Traverse County (19 percent), while the smallest proportion is in Clay County (10 percent). Statewide, 11 percent of the population has a disability.

Veterans

- **Veteran population:** About 7 percent of District 4 residents over the age of 18 are military veterans. Big Stone and Traverse Counties have the largest proportion of veterans (9 percent each), and Clay and Stevens Counties have the smallest (5 percent each). About one-quarter (27 percent) of the district’s disabled veteran population lives in Otter Tail County.

Educational attainment

Table 3 compares the highest educational attainment for the population age 25 and older in District 4 with Minnesota as a whole.

Table 4. Highest educational attainment for population age 25 and older

Highest educational attainment	District 4	Minnesota
Less than high school diploma	7%	7%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	30%	25%
Some college, no degree	22%	21%
Associate’s degree	15%	11%

⁵⁰ Minnesota Department of Education, Primary Home Language County by County 2013–2014.

⁵¹ The American Community Survey asks respondents to answer questions covering six disability types: hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, cognitive difficulty, ambulatory difficulty, self-care difficulty, and independent living difficulty. Respondents who report any one of the six disability types are considered to have a disability. See more at <https://www.census.gov/topics/health/disability/guidance/data-collection-ac.html>.

Highest educational attainment	District 4	Minnesota
Bachelor's degree	18%	23%
Graduate or professional degree	7%	12%

- **Highest level of education:** Ninety-three percent of District 4 residents have at least a high school diploma or equivalent, which is equal to the statewide proportion. However, the share of residents with an associate's degree or higher (40 percent) is lower than the statewide share (46 percent).
- **Students:** Currently, 6 percent of District 4 residents are enrolled in college or graduate school. The largest concentrations of college and graduate students are in Clay (14 percent) and Stevens Counties (16 percent).⁵²

Income and labor force

- **Median household income:** The average median household income in the district is \$54,797 (in 2017 inflation-adjusted dollars), which is lower than the statewide median household income of \$65,699. Clay County has the highest median household income (\$61,409), while Big Stone County has the smallest (\$48,299).
- **People in poverty:** About 11 percent of people in District 4 live below the federal poverty level.⁵³ This is nearly the same as the statewide percentage (10 percent). Mahnomon County has the largest proportion of people in poverty (23 percent), and Douglas and Pope Counties have the smallest (8 percent).
- **Labor force participation rate:** Sixty-four percent of the working-age population 16 years and older are in the labor force, which is lower than the state's rate (70 percent). Clay County has the highest participation rate (71 percent), and Big Stone County has the lowest (60 percent).
 - For Clay County residents who are employed, nearly half (49 percent) work primarily in Fargo, North Dakota.⁵⁴ Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) work primarily in Moorhead.
- **Labor force projections:** Overall the working-age population 16 years and over is projected to decline by 1 percent over the next ten years.⁵⁵ The 55 to 64 age group is projected to decline the most (27 percent), while the 75 and older age group is projected to have the largest increase (41 percent). The next largest increase is projected for the 25 to 34 age group (13 percent).

⁵² Clay County is home to Concordia College, Minnesota State Community and Technical College, and Minnesota State University Moorhead (all located in the City of Moorhead), and North Dakota State University is located across the state border from the county in Fargo, North Dakota. Stevens County is home to the University of Minnesota–Morris.

⁵³ According to the Census Bureau, "a family and every individual in it are considered to be in poverty if the family's total income is less than the threshold calculated based on family size and composition.

⁵⁴ Based on 2015 US Census estimates for primary job locations.

⁵⁵ Minnesota State Demographer's Office: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/labor-force/>

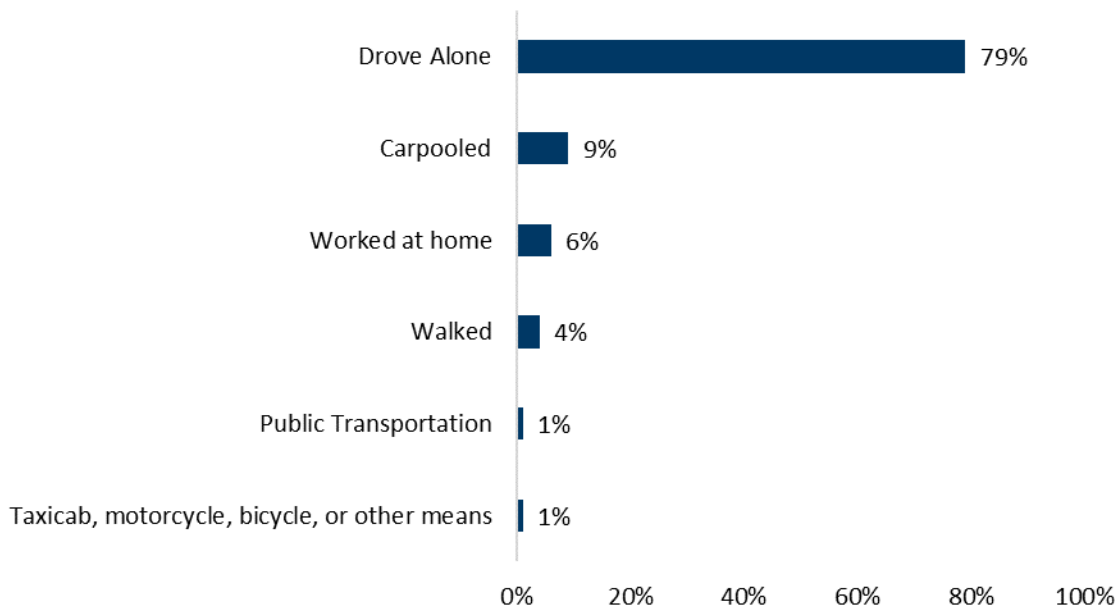
Table 5. District 4 labor force projections

Age group	2020	2025	2030	Percent change (2020 to 2030)
District 4	126,286	125,739	124,831	-1%
16 to 24	23,028	22,907	22,451	-3%
25 to 34	24,167	26,319	27,335	13%
35 to 44	24,104	24,027	23,809	-1%
45 to 54	21,767	21,652	22,904	5%
55 to 64	23,459	19,883	17,216	-27%
65 to 74	8,229	9,126	8,951	9%
75+	1,532	1,825	2,165	41%

Means of travel

- Households and vehicles:** Approximately 6 percent of households (6,123 households) have no vehicles, which is close to the statewide average of 7 percent. Among households with vehicles, 29 percent (27,399 households) have one vehicle and 71 percent (67,815 households) have two or more vehicles.

Figure 6. Means of travel to work



- Traveling to work:** Over three-quarters (79 percent) of workers age 16 and older drive alone to work, which is close to the level for the state as a whole (78 percent). Traverse County had the largest proportion of workers who carpooled (15 percent). The proportion of workers across the district using public transportation to get to work was small (1 percent or less).
- Commute times:** About 45 percent of workers age 16 and older who did not work from home had a commute time of less than 15 minutes, while 21 percent had commute times of 30 minutes or more.

Stevens County had the largest proportion of workers commuting less than 15 minutes (72 percent), and Grant County had the largest proportion commuting 30 minutes or more (33 percent).

Table 6. County-by-county comparison for selected demographic data

County	Total population	BIPOC population (%)	Percent under 18	Percent 65 and older	Percent disabled	Median household income	Persons in poverty (%)	Zero-vehicle households (%)
Becker	33,552	12%	25%	19%	13%	\$55,884	13%	6%
Big Stone	5,039	1%	21%	25%	16%	\$48,299	12%	8%
Clay	62,040	8%	24%	13%	10%	\$61,409	12%	7%
Douglas	36,891	3%	21%	22%	13%	\$58,667	8%	5%
Grant	5,923	3%	22%	23%	14%	\$53,727	11%	4%
Mahnomen ⁵⁶	5,500	53%	31%	17%	14%	\$57,289	23%	9%
Otter Tail	57,790	5%	22%	22%	13%	\$55,181	9%	6%
Pope	10,932	3%	21%	23%	14%	\$58,198	8%	4%
Stevens	9,759	7%	21%	17%	12%	\$57,552	15%	7%
Swift	9,448	5%	22%	21%	14%	\$49,556	12%	6%
Traverse	3,357	7%	21%	25%	19%	\$48,889	11%	7%
Wilkin	6,398	6%	23%	18%	15%	\$52,917	10%	6%

⁵⁶ Mahnomen County partially overlaps with the White Earth Nation; residents of White Earth Nation are not included in these estimates.

Appendix D: Advancing Transportation Equity project—key communities for conversations

Management Analysis and Development (MAD) developed the following in early 2019 to help guide the District 4 community conversation for the transportation equity study.

This document summarizes key communities within MnDOT District 4 for potential inclusion in the Advancing Transportation Equity project. **The goal of this document was to provide a starting point for interviewee identification.** The interview populations were identified based on the current demographics and trends⁵⁷ in the district and include populations with known inequities. Additional background and analysis about each community is included in the following paragraphs.

It is important to recognize that these groups are not discrete. Transportation concerns often overlap between groups and an interviewee may represent multiple groups. Additionally, an individual may belong to more than one of the communities identified and may experience overlapping inequities.

Overview of District 4

Located in West Central Minnesota, the Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) District 4 is composed of 12 counties. Combined, these counties represent 12 percent of Minnesota's total land area and nearly 5 percent of the total population. One-quarter of the district's population lives in Clay County (62,040 residents). Within that county, the City of Moorhead is the biggest city, with 43,440 residents, making it more than three times the size of the next largest in city in District 4 (Otter Tail County's Fergus Falls, with a population of 13,754).

Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities

Biased policies and practices of the past have contributed to employment, wealth, and education inequities for people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color living in Minnesota. Specific to transportation, historical inequities include access, safety, and lower participation in decision-making for projects and future planning.

About 7 percent of the residents in District 4 identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian, two or more races, or another race. American Indians account for the largest group (3 percent of the total population) followed by Black or African American residents (1 percent of the total population). Mahnomen County partially overlaps with the White Earth Nation, and it has the largest proportion of American

⁵⁷ The demographics and trends were derived from the 2017 US Census five-year estimates and the Minnesota State Demographic Center.

Indian or Alaska Native residents in District 4, at 43 percent (Becker County has the second largest proportion, at 8 percent).

Since 2000, the district population for people identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian, two or more races, or another race increased by 47 percent. Statewide, the American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian, two or more races, or another race population increased by 72 percent during the same period. The racial group that increased the most was Black or African American residents, rising 222 percent (from 1,028 to 3,315). The number of residents who identify as two or more races increased by 73 percent (from 2,992 to 5,172).

Among all racial groups, 3 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino, which makes it the largest ethnic minority in the district. Stevens and Swift Counties have the largest proportions of Hispanic or Latino residents (both at about 5 percent).

One percent of the people in District 4 speak English less than very well. Statewide, the estimate is 5 percent. After English, Spanish is the most common language spoken at home, followed by Somali, Mandarin Chinese, and Russian. Less common languages include Arabic, Cambodian, and Vietnamese.

The City of Moorhead and Clay County

Moorhead and Clay County constitute a significant part of the federally designated Fargo Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), home to an estimated 232,660 residents on both sides of the Minnesota-North Dakota border.⁵⁸ While the Fargo MSA is similar to District 4 as a whole for many of the characteristics relevant to this MnDOT equity initiative, it has a much greater percentage of people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color—more than 12 percent, compared with about 7 percent for District 4. Similarly, the share of Fargo MSA residents who were born outside of the United States, at about 6 percent, is significantly greater than the share for all of District 4, at 2 percent, as is the share of residents who speak English less than very well (estimates for the share of the population over the age of five that speaks English less than very well are nearly 3 percent for the Fargo MSA and 1 percent for District 4).

Older adults, especially those aging in place

About 19 percent of the population in District 4 is over age 65, which is slightly higher than the statewide percentage (14 percent). Big Stone and Traverse Counties both have higher percentages of populations ages 65 and older at 25 percent each. People 75 and older are projected to increase 41 percent over the next ten years. Concerns for these groups include transportation needs to access services and care providers, which should be taken into consideration as part of this project.

Low-income (people living in poverty)

The primary transportation equity concern for low-income households is the ability to access jobs, services, and other opportunities. About 11 percent of people in District 4 have incomes lower than the federal poverty level, which is nearly the same as the statewide percentage (10 percent). The average median household income in

⁵⁸ Based on 2017 US Census estimates using 2013–2017 American Community Survey five-year data.

the district is \$54,797 (in 2017 inflation-adjusted dollars), which is lower than the statewide median household income of \$65,699. Clay County has the highest median household income (\$61,409), while Big Stone County has the smallest (\$48,299).

People living with disabilities

About 13 percent of the district's population are people with disabilities, which is slightly higher than the statewide percentage (11 percent). Nearly one-third of people 65 and older in the district have a disability. Better understanding of people's nuanced experiences will help ensure that individuals with the disabilities such as hearing and vision impairments or ambulatory, self-care, or independent living difficulties are able to travel with the same ease and access as those who do not have a disability.

Veterans

About 7 percent of the district's population are military veterans. Nearly two-thirds of the veterans are 65 and older. Overall, 32 percent of the district's veteran population has some type of disability, and over one-quarter (27 percent) live in Otter Tail County. In addition to mobility concerns, access to veteran's services in District 4 should also be considered as part of this project.

Women and girls

Women of all ages make up 50 percent of District 4's population. This is similar to the State of Minnesota overall. A common transportation concern for women is safety, such as walking to and waiting for public transit, especially at night. Other transportation issues include consideration of travel needs and patterns due to the importance of women's role in child-rearing and household management, women's share in the aging population, and cultural differences among cultural or ethnic groups (such as BIPOC communities and immigrants and new Americans). These aspects should be considered as part of this project.

Zero-vehicle households

About 6 percent of households in District 4 do not have a vehicle. Equity concerns with zero-vehicle households are related to access to jobs and other opportunities. The availability and frequency of transit service, in addition to bicycling and walking options, are important when considering the transportation needs of zero-vehicle households.

Other communities and organizations for consideration

Information is not readily available for all demographic groups. In some cases data is not regularly collected and reported or individuals may not feel comfortable providing information. However, a lack of data for some demographic groups does not mean those communities are not experiencing transportation inequities. The list below identifies other potential communities for consideration in the Advancing Transportation Equity project:

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual
- People released from incarceration

- People experiencing homelessness
- People experiencing chemical dependency and other addictions

Other organization types for consideration that work with one or more of the communities identified include:

- Colleges and universities: Clay County is home to Concordia College, Minnesota State Community and Technical College, and Minnesota State University Moorhead (all located in the City of Moorhead). North Dakota State University is located across the state border from the county in Fargo, North Dakota. Stevens County is home to the University of Minnesota–Morris.
- Domestic violence support service providers
- Public and nonprofit housing assistance organizations such as public housing agencies and community action partnerships focused on housing
- Regional health care providers including Sanford Health and Essentia Health
- Social service nonprofits that have missions to work with one or more of the communities such as Dorothy Day, Goodwill Easter Seals, Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, and United Way
- Substance abuse and intervention service providers

Appendix E: Advancing Transportation Equity interview guide

Interviewers used the following questions to guide their conversations and were instructed to use probes to further explore topic areas.

1. Broadly speaking, what are some challenges facing the community or communities you serve/represent?
2. Which transportation modes are most often used by the community to carry out day-to-day activities? (Including attending work, school, health care appointments, social, and cultural activities?)
3. Which modes are most critical and what challenges do they encounter in accessing these modes? (Including private vehicles, transit, bicycling, walking, etc.) What, if any, locations are particularly difficult to get to?
4. How well are nonmotorized modes and public transportation in this area meeting (or not meeting) the needs of the community?
5. What, if any, safety concern does the community have with regard to transportation?
6. What does equity mean to your organization?
7. Can you describe a transportation project or program that impacted the community your organization serves/represent and how the community was involved in the decision-making?

What, if any, examples do you have of when the community has been successful in advocating on issues important to them?

Appendix F: Findings and potential solutions from Implementation Planning Meeting 1

MnDOT Central Office and District 4 management team and staff participated in a virtual implementation meeting on June 2, 2020, to review the study’s findings. Prior to the meeting, MAD invited meeting attendees from District 4 and MnDOT’s Central Office to complete a survey that asked respondents to select which findings are within the agency’s sphere of influence. The meeting participants generated potential solutions in small groups (listed in the next section), and then the larger group voted on which of these solutions should be the highest priorities for the agency. **Proposed solutions that received participant votes appear in bold**, with the number of votes listed afterward in parentheses.

Findings: People with disabilities

People with disabilities are among the communities transported the most often by transit providers. People rely on volunteer drivers, medical transportation services, and veterans’ services rides—however, certain options are not licensed or physically able to transport people who use wheelchairs or electric mobility scooters.

Transportation challenges include:

- Limited transportation options available with wheelchair access or other mobility accommodations
- Lack of curbside assistance to access transit vehicles
- Mobility limitations due to lack of snow removal and sidewalk accessibility concerns
- Lack of intersections with a stoplight or accessible pedestrian signals or audible signals

Potential solutions:

- **Accessibility and ADA compliance: Make sure to connect with local governments and communities to identify and accommodate their needs. For example, talk to care facilities to identify specific areas of need. (7 votes)**
- **Public engagement: MnDOT is already doing a lot of public engagement. For example, ADA components are on the website. Other ideas include: (1 vote)**
 - Talk to people in person
 - Listen to people and their complaints and access issues
- **Incorporate accessibility considerations into planning studies (1 vote)**
 - Planning studies can help identify needs down to township—can make sure to include accessibility considerations.
 - Use findings from our statewide equity effort to incorporate into future planning studies. This will allow us ample time to coordinate these efforts with the large group of stakeholders we see in communities and on projects.
 - We can plan all the different aspects in our plans.

- **Connect with local governments and communities about needs at the onset of projects. For example, noting where there are pedestrian signals and adding APS (1 vote)**
- Snow removal: It is a local issue, but MnDOT has a role in increasing compliance.
- Accessibility on MnDOT ROW (right-of-way): MnDOT is already doing an inventory of where accessibility is lacking and is working on updates. When there is a project, it can be addressed.

Findings: Public engagement

Participants in more than half of the conversations said they did not feel informed about transportation projects. Most commonly, participants said information and opportunities to provide input are not shared directly with organizations or community members. Frequently used methods of engagement, such as public meetings, advisory groups, and media outlets may also not be meeting the needs of communities such as immigrants, veterans, and the aging population.

Common effective communication methods include:⁵⁹

- Prioritizing direct engagement (e.g., face-to-face throughout a project’s lifecycle)
- Sharing flyers or newsletters with utility bills, or services already received, such as Meals on Wheels
- Sharing information through word of mouth, or between family members
- Posting announcements on bulletin boards in community gathering spots
- Working with faith-based and community-based organizations that are interested in partnering with MnDOT
- Making communications accessible and meaningful (e.g., using plain language, providing translations, stating the impact on the community)
- Holding events and conversations in places where community members already congregate, such as cafés, grocery stores, and sporting events

Potential solutions:

- **General training on other cultures, cultural awareness. So we know what they [communities] need versus what we think is right. Ask, “What makes sense to you? What can we do better?” (12 votes)**
- **Attend community organizations’ meetings; leverage existing meetings that they [MnDOT staff] have to go [to] and present to specific groups. (3 votes)**
- **Provide additional times for people to come to open houses. Not just the typical 4–6 p.m. time. Offer a virtual version. (3 votes)**
- **Reach out to not only representatives of communities, but community members themselves. Members of organizations, transit users, get perspective of lived experiences. (2 votes)**
- **Set up poster boards or ways to participate in a survey or engagement activity that doesn’t require discussion; sensitive to the fact that some may not want to speak to us in person. (1 vote)**
- Listen and speak directly to how people would like to be communicated with.
 - Examples include posters, open houses, flyers, and in-person visits.
 - Be responsive.
- Language barriers: Do we have the materials to translate materials accurately? Oral communication, written communication, ADA compliance, sign language.

⁵⁹ The feedback from conversation participants was gathered by MnDOT prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. MnDOT will adapt recommendations and actions as needed based on state and federal public health safety guidelines.

- Partner with businesses to provide transportation to workers? And to get information out to their workers. Set up a table in the office to answer questions.
- Outreach to fairs, expos, public events to get the word out; go to places of worship, Walmart stores, community centers.

Findings: Employment and economic development

Over three-quarters of the participants discussed the relationship between transportation and access to employment and economic development, including land use. Outside regional hubs, local grocery stores and other shopping are closing, which means people must travel farther to find options.

Challenges include:

- Limited transportation options for getting to jobs without a private vehicle, especially second- or third-shift jobs.
- Shift jobs at production and manufacturing facilities are further away from the regional city centers and available housing.
- The lack of jobs paying livable wages in the region contributes to the poverty and homelessness.
- Newer buildings such as schools and hospitals are being built on the outer edges of communities and farther away from affordable housing available for people with limited incomes and transportation options.
- Several participants discussed other land use challenges including:
 - The difficulty of getting into and out of downtown areas without a private vehicle
 - Major roads or train tracks that separate communities from services and amenities

Potential solutions:

- **Second and third shift transit: Reach out to large employers with second and third shifts to understand their needs (e.g., factories, medical providers). (5 votes)**
- **First/Last Mile Connections: Invest in connections, particularly near major employers. (4 votes)**
- **Change TED (Transportation Economic Development) funding process. (2 vote)**
 - **Increase flexibility to match our process to developers.**
 - **Consider a rolling application.**
 - **Evaluate if projects need to be in STIP, CHIMES, etc.**
 - **Encourage applications from Greater MN.**
- **Collaborative community planning: Collaborate with community planners for ability to make one trip. Destinations spread out and can't be made in one trip. (1 vote)**
- Complete Streets investments: Expand opportunities to support economic development. Projects can't be built in all communities.
- Intercity services needed: Better connections to regional destinations and centers. Nonwork travel is expensive, if available at all (e.g., for shopping, going to pharmacy).
- Expand transit beyond 8 p.m. to 5 p.m. [service times].

Findings: Public transit

Nearly all participants said public transit is an important but limited transportation option for older adults, low-income residents, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people without private vehicles. Participants discussed public transit limitations and barriers to use including:

- Limited hours of operation
- Infrequent service
- Long wait and travel times
- Cost of using transit services

Potential solutions:

- **Need stronger connection between local officials and transit. There's a wide range of transit agencies, with different structures. Some joint powers, some county services, some city services. (10 votes)**
 - **Would like elected local officials to have a stronger connection to transit agencies. The benefit would be that the local officials would know the transit needs of their constituents, and they'd be better advocates for transit.**
- **Improve bus service: Extend services hours to certain workplaces to make it feasible for workers to commute by transit to second or third shift jobs. (4 votes)**
 - **Consider using vans instead of small buses to increase frequency and wheelchair accessibility.**
- **Lack of coordination between transit systems: Some people need to use multiple transit systems for medical trips; it's hard to do. Need a one-stop shop. (2 votes)**
- **Make transit work for daycare drop-off. Parents dropping kids off need to wait for next bus. It's much easier to drive.**

Findings: Walking

Participants in nearly three-quarters of the conversations noted winter weather conditions and related safety concerns are barriers to walking, particularly for older adults, people with disabilities, and parents with children. Participants cited barriers such as areas of cities and towns with sidewalks that do not connect to destinations or trail systems, stop abruptly, or are in poor conditions. In several conversations, participants talked about dangerous crossings with low visibility for cars, particularly across highways and other busy city roads.

Potential solutions:

- **Snow storage: Winter environment a challenge for people (3 votes)**
 - **Push to narrow driving lanes, but MnDOT has pushed back to keep lanes wider**
 - **Snow events can hinder downtown parking and walking.**
 - **Communities don't always prioritize clearing sidewalks in local maintenance agreements (creates barriers to walkers).**
 - **MnDOT could continue to raise issues.**
 - **MnDOT could take away maintenance agreement, as an option (but then it becomes MnDOT's responsibility).**
- **New developments in communities: MnDOT could be more involved with planning new community developments to help make sure there are more pedestrian options that connect and people feel safe**

using (schools, larger facilities along state highways); MnDOT tends to be consulted later, costs not always considered from the start. (3 votes)

- Have conversations early in the process so MnDOT can ask question even if not making the final decision (“How will people get to those locations?”)
- Challenge: Don’t have funding to do it all at once
- **Statewide walking plan (1 vote)**
 - Follow up at district level for how to implement the plan.
 - Identifying major origin and destinations for underserved populations (e.g., low-income households)
- Appropriate lighting: Pedestrian scale lighting so people can feel safe walking (safe from vehicles and personal security), CO item.
- Scoping process: Bike and Ped staff already identify gaps in project (continued practice).
 - Increase community-wide planning so the trunk highway fits in at the local level.

Findings: Biking

Two-thirds of the conversation participants—including some of those who cited bicycles as important for travel—described barriers that limit or prevent people from using bicycles to get around. Participants described barriers, including:

- Winter weather conditions
- Road safety concerns (e.g., poorly maintained roadside shoulders, sharing the road in the fall when trucks are hauling the annual sugar beet harvest)
- Long distances to destinations
- Travel times, particularly for those with multiple jobs and tight schedules
- A lack of connectivity among bicycle lanes and trails
- The costs for bicycles (e.g., maintenance, helmets, and secure locks)

A few participants pointed to the impracticality of bicycle travel for people with physical disabilities, parents with young children, and shoppers with lots to carry home from stores.

Potential solutions:

- **Measure equity impact of projects: There is a disconnect between what we talk about and what we implement. If we’re talking about being equitable, we should be able to measure it. (10 votes)**
 - Put a system into place to measure equity impact.
- **Set aside funding for standalone projects. (3 votes)**
- Work with OTAT: Ask OTAT to take the lead on coordinating efforts to get the active transportation program funded.
 - A lot of districts have bike plans, are doing equity plans through this study—could coordinate through their district planning coordinator on working with local advocates.

Appendix G: Additional suggested organizations

The table below lists the organizations and people that participants suggested for additional conversations. These contacts are an opportunity for District 4 staff to expand on the findings from the community conversations and explore additional areas of interest that arise from the findings and recommendations.

Table 7. Additional suggested organizations with city

Organization	City
A Place to Belong	Fergus Falls
Becker County 4H	Detroit Lakes
Center for African Immigrants and Refugees Organization (CAIRO)	St. Cloud
City of Fergus Falls	Fergus Falls
City of Moorhead	Moorhead
Clay County Adult Protection Services	Moorhead
Clay County Social Services	Moorhead
Clay County Waivered Services	Moorhead
Countryside Public Health	Ortonville
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialists (DHS)	Moorhead
Detroit Lakes Middle School	Detroit Lakes
Fergus Falls Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee	Fergus Falls

Organization	City
Frazee Care Center	Frazee
Minnesota State Community and Technical College—Accessibility Resources	Fergus Falls
Neighbor to Neighbor	Frazee
Pelican Rapids Oaks (Organizing Acts of Kindness for Seniors)	Pelican Rapids
Region 4 Adult Mental Health Consortium	Alexandria
Rural Enrichment and Counseling Headquarters Inc. (REACH)	Hawley
Minnesota State University Moorhead—Women’s Center	Moorhead
Welcome Place	Pelican Rapids
Wilkin County Child Protective Services	Breckenridge

Appendix H: Other opportunities and initiatives

Listed below are other opportunities and initiatives participants in conversations identified as possibly relevant to MnDOT's work in equity.

- **Agricultural community representatives** (e.g., corn growers and pork producers)
- **Block Nurse programs**, a neighborhood-based system of home care designed to meet the needs of the elderly. There are two service providers: nurses trained to treat elderly individuals and block companions who are trained to provide home health aide and other home services.
- **Homeless shelters**
- **Large employers** in the West Central region
- **Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota**
- **Disability Services** provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services
- **Other transit providers** (Anderson Buses, Friendly Rider, Otter Tail Coaches, White Earth Transit)
- **Project Homeless Connect** (Central Minnesota United Way)