



Merced County Coordinated Transit Service Plan

July 2009



**FINAL PLAN ADOPTED
AUGUST 2009**

INTRODUCTION

The Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG), as the designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), is responsible for transportation planning in Merced County. This includes development and adoption of planning policies and documents, review and coordination of transportation planning, and transportation policy direction. MCAG is the lead agency for the development of a Coordinated Transit Service Plan under the direction of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU).

PURPOSE OF PLAN

The Coordinated Transit Services Plan (CTSP) is prepared in response to the coordinated planning requirements of SAFETEA-LU, which requires that projects selected for funding under the Job Access and Reverse Commute 5316 Program (JARC), New Freedom 5317 Program and Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities 5310 Program be derived from a locally developed, coordinated public transit-human services transportation plan.

A locally developed, CTSP identifies the transportation needs of individuals with disabilities, older adults, and people with low incomes, provides strategies for meeting those local needs, and prioritizes transportation services for funding and implementation. At a minimum the plan must include the following elements:

1. An **assessment of available services** identifying current providers, public and private;
2. An **assessment of transportation needs** for individuals with disabilities, older adults and persons with low incomes – this assessment can be based on the experiences and perceptions of planning partners or on data collection efforts and gaps in service;
3. **Strategies and/or activities and/or projects** to address the identified gaps between current services and needs, as well as opportunities to improve efficiencies in service delivery;
4. **Priorities for implementation** based on resources (from multiple program sources), time and feasibility for implementing specific strategies and/or activities identified.

PROJECT IDENTIFICATION and FUNDING

As a planning tool, the CTSP identifies a set of strategies and programs and establishes a framework for the prioritization of projects in the region seeking federal funding assistance. FTA now requires projects funded through the programs listed below be “derived from a locally developed coordinated public transit-human services transportation plan.” The CTSP will be used as the region’s framework for establishing eligibility for projects to receive funding through the following federal programs:

- Section 5310 – Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities
- Section 5316 – Jobs Access and Reverse Commute (JARC)
- Section 5317 – New Freedom

The passing of SAFETEA-LU changed the nature of the Jobs Access Reverse Commute (JARC) program, and created the New Freedom funding category. Prior to SAFETEA-LU, JARC projects were funded through a competitive grant process at the federal level and distributed via earmarks. Eligible grantees were local governments and non-profit organizations, eligible activities required the connection of welfare recipients and low-income persons to employment and support services. While the goal of the JARC program remains the same, the funding formula has changed. Now that SAFETEA-LU has taken effect, JARC funds are allocated to urbanized areas’ and states’ designated recipients to competitively select projects within their respective boundaries.

Apportionments for JARC and New Freedom programs are allocated to “designated recipients” according to a formula based on the number of low income individuals, youth or elderly, and persons with disabilities residing in either urbanized areas or nonurbanized areas within a state.

Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities funds are apportioned directly to the state based on a formula that accounts for the number of elderly persons and individuals with disabilities living in that state. These funds are distributed via a statewide competitive selection program and are eligible to be spent anywhere in the state, including urbanized areas.

| Program Goals by Section | | |
|--|--|---|
| 5310 Elderly Individuals with Disabilities | 5316 Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) | 5317 New Freedom |
| Provide funding for those projects that aim to increase the general mobility of senior Americans | Improve access to transportation services to employment and employment related activities for welfare recipients and eligible low- | To provide tools to overcome existing barriers facing Americans with disabilities seeking integration into the workforce and full |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| and individuals with disabilities. | income individuals. Provide financial assistance for transportation services planned, designed, and carried out to meet the transportation needs of eligible low-income individuals. | participation in society. Expand transportation mobility options available to persons with disabilities beyond the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. |
|------------------------------------|---|--|

Merced County

Approximately 246,000 people currently live in Merced County, and up to 45 percent of the population may merit special transportation services because of their potential inability to drive due to a disability, age, or income status. Based on the U.S. Census Bureau, of the total population in the county, roughly 16 percent has one or more disabilities; nearly 10 percent are seniors, defined as persons over the age of 65, and 19 percent are considered low income.

Merced County Total Population

246,117

Data derived from 2007 U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts

| | | |
|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Seniors | Disabled | Low-income |
| 23,381 | 39,976 | 47,500 |
| 9.5% | 16.2% | 19.3% |

Senior Population for Merced County

(estimates/projections derived from the Department of Finance)

| | 2010 | 2020 | 2030 |
|------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Total Population | 273,935 | 348,690 | 439,905 |
| 65-69 | 7,383 | 11,515 | 15,586 |
| 70-74 | 5,743 | 8,741 | 12,875 |
| 75-79 | 4,672 | 5,868 | 9,433 |
| 80-84 | 3,338 | 3,976 | 6,325 |
| 85+ | 3,152 | 4,428 | 6,201 |

The Department of Finance provides forecast data for each county in the state. The table above provides information regarding population trends for different senior citizen age groups within Merced County for the years 2010, 2020, and 2030.

TRANSPORTATION SERVICES and PROVIDERS

This section provides detailed descriptions of the transportation services currently available with the Merced County region. Service providers can be a public, private, or nonprofit agency and will typically focus their services to meet the transportation needs of specific, underserved populations.

Private Transportation Providers:

- Central Valley Opportunity Center
- Kings View
- Love INC of Greater Merced
- Riggs Ambulance
- Turning Point Community Programs

Public Transportation Providers include:

- Merced County – Going Places
- Merced County Area Agency on Aging
- Merced County Transit – The Bus
- Merced County Human Services Agency
- Merced County Mental Health
- Merced County Mental Health Transitional Age Youth

Regional Transportation Provider include:

- Amtrak
- Greyhound
- Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System (YARTS)

Central Valley Opportunity Center

6838 Bridget Court, Winton (209) 357-0081

Central Valley Opportunity Center was incorporated as a community-based corporation in May of 1979. CVOC operates numerous employment, educational, economic development and social service programs in central California.

CVOC services include vocational education, remedial education, English Language instruction, housing assistance, energy payment assistance, emergency supportive services, transportation, emergency food, youth employment, health care acquisition, childcare services and community education services. CVOC has effectively provided a comprehensive package of services to over a hundred thousand customers.

Average daily attendance at the Merced County office is 50, of which approximately 35 require transportation services.

Four (4) vehicles are available for daily transportation with four (4) paid drivers.

| Vehicle Capacity | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| One (1) vehicle 10-14 passengers | Three (3) vehicles 15-24 passengers |

Average vehicle miles a month – 3,600

Transportation budget - \$180,000 for vehicle operations, bus passes, insurance, and mileage reimbursement. Funding sources are derived from Community Services and Development (state) and Workforce Investment Act (federal)

Client population includes persons of low income with limited English speaking.

Kings View Work Experience
Atwater, CA (209) 358-7228

Mission Statement

To provide community mental health and social services to those with limited resources.

Vision Statement

Mental health and life free of substance abuse addictions is an essential part of good health care. Kings View is committed to providing services that are characterized by "care and compassion" for individuals needing care. Restorative approaches including prevention, early intervention, treatment, and education are basic components of programs. Kings View is to be guided by the following practices and intents:

- Provide full access to treatment, rehabilitation, and support services in a coordinated and comprehensive system of care that is culturally competent.
- Continuity of care.
- Treatment that meets standards of care that are supported by best practice research.
- Pharmacological intervention based primarily on efficacy and total cost rather than short-term costs.
- Treatment in the least restrictive setting that is consistent with both safety and reasonable expectations of benefit.
- Safe, supportive housing with the ultimate goal being housing as independent as possible.
- Daily activity that is meaningful, productive, and life enhancing.
- Social opportunities and collegiality within a community.
- Support services that assist attaining the highest level of quality of life for each individual served.

Average daily attendance is 280 with all requiring transportation services (60 with wheelchairs).

Forty vehicles are available, capacity of 15-24 passengers, with 30 paid drivers.

Client population includes frail seniors, persons with physical disabilities, persons with behavioral disabilities, and persons with sensory impairments.

Love INC of Greater Merced County

Merced, CA (209) 383-7034

Love INC serves as a clearinghouse for local churches and coordinates resources of individuals, churches and agencies to help meet the needs of people in the Greater Merced area.

Transportation budget is derived from fundraising and donations for bus passes and/or mileage reimbursement (average \$500 annually). Additionally, up to 10 volunteers provide rides to clients using their own vehicles.

Medi-Cab

645 W. Olive Avenue, Suite 322 B, Merced, CA (209) 723-4109

Non-profit organization providing specialized transportation for people with medical conditions that prevents them from using public transit.

Riggs Ambulance

480 E. 13th Street, Merced, CA (209) 381-6800

Riggs is the exclusive provider of pre-hospital services for all of Merced County. They cover over 2,000 square miles and respond to over 26,000 requests annually. Riggs employs over 125 people and operates the county's medical dispatch 9-1-1 system. Their current fleet includes 21 ambulances, four Supervisor Units, an EMS Transport Cart, an EMS Explorer Post and several support vehicles.

Turning Point

627 Main Street, Merced, CA (209) 204-4738

Turning Point operates Merced County's Community Assistance Recovery Enterprise (CARE), which provides comprehensive mental health, supported housing, and employment services to those in recovery from mental illness, homelessness and possible co-occurring substance abuse disorders.

Emphasizing "housing first" and development of employment and educational opportunities, CARE collaborates with other agencies to be sure Turning Point Community Program members receive "whatever it takes" to integrate homeless mentally ill back into the community.

CARE is also designed to reach transition age youth including 18- to 25-year olds who may have children, and underserved Hispanic populations in Merced County, including 26- to 59-year olds.

**Merced County Going Places
(209) 381-1165**

Going Places is funded by First 5 Merced County and is a collaborative partnership between VIA Transportation, Healthy House, and the Merced County Department Of Public Health.

Going Places assists pregnant women and families with children 0 – 5 that have special health care needs with transportation to specialty medical care located outside of Merced County.

**Merced County Area Agency on Aging
851 West 23rd Street, Merced (209) 385-7550**

Mission - To work in partnership with the community to provide for the protection, care, and support of families and individuals, and to promote personal responsibility and self-sufficiency.

Goals - Sustain independent living. Strengthen ties to community services and activities. Promote a safe and healthy environment

The Senior Transportation Program provides transportation services to disabled and older adults, 60 years of age or older. Monthly bus passes are available for purchase at a discounted price. Limited number of free bus passes also available.

Average daily attendance is 8 of which approximately 2 require transportation services.

Transportation budget - \$50,000 for bus passes. Funding sources are derived from local general funds, minimal donations, and the California Department of Aging.

Client population includes seniors 60 years or older.

**Merced County Human Services Agency
2115 West Wardrobe Ave, Merced (209) 385-7550**

The Merced County Human Services Agency (HSA) provides immediate assistance in crisis situations to protect children and vulnerable adults from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. They also help people and families when they are temporarily unable to obtain food, clothing, and shelter.

HSA assists senior citizens and disabled adults in achieving the greatest degree of independence possible, sponsoring services such as food deliveries, caregiver support, assistance with transportation, and help with home repairs.

HSA has a fleet of 98 vehicles that serve 9 or fewer passengers. 30-50 agency staff are available to transport clients at any given time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Agency averages 9,000 vehicle miles per month and has a budget of approximately \$1,331,637 (breakdown below).

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Vehicle Operations | \$40,000 |
| Buss passes or other specialized transportation services | \$162,459 |
| Mileage reimbursement | \$1,102,101 |
| Subsidize cost for Seniors | \$27,077 |

Vision

Fight poverty and abuse.

Mission

To build strong, healthy families, and improve the quality of life in our community.

**Merced County Mental Health
(209) 381-6800**

A variety of mental health services and programs are available to mental health consumers in Merced County. The County is able to provide a selection of mental health services to children, youths, adults, and their families. Merced County also offers drug and alcohol services. Mental Health services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be accessed by appointment, walk-in, or by contacting emergency services.

Caseworker has access to one vehicle that serves less than 9 passengers and averages 500 vehicle miles per month.

Transportation budget for bus passes is approximately \$1,620. Funding sources are derived from Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

**Merced County Transit – The Bus
880 Thornton Road, Merced (209) 724-0530**

Merced County currently operates an urban and rural bus transit service, known as The Bus. The Bus operates on 17 fixed route lines and demand response services. Demand response services include services open to the general public in rural areas where fixed route service is limited or non-existent and is limited to seniors and disabled customers in urban areas such as Merced where extensive fixed route service is provided. The Bus currently operates 43 buses with 27 assigned to fixed routes and the remaining 16 providing Dial-A-Ride service to all of Merced County

and a small portion of the City of Turlock in Stanislaus County. Generally, The Bus fixed route services operate from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM Monday through Friday, and from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM on Saturdays.

Current Operations

- 43 buses
 - 27 buses on 17 fixed routes
 - 16 buses providing Dial-a-Ride
- System operates weekdays from 7 a.m. to 6:15 p.m. with limited Saturday service
- Annual operating cost = \$9,400,000

Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System Merced (209) 388-9589

YARTS provides regularly scheduled public transit service into Yosemite National Park and the gateway communities along its routes in buses that are air conditioned and equipped for rider comfort.

HUMAN SERVICE TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

Many people believe that individuals with special transportation needs are only those with disabilities or wheelchair users. In fact, the term “transportation disadvantaged” covers a much larger spectrum. *Transportation disadvantaged* people, otherwise known as individuals with special transportation needs, are those who are unable to transport themselves due to their age, income, or health condition. According to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), “transit dependent or transit disadvantaged shall include, but not be limited to, the elderly, individuals with disabilities and persons of limited means.” A transportation-disadvantaged person may have different types of transportation requirements. Examples of transit dependent user could include a frail elderly woman trying to get to a specialized health center or an evening concert, a veteran traveling to VA medical centers, a person with AIDS going to the grocery store, or a visually impaired individual with a guide dog traveling to visit his parents.

Special needs transportation is any mode of transportation used by those defined as transportation disadvantaged or with a special transportation need. This includes buses that have regular stops, such as: fixed-route transit for the general public; specialized services such as vans, ambulances and taxis that pick up people at the curb or door; demand response or dial-a-ride; volunteer driver services; or any federal, state, and local publicly funded transportation. The different agencies providing these special transportation services largely fit into a number of categories: human service transportation, public transit, and student transportation services. These designations, however, do not adequately describe the variety of providers or the diversity of people they serve. In this planning effort, the intent is to use the

widest possible interpretation of special needs transportation. This includes transportation services funded and provided by the following:

- County and local human service departments including programs for children, the elderly, and disability populations
- Public transit
- For-profit and non-profit contractors

UNMET NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Annual Hearings

Administered by MCAG, a Social Services Transportation Advisory Council (SSTAC) holds annual Unmet Transit Needs Hearings to provide a forum for transit users and community members to express concerns of their needs that may not be satisfied by the local public transit services. MCAG staff and the SSTAC analyze the public hearing testimonies and present their finding(s) to the MCAG Governing Board for resolution. After the resolution of the Unmet Needs Hearings, the Governing Board allocates Transportation Development Act funding to the transit provider to implement the solutions, if any.

In past hearings there was a wide range of unmet transit needs. Requests have ranged from bus stops to later hours of operations. The transit provider makes an effort to address all unmet transit needs that can be reasonably met and some operational concerns as it may increase quality of service.

At the most recent unmet transit needs hearings in October 2008, the public voiced concerns about the following:

- Create new or expand routes
- Provide discount for mental health consumers
- Need to extend hours on Saturdays and offer Sunday service to provide flexibility to the senior population.
- Improve Dial-A-Ride pickup time commitments for seniors and disabled.
- Increase availability of buses at the beginning of the month.

The SSTAC had greatest concern with transportation for college students during the evening hours. In Merced County all elementary, middle, and high schools have chartered school buses to serve students to and from school. During the 2008 unmet transit needs hearings, concerns were raised for the lack of public transportation service for after hour courses at Merced Community College (Merced & Los Banos campuses). However, past demonstration projects for the evening college students were attempted, but after several months the students no longer utilized the service.

MCAG staff determined that some of these needs were operational in nature and were not unmet needs. However, an underlying theme is recognized between current and past concerns with transit, the lack of funding to increase service hours and capacity to meet service gaps.

Survey – Planning Partners

MCAG requested participation from public, private, and non-profit transportation providers in Merced County to identify services they offer and the unmet needs they believe exist with their clients based on their experiences. Clients include seniors (able-bodied, frail, low income, etc), persons of low income, youth, homeless, persons with physical disabilities, persons with behavioral disabilities, persons with sensory impairments, and the general public. The following *transportation* needs were identified via a survey (Appendix A):

- Getting to work during the hours of 8-5
- Late night or early morning work shifts
- Weekend/holiday trips
- Recreational activities
- Kids to daycare or school
- Going to the doctor/medical
- Counseling/mental health appointments
- Shopping and multiple errands
- Attending training, education classes or program sites
- Long distance trips for medical appointments and visiting family
- Emergency trips for family crisis
- Interviews/screenings

Planning partners also identified their need for replacement vehicles:

| Need Replacement Now | Within 12 months | Within 24 Months |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 17 | 4 | 42 |

Additionally, the survey identified that many of the respondents feel there is a lack of publicity about existing specialized transportation services. Many residents are unaware of the specialized transportation services available and/or are confused by the eligibility requirements for specific rides based on the requirements of the particular funding source. Existing efforts and resources to inform the public are insufficient to effectively reach those in greatest need.

Social Services Transportation Advisory Committee

The SSTAC held a joint workshop with private and public transportation providers to discuss other unmet needs that may exist that were not identified through the annual hearing process and survey. Unmet needs identified included:

- Out of county transportation, specifically to the Bay Area for medical appointments.
- Centralized transportation information; single point of information in English Spanish, and Mong.
- Transportation for 165 HSA clients that attend classes (employment, parenting, managing finances, etc.) during the evening hours.

In addition to the above-mentioned needs and the general concept to increase the coordination between Merced County's public and private agencies, the SSTAC also identified the need to coordinate services regionally, specifically with Madera and Stanislaus Counties.

EXISTING COORDINATION SERVICES

In 1996, Merced County Transit – “The Bus” – began providing a consolidated public transit service throughout Merced. Prior to that time public transit service had been provided by some of the individual jurisdictions. The Transit Services Consolidation Agreement established a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) between Merced County and the Cities of Atwater, Dos Palos, Gustine, Livingston, Los Banos and Merced. The County of Merced, through the Department of Public Works' Transportation Division – Merced County Transit, administers and manages the consolidated services. The Bus serves the entire County of Merced with fixed route and demand response service.

The following agencies currently contract services for their clients with Merced County Transit:

- Merced County Human Services Agency
- Merced County Area Agency on Aging
- Central Valley Opportunity Center

Additionally, Merced County Mental Health contracts with Greyhound Bus to provide out of county travel for their clients.

Strategies to Fill the Gaps in Priority Order

Priority 1: Create a One Stop Shop of Transit Information

Needs assessed by strategy: Problems with availability and quality of information.

Sharing of information about programs and transportation services is one of the benefits that were derived in the process of developing the Coordinated Transit-Services Plan. Although representatives of agencies meet from time to time in different forums to share information about client needs, health care needs, educational opportunities and funding issues, outside of the SSTAC, few opportunities exist for agency staff to convene to discuss coordination of services based on transportation. Furthermore, many agency staff are unaware of the availability of public transit services or complementary human service agency transportation programs that might benefit their own clients.

| Expected Benefits | Potential Obstacles |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improves access to and awareness of transit services • Allows for coordination of non-transportation services in combination with transportation needs • Benefits clients and human service organizations • Consolidated information about multiple agencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of services means developing and updating information to one source • Information requires on-going maintenance |

Seniors often receive information about transit by word of mouth through the senior service centers; there is still a need to increase awareness about transit services among other populations, including individuals with disabilities and people with limited incomes.

One cost-effective way to reach the described populations is by piggybacking onto existing information such as The Bus website, which is maintained by the Merced County Association of Governments. Since The Bus site is already providing information to the public regarding public transportation, it could concurrently inform the community about complementary transit options.

Additionally, transit services could be included with the Merced County Network of Care website maintained by the Human Services Agency. Network of Care currently helps Merced County residents locate a variety of services and opportunities including business and consumer services, clothing and food services, counseling/crisis services, disaster services, education and training, employment services, financial assistance, family/community services, health/medical and mental

health services, legal services, and shelters. Network of Care currently provides basic information about the existing public transportation program, but desperately needs to be expanded regarding volunteer and privately operated services.

This strategy proposes to expand the Merced County “The Bus” site as well as the Network of Care site to expand information in the area of transportation, and then to advertise and market each site as a source of transportation information. Efforts should also include updating the sites and a printed directory to include comprehensive information on all of the transit options included in the assessment of existing services as well as the connecting regional transit services in neighboring counties.

Priority 2: Establish Inter-County Transportation Program for Medical Appointments

Needs assessed by strategy: Lack of service outside of Merced County

It is difficult to provide roundtrip transportation to a location that is a 2+ hour bus ride from Merced County. Many low-income individuals/families and senior residents require transportation to Northern California (i.e. Stanford, UC Davis, etc) and to the South Central Valley (i.e. Valley Children’s Hospital, Fresno, etc.) for medical appointments on a regular basis. MCAG staff is investigating coordinating with services in Stanislaus and Madera counties that currently transport to the Bay Area and to the South Valley.

This strategy proposes to seek New Freedom and 5310 funding to begin coordination with both Stanislaus and Madera Counties to create a regional partnership to provide transit services for the Merced County disadvantage for the purpose of medical appointments.

Priority 3: Establish Transportation Program for Merced County Human Service Agency Clients for Evening Classes

Needs assessed by strategy: Lack of service for low-income population during the evening hours.

The Merced County Human Services Agency (HSA) has 165 clients (as of July 2009) enrolled in evening classes, which include courses for employment, financial planning, parenting, etc. When HSA had funding available for transportation, 15 clients were consistently being transported from each direction of the County to classes on Main Street in the City of Merced. Due to lack of funding, transportation services were ceased. HSA staff has encountered many clients unable to attend classes due to lack of transportation, as the The Bus does not operate after 6:00 p.m.

This strategy proposes seeking JARC funding to develop a program to provide clients of HSA transit services after 6:00 p.m. to attend classes that will provide them the tools needed to become self-sufficient and employed.

Priority 4: Replacement of Old Vehicles

The following agencies have expressed the need to replace existing vehicles within the next 24 months:

- Human Services Agency
- Turning Point Community Services
- Central Valley Opportunity Center
- Kings View
- Riggs Ambulance

| Need Replacement Now | Within 12 months | Within 24 Months |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 17 | 4 | 42 |

Conclusion

Several key strategies have been identified to improve transportation services in Merced County:

- Increased communication and collaboration between transportation providers and social service providers;
- Expanded information availability and marketing programs;
- Identification of new funding sources, and increased transit opportunities for the transit disadvantaged.

These strategies will require communication and participation from a variety of public agencies, social service organizations, and private entities, with strong leadership from MCAG, as well as smaller organizations whose clients have distinct and pressing transportation needs. Short-term solutions will establish a foundation for more comprehensive longer-term solutions.

This plan will also support the pursuit of additional funding for transportation services in Merced County, from both Federal and State sources, by demonstrating a clear vision, path and priorities to improve transportation in all of Merced County, as well as articulating the need for expanded funding overall.