



South Carolina Institute of  
Medicine & Public Health

SOUTH CAROLINA OFFICE OF  
**RURAL HEALTH**

Investment. Opportunity. Health.



POLICY BRIEF | APRIL 2024

# Public Transportation in Barnwell County



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Suggested Citation: Haire, E., Wilks, A. (2024). Public Transportation in Barnwell County. South Carolina Institute of Medicine & Public Health. <https://imph.org/public-transportation-barnwell-county/>

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## Acknowledgments

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**Healthy People Healthy Carolinas**

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# Background

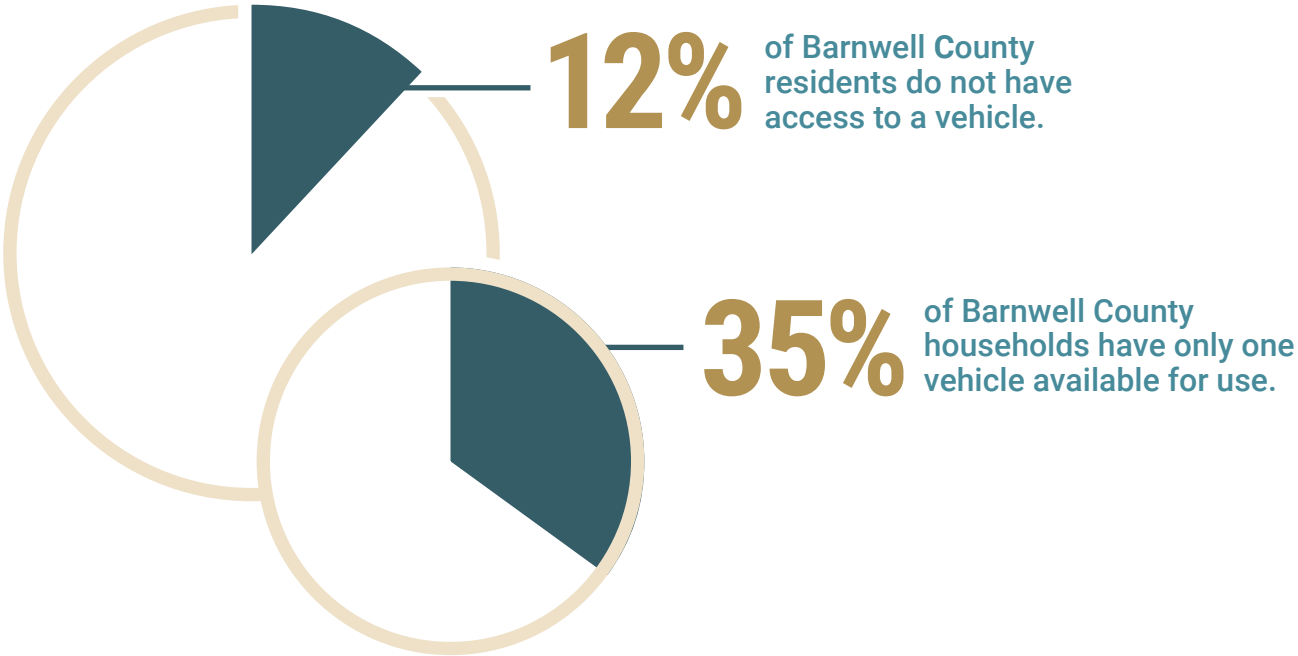
Barnwell County’s public transportation system is housed and operated by Generations Unlimited, the county’s local Council on Aging.<sup>1</sup> In 2023, transportation services were scaled back, limited to Medicaid recipients, as providing mass transit services were no longer feasible due to financial constraints.<sup>2</sup> As fuel and maintenance costs continue to rise, funding public transportation has become increasingly difficult for rural communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of virtual health care visits by Medicaid recipients surged, leading to an additional drop in revenue for Generations Unlimited.<sup>3</sup>

Transportation plays a critical role in the livability and quality of life within a community.<sup>4</sup> The primary use of rural public transportation has historically been to provide access to employment, health care and goods and services for older adults, people with disabilities and low-income individuals.<sup>5</sup> Lack of transportation continues to emerge as a barrier for people of all ages to access health and social services.

**Lack of transportation continues to emerge as a barrier for people of all ages to access health and social services.**

Public transit services are more heavily utilized when individuals lack access to vehicles. In Barnwell County, **12 percent** of residents do not have access to a vehicle and **35 percent** of the county’s households have only one vehicle available for use.<sup>6</sup> Rural communities have lower population density when compared to urban communities which can lead to low ridership for fixed transit routes.<sup>7</sup> Low ridership, coupled with a small tax base, often does not produce enough revenue to maintain the public transit systems in rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

Active transportation, such as walking and bicycling, may not be a practical option in rural communities due to long distances.<sup>9</sup> The average commute from home to work in Barnwell County is **31 minutes**.<sup>10</sup> Rural residents are forced to be more reliant on personal automobiles, which can be costly to purchase and maintain.<sup>11</sup>





## Transportation as a Barrier to Resources

Safe and reliable transportation influences the health and well-being of a community.<sup>12</sup> Lack of accessible transportation can influence how residents in rural communities make health care decisions. AARP emphasizes that “access to health care is a key purpose of local public transportation services and rural public transportation programs.”<sup>13</sup> Transportation barriers can lead to missed health care appointments, missed or delayed use of medication and delayed health care interventions.<sup>14</sup> All of these factors can contribute to negative overall health outcomes.

Access to reliable transportation is also critical for low-income areas with limited access to sources of fresh foods.<sup>15</sup> Limited transportation options can prevent residents from accessing existing social services and other necessary resources such as grocery stores.<sup>16</sup> Barnwell County has established several resources that address nutrition concerns including FoodShare partnerships and food pantries, but transportation continues to be a barrier because these programs do not provide transportation to and from services. As a result, many of these resources are only available to individuals who have a vehicle.

Adequate public transportation is especially critical for older adults and individuals with disabilities. This sector of the population needs a reliable transportation source to access both medical and social services. Men typically outlive their driving expectancy by seven years, and women outlive their driving expectancy by 10 years.<sup>17</sup> Older adults without access to transportation are more likely to experience isolation and have a greater risk of morbidity and premature death.<sup>18</sup>

Transportation services also support the workforce. Health care professionals who provide in-home care to older adults may depend on public transportation to serve their patients.<sup>19</sup> Established and reliable public transportation can also increase the number of residents that are able to enter the workforce.<sup>20</sup> Since distance between home and work is longer for residents in rural communities, public transportation provides the necessary support for the workforce to travel to their place of work and home.



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## Funding Public Transportation

Securing adequate funding is a challenge for local transportation providers. The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) is responsible for administering federal and state funds to support local public transportation in the state, including the Section 5311 funds provided for the Rural Area Formula Program Grants.<sup>21</sup> These grants are distributed to local entities by the Federal Transit Administration to support public transportation in rural areas with populations less than 50,000.<sup>22</sup> SCDOT holds comment periods to provide the public with the opportunity to share feedback on proposed projects. In 2024, the public comment period was held from January 18 to February 8.<sup>23</sup> Opportunities such as this give residents and local leaders an opportunity to advocate for funding that can assist with capital expenses and operating costs.



Currently, Generations Unlimited receives some reimbursement from SCDOT, but the Medicaid reimbursement rate is higher.

To supplement transportation funding needs, six counties, including Jasper County, have implemented a Sales and Use Tax specifically to help stabilize funding for their public transportation systems.<sup>24</sup> When working with limited financial resources, public transit services should consider using Community Health Needs Assessments and other community planning efforts to give residents the opportunity to provide feedback regarding high priority travel times.<sup>25</sup> This will help transportation providers determine appropriate operating hours for maximum benefit.

State legislators often consider funding proposals for county improvement projects. County leadership can work with their county's legislative delegation and staff to develop an appropriate budget proposal to be considered by the General Assembly for securing one-time funding to support necessary county improvement projects, such as investing in transportation.

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## Conclusion

Reliable transportation enhances the quality of life for rural residents by connecting residents to resources and critical services like health care and food pantries.<sup>26</sup> Community members and community-based organizations work diligently to develop services that meet the needs of community members because the lack of transportation services can prevent community members from receiving the services they need to be healthy.

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*This policy brief is a product of the Rural Health Policy Fellows Program that was conducted in partnership between the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health and the South Carolina Office of Rural Health. This partnership was part of a national initiative to address COVID-19 health disparities. Support was provided by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021.*