

Maine Coordinating Working Group on Access and Mobility

Meeting Minutes of December 9, 2025 – Held via Zoom

Working Group Members in attendance: Nathanael Batson, Kirk Bellavance, Melissa Beecher, Roger Bondeson, Samantha Horn, Jess Maurer, Tom Reinauer, Megan Salvin, Libby Stone-Sterling, Joyce Taylor.

Others in attendance: Jennifer Grant, Ryan Neale

Welcome. Joyce gave a brief overview of the agenda items: Roger Bondeson overview of the transportation ombudsman legislation, Jess Maurer's ideas, the tasks for the Working Group, and a summary of the RFP process. There are a lot of related issues that are beyond the Working Group's assigned scope and we should stay focused on the specific tasks from the authorizing legislation.

Discussion on the Ombudsman Concept. Roger reviewed LD 1835 from the last legislative session, which included a non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) ombudsman. The ombudsman is likely to be reintroduced in this session separately or as part of a larger bill. Per the previous bill, the ombudsman would ensure all NEMT complaints are investigated and presumably report back on recommendations or findings. The bill specified that the ombudsman would be a contracted nonprofit organization but did not provide details on which agency would manage the contract and how the arrangement would work. Legislative staff has been asked to research similar programs in other states. The ombudsman could help coordinate among transportation services. The legislation did not include additional funding. DHHS opposed the bill because it required things the department is already doing but did not include additional funding and did not increase capacity to provide trips. DHHS has told the legislative committee chairs that it would not oppose the ombudsman piece this session if it were funded and staffed appropriately.

The ombudsman position would focus on MaineCare and not others who experience transportation insecurity. The ombudsman roles and responsibilities could be expanded to include others outside of MaineCare. Ombudsman offices are effective at identifying why systems are not working, but not for promoting or educating. Ombudsmen identify potential systemic improvements from specific cases. The ombudsman could make it easier to file complaints on NEMT and facilitate communication with transit operators. An ombudsman may not do actual mobility management but could help address issues.

Jess' Vision

Maine's population is aging and 93% of people over 65 have a driver's license, compared with 73% of people over 80. Many older people live in rural communities with limited public transportation options. Volunteer driver networks work well at the local level when neighbors are helping neighbors and drivers and passengers feel safe and trusted. GO MAINE lists volunteer networks as potential transportation options and allows potential drivers to connect with networks but does not vet drivers or passengers.

Large school buses may not be practical. The long routes and times are challenging for parents and students. Smaller vehicles might better meet the needs of schools, could be used for general public transportation, and do not require commercial driver's licenses. Vermont and the Margaret Chase Smith Center's research could provide more information.

The Working Group could recommend or support pilots and innovative ideas. The PTAC could play this role but is currently focused on public transportation. Solutions should address the challenges of the populations we are trying to serve, such as older adults who struggle with long travel times or delays. Mobility management is about improving connections to existing services and improving the transportation system. Ohio's program includes regional mobility managers who provide support and connections at the local level and elevate issues to policymakers.

Working Group Tasks

Effective mobility management programs typically include a state coordinating body that provides oversight and consistency and defines responsibilities for regional programs. Ohio's central coordinating body is within the department of transportation and all regional managers are state employees. Regional programs may be embedded within transit operators or community action programs. Maine's coordinating body could be split between MaineDOT and the Maine Office of Community Affairs, which handles related issues such as comprehensive planning, housing, and code enforcement. A state coordinating body could help volunteer networks with software, which is a part of the ICAM project. A coordinated structure should provide sustainability through staff turnover at the local level.

The Working Group should look at how federal regulations impact Maine and other recommend changes. Even if regulations allow trips to grocery stores, for example, capacity is still lacking. The Group should identify limitations such as funding and lack of licensed drivers and provide funding estimates for each task. RLS Associates is developing and looking to pilot a cost sharing model. Artificial intelligence may have a role to play here and Ohio may be a good case study. Pilots may be more manageable and attractive for funding in the short term than systemic changes.

Autonomous vehicles may have a role to play but are still in the testing stage.

The Maine State Transit Plan, Public Transit Advisory Council 2025 Biennial Report, and Blue Ribbon Commission report may be helpful resources and will be shared with the Working Group.

Regional mobility management programs could be based on MaineDOT's eight transit regions, MaineDOT's transportation regions, or regional planning organization regions.

Workforce transportation is another potential area of focus. The private sector, including medical providers, may be sources of funds for workforce transportation or medical transportation. Medical providers are focused mainly on emergency transportation rather than NEMT. Transportation services should be able to account for appointments that run long.

Status Update on RFP and Consultant Selection Process

The scoring committee met on December 8 to score the three submitted proposals. The most qualified firm has been identified. MaineDOT is working to get them under contract as soon as possible.

Potential future agenda items include presentations by New Hampshire, Ohio, and Vermont, particularly how the programs were created, funding, and how regional programs were defined and structured.

The next Working Group meeting is Monday, December 22, from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m.