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### **Getting From Here to There in Western Massachusetts New RIDE WMA Tool Maps Gaps in Public Transportation**

**February 6, 2024 [Chicopee, MA]** -- Affordable and reliable transportation for individuals facing food insecurity is a key concern at the Food Bank as we confront the underlying causes of hunger. A 2019 USDA study found that 46% of individuals living in the United States with low incomes and without cars live more than a half mile from a grocery store. Reliable and frequent public transportation is crucial, as the alternative is time-consuming treks combining public buses with long walks, bike rides on busy streets, and/or costly rideshares. These transportation challenges extend beyond food access, creating obstacles to employment, medical care, education and more.

To help identify communities with little to no connectivity to public transit, the Food Bank is releasing RIDE WMA, a new mapping tool commissioned by the Food Bank, funded by T4MA, a statewide coalition focused on improving Massachusetts' transportation systems, and Feeding America, the national network of Food Banks, and developed by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. The tool maps the region's public transportation options in relation to grocery stores, places of employment, higher education, and medical care.

Included in the map are all three major RTA's (Regional Transit Authorities) that operate in Western Massachusetts: the PVTA serving Hampden and Hampshire Counties, the FRTA serving Franklin County, and the BRTA, serving Berkshire County. The tool also includes information about the area's often overlooked micro-transit options that are especially effective in rural towns.

The map can help the public better understand how well their communities are being served by public transit. People can use the tool to ask questions such as,

- How well is my neighborhood connected, via public transport, to jobs with second and third shifts throughout the region?
- Are people in my community able to access places for food and health care services if they don't own a car?

- If I take a bus to my doctor's office near the end of the day, will there be a bus running late enough to take me home?

"Anyone who lives in Western Massachusetts understands how challenging it can be to get from one area to the next if you don't own a car, but RIDE WMA really makes clear that difficulty," said Laura Sylvester, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts' Public Policy Manager. "We hope that the tool will illustrate the need for increased funding for the RTAs and for innovative solutions like micro transit in rural areas. Better transportation options will lead to better health, education, and employment outcomes for our residents. We're grateful to PVPC for their great work and to T4MA and Feeding America for the funding."

Revealing gaps in public transportation is crucial for demonstrating the need for funding. Too often, transportation funding gets stuck in a feedback loop that prevents necessary improvements. People who rely on public transportation are then forced to cobble together increasingly fewer options to get from one place to another. This tool will help us track inefficiencies.

"The RIDE WMA online tool provides a great first step for advocates evaluating potential transit gaps in western Massachusetts" said Jacob Dolinger, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Senior Planner/GIS Analyst. "It also helps inform the public of transit options in the area and provides an opportunity for contributions to advocacy through the submission of email comments".

The Ride WMA tool aims to break the negative cycle of inadequate services and help make the case for additional funding for public transport in neighborhoods and communities in need across the region.

To access the RIDE WMA transportation tool, visit: <https://www.pvpc.org/RideWMA>

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***About the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts:*** Since 1982, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts has been a community partner to end hunger. We provide healthy and culturally responsive food directly through our own programs (Mobile Food Banks and Brown Bag: Food for Elders), and through the food assistance network in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire counties. This network is comprised of independent pantries, meal sites and shelters that are on the front lines providing food and resources to individuals, families, seniors, children, veterans, and people with disabilities, so they may lead healthy and meaningful lives. The Food Bank partners on public education and advocacy to address systemic issues that lead to hunger, operating with the belief that everyone has a right to healthy food.