

INCREASING HEALTH-CARE ACCESS BY EXPANDING PUBLIC TRANSIT IN EAST GAINESVILLE

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Thesis

To increase access to quality health-care facilities for its citizens, the City of Gainesville Regional Transit System should establish a new bus route connecting the health-care centers in West Gainesville to the residential areas of East Gainesville.

Background Analysis

The City of Gainesville is divided into two halves; East Gainesville is a predominantly Black, working-class community, while West Gainesville, home to the University of Florida (UF) campus, is wealthier and predominantly white (Florida Housing Coalition 2017). Neighborhoods in East Gainesville such as North Lincoln Heights and Sugar Hill are over 80 percent Black, while neighborhoods on the west side, like Westmoreland and Ridgewood, are over 80 percent white (Statistical Atlas n.d.a). The two sides of the city have vastly different health outcomes, especially related to chronic illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, and heart failure. A study conducted by Alachua County, where Gainesville is located, found that the ratio of Black to white patients who received emergency asthma treatment is 6.1 to 1, while the hospitalization ratio is 3.2 to 1. For diabetes, the ratios are 4.3 to 1 and 3 to 1, respectively. Black residents are more than twice as likely to be hospitalized for congestive heart failure (and twice as likely to die as a result) than white residents (Florida Department of Health 2022).

These high rates of emergency room visits and hospitalizations could be mitigated by routine visits to a primary care provider. Routine care allows chronic conditions to be monitored and prevents severe deterioration in health that leads to emergency room visits and hospitalizations (ODPHP n.d.). On the west side of Gainesville, there are 31 health clinics and urgent care centers, 28 of which are open Monday through Friday. However, on the city's east side, there are only 11 health clinics and urgent care centers, and only 2 that are open Monday through Friday (Lawrence 2021). In its 2020 Alachua County Needs Assessment, WellFlorida Council asserted that these disparities in environment and community resources have contributed to the ongoing racial and economic inequality in the city (WellFlorida Council 2020).

While not the only barrier to accessing primary care, the lack of transportation for residents of East Gainesville to the existing clinics in the city contributes to the problem. As of November 2021, the City of Gainesville's Regional Transit System (RTS) has 46 bus routes, only two of which connect East Gainesville residents directly to UF Health or North Florida Regional Medical Center (NFRMC)'s hospitals and clinics. In its 10-Year Transit Development Plan (TDP), Gainesville RTS has explicitly acknowledged the disparities in transportation, stating that "the need for improved mobility for work, school, health care, and shopping is growing, especially in East Gainesville" (Gainesville Regional Transit System 2019a). This need has also been widely expressed by Gainesville residents. In a survey conducted to gauge residents' perception of RTS, 73 percent of respondents felt that the mobility needs of those without an automobile were not being met and 66 percent of respondents wanted more bus service that covers new areas. Respondents also frequently identified the lack of service to East Gainesville as a concern (RTS 2019b). Without direct access to health-care facilities, East Gainesville residents lack the necessary resources to regularly visit a primary care provider, comply with care plan recommendations, and seek specialty treatment to manage complex or chronic conditions.

Policy Idea

The City of Gainesville Regional Transit System should create a bus route from the newly proposed transfer station in East Gainesville to the Oaks Mall that would pass through UF Health Shands Hospital and at least two East Gainesville neighborhoods. This bus route would grant East Gainesville residents access to more of Gainesville's health-care facilities via a single bus route, alleviating transportation burdens for patients. Gainesville's Department of Transportation was recently awarded \$10.6 million from the Federal Transit Administration, with which it plans to replace 12 RTS buses and build a transfer station in East Gainesville near the Gainesville Technology Enterprise Center (Henderson 2022). This influx of funding would allow the city to reallocate some of its existing transit spending to fund this new bus route.

Policy Analysis

People need to be able to physically access care. Individuals without the ability or means to drive are left with limited travel options that tend to be slower or more inconvenient (Ray 2020). For low-income individuals, purchasing and maintaining a car leaves less money for necessities that ensure health and quality of life, such as food, housing, and health care (Ray 2020). Expanding existing public transit systems, specifically buses, is an affordable method of leveraging public investment to increase access to health care for all Gainesville residents.

It is in the City of Gainesville Regional Transit System's best interest to support this bus route. Gainesville RTS has already identified improved mobility in East Gainesville as a priority for the 2020 to 2029 period in its 10-year Transit Development Plan (TDP). This proposed bus route would help improve health-care access for everyone living in East Gainesville, and particularly for Black residents—a necessity, as evidenced by the drastic disparities in health outcomes between Black and white residents. A bus route

that goes through neighborhoods in East Gainesville would make travel to health-care facilities in West Gainesville more convenient for residents, while also increasing the scope of medical services available to address acute, chronic, and complex health concerns.

Beyond direct access to health care, the proposed bus route also has positive implications for social determinants of health that alternative options such as nonemergency medical transportation services do not provide. The median household incomes in predominantly Black North Lincoln Heights and Sugar Hill are \$26,362 and \$32,105, respectively (Statistical Atlas n.d.b), while predominantly white Westmoreland and Ridgewood have median household incomes of \$61,250 and \$92,181, respectively (Statistical Atlas n.d.b). The locations that would be on or in close proximity to the bus route—UF, UF Health, the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, North Florida Regional Medical Center, and Publix—are among the top 10 major employers in Gainesville (RTS 2020b). In addition to providing transportation to and from these employment opportunities, the bus route would also improve proximity to pharmacies, which improves patient compliance after health-care visits; more green spaces and walkable areas, which are linked to increased physical activity and social interaction; and grocery stores, which would improve nutrition and healthy eating habits.

Some may argue that the cost of this bus route outweighs its potential benefits for East Gainesville residents. Money has already been allocated to improving mobility in East Gainesville through the TDP, and the funds awarded by the Federal Transit Administration make it possible to allocate even more money to this project. This bus route proposes one option for how to accomplish the goals outlined in the 10-year TDP. Additionally, this bus route would increase access to jobs and create more jobs through RTS, which helps support the economy within Gainesville.

It is important to note that transportation access alone does not guarantee health-care affordability. Even if health care was free, people would still have to spend time and money to access it. In fact, the total cost of missed health-care appointments was estimated to be \$150 billion in 2019—an average of \$200 per appointment—based on lost payments to providers and the added consequences associated with delaying or interrupting treatment for patients (Ray 2020). The affordability of health care itself is a significant part of the problem, but one that requires separate policy solutions.

However, to ease the issue of transportation access for medically underserved communities, the proposed bus route is a start. Establishing a new bus route connecting the health-care centers in West Gainesville to the residential areas of East Gainesville will improve Gainesville residents' access to health care and quality of life.

Talking Points

- There are 31 health clinics and urgent care centers on the west side of Gainesville and only 11 on the east side. Despite this disparity in resources, only two bus routes connect East Gainesville to hospitals in West Gainesville.
- Adding a bus route between residential areas in East Gainesville and health-care centers in West Gainesville would increase access to care for the city's Black and working-class communities. Since these facilities are among Gainesville's largest employers, and the proposed route would be close to necessities like pharmacies, grocery stores, and green spaces, it would also benefit the quality of life of the people commuting on this route daily.
- Investing in the City of Gainesville Regional Transit System, as opposed to other methods of travel, improves transportation access without exacerbating the city's traffic congestion or eliminating options for those who do not or cannot drive. A bus route also increases access to stops beyond health-care facilities, which is not true for most nonemergency medical transportation services.
- Gainesville RTS is already executing a 10-Year Transit Development Plan that includes improving mobility in East Gainesville. The proposed bus route builds on the momentum of that plan by suggesting a route that can really benefit East Gainesville residents.

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