

**Submission
No 7**

**ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR SENIORS AND
DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN RURAL AND
REGIONAL NSW**

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Legislative Assembly: Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW

Home Assistance and Regional Transport Services (HART Services) Background:

Operating since 1989, HART Services, (ex - Northern Rivers Community Transport) provides community services across the Lga's of Lismore, Kyogle and Richmond Valley. In 2015 NRCT delivered over 63,000 transports and 12,000 hours of Social Support to 1,800 elderly clients and 400 younger people with disabilities. Volunteer hours average 500 per week.

HART Services promote independence, health and wellbeing and social participation. HART Services is inclusive of all cultures and actively creates access pathways for special needs groups. HART Services has multiple funding streams and services include individual transport to medical appointments and door-to-door buses for shopping, social and cultural events. There are specialised services for Carers, people with disabilities, Aboriginal people, men's only groups, and personalised case-management for persons with complex needs, (frequently people with mental health/behavioural issues).

As the C.E.O of this organisation for the last 18 years, I have an extensive understanding of the transport issues effecting disadvantaged persons within this footprint. HART Services works with many disadvantaged people and special needs groups including frail aged, people with disabilities, LGBTI, Aboriginal Communities, CALD communities and people with persistent and severe mental health illness.

Financial and social disadvantage is widespread across the Northern Rivers with Bonalbo, Casino and Coraki falling into high-disadvantage bands in both the 2007 and the 2015 'Dropping of the Edge' study, published by Tony Vison and Margot Rawsthorne.

Whilst there is severe transport disadvantage for elderly people in general and for people with disabilities across the Northern Rivers, I am predominantly addressing the transport issues relating to Aboriginal Communities, (for this submission 'Aboriginal' also encompasses ATSI persons). This is due to the disproportionate disadvantage as described below.

Aboriginal Communities: Background demographics (data is based on the 2011 Census)

Tabulam and Bonalbo

Tabulam (including Jubullum) has a population of 644, with 24% of the population identifying as Aboriginal (10 times higher than the State average of 2.5%). Low socio-economic status is systemic, the median household income in Indigenous families in the Tabulam area being \$433 per week, this is below half of the NSW State average of \$941 (outer urban). **Bonalbo** has a population of 543 with 7.5% being Aboriginal.

Both of these rural towns have large Aboriginal populations, are extremely isolated and transport disadvantaged. Issues of limited public transport and extreme financial disadvantage are compounded by low car and licence ownership.

Distance further compounds matters. Access to a Doctor or chemist necessitates a 60-70 kilometre trip to Casino, to access a major hospital or specialist requires a trip to Lismore at over 100 kilometres one way for either of these communities.

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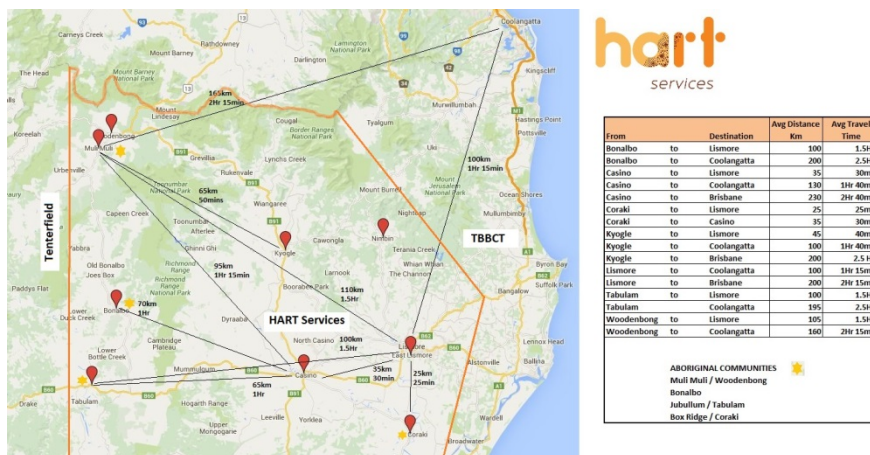
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Muli Muli Aboriginal Community is situated approximately 6 km from Woodenbong. There is a population of 203 persons identifying as Aboriginal. This comprises 31% of the local population of 652 persons (encompassing Woodenbong).

Box-Ridge/Coraki has a collective population of 1213, 15% identifying as Aboriginal. In the Box ridge Aboriginal community the median household income is \$670, however the average household number is 3.5, compared to the rest of the State at 2.4, this represents overcrowding and strained resources.

This map outlines the respective position of Aboriginal Communities, distances and destinations commonly travelled.



It is well known that the ‘gap’ in health outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian people has not closed despite a decade of strategies.

“ABS published (2013) revised estimates for expectation of life at birth for Indigenous people, the ABS estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males born in Australia in 2010-2012 could expect to live to 69.1 years, 10.6 years less than the 79.7 years expected for non-Indigenous males.

The expectation of life at birth of 73.7 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females born in Australia in 2010-2012 was 9.5 years less than the expectation of 83.1 years for non-Indigenous females”.

(‘Overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health status 2015’ Dept. of Health).

Across our rural footprint, lack of transport is the single most limiting factor influencing Aboriginal health.

A report published by NCOSS titled ‘**Provided there is Transport**’ (2012), discusses ‘Health Transport and Health Inequity’ the report states (p8):

“The high participation of Aboriginal stakeholders in the Lismore workshop reflects the particular problems that Aboriginal people in rural and remote regions experience in accessing health services. A large number of Aboriginal people live in isolated locations or in communities located on the outskirts of town (often the sites of former missions) and must therefore travel further in order to access health services. Yet these areas are often poorly serviced by public transport.”

Accessibility of current public transport services.

Put simply, there is no public transport servicing these communities. The school buses that service the local townships are not suitable for most Community members, as they are scheduled early to traverse the

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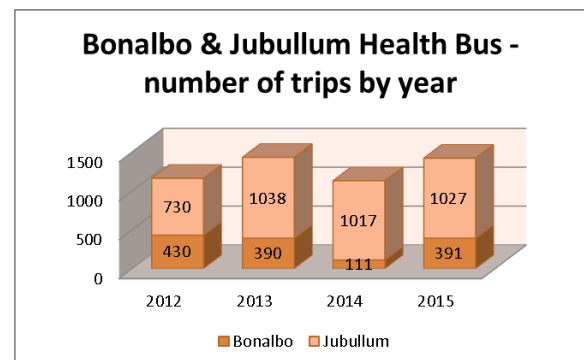
distances required, amongst other reasons. Elders and people with health issues (or young children) cannot catch early school buses nor wait all day to return home.

'Public Transport' route or scheduling modification is not the answer, as to run a culturally appropriate service takes enormous flexibility and cultural knowledge.

HART Services have an excellent blueprint for service delivery in rural and remote Aboriginal Communities. This includes employment of Aboriginal personnel, support to obtain LR/MR licences, involvement of Elders and Community members, self-determination within Communities and a holistic, flexible approach. Schedules are flexible to accommodate 'Sorry Business' and cultural needs. Community buses are wrapped in Community art designed and constructed by Community members, fostering pride and ownership.



HART Services operate a fleet of smaller buses tailored to local communities. These services have been built over many years, in a culturally appropriate manner. The access runs employ drivers from within the Communities which ensure that specific individual and collective needs are known and met. Steering Committees comprised of community members determine operational matters. Hart Services offers communities the opportunity to build skills, confidence and self-determination.



HART Services operate a number of funded services, unfortunately however the 'health bus' for example only runs two days a week from Jubullum and once a fortnight from Bonalbo to Casino/Lismore due to funding shortages. The runs have high patronage as can be seen by the trip graph above. These type of services alleviate extreme transport isolation and disadvantage.

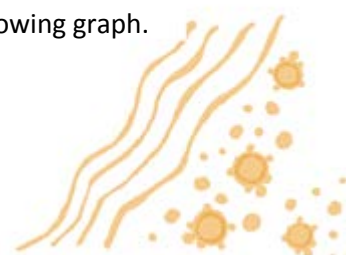
General Issues Relating to Transport Disadvantage.

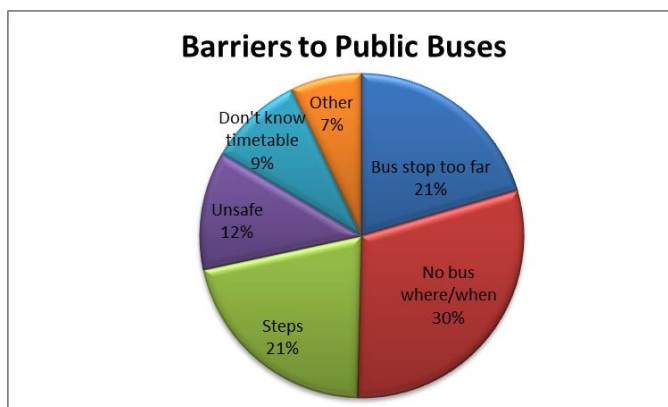
Regarding access issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW and potential strategies to improve access, I wish to discuss the need for Travel Training. Whilst a lack of transport services is certainly an issue for areas across the Northern Rivers, other factors also contribute to a perceived lack of transport options.

In a client survey conducted by HART Services respondents were asked if they **could** use public buses. There were 172 responses; 44% of these said they could, 8% could with help and 48% said they could not use buses at all. The reasons given by those who could not use buses at all are summarised in the following graph.

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Often barriers are perceived rather than actual, as demonstrated by this graph as buses commonly do not have steps. Elderly passengers are frequently afraid that the bus will 'take-off' causing them to trip, or that they will be unable to navigate schedules and timetables. Access and capacity to utilise web-based information and technology is lower for rural people compared to urban counterparts. Excessive car dependence often renders rural people naïve in navigating public transport, should their circumstances change and they find they require it.

Travel Training provides opportunity for:

- Increased individual awareness of transport options
- Increased awareness for non-government and government staff
- Increased confidence in using alternative transport options
- Provision of information on available concessions
- Encouragement of organisational support or commitment to alternative transport options
- Increased activity levels for individuals and groups by supporting active transport options
- Increased patronage of the local bus services and ultimately service levels
- Decreased social exclusion and isolation through transport disadvantage.

Transport for NSW are implementing Travel Training programs as of July 2016, mostly in urban areas however HART Services have been funded to implement a rural version.

These projects could be monitored for outputs/outcomes with best practice being appropriated as a blueprint for other areas.

Apart from that, I wish to suggest that current NSW Bus operator contracts are financially wasteful, outdated and are certainly not meeting the needs of rural Communities. Despite this being well known and documented (Barrie Unsworth's report on bus transport 2004) existing bus contracts have recently been renewed for another 8 years with no substantial rationalisation or improved performance requirements. The Unsworth report proposed a revolutionary restructure of bus operations that would have revolutionised rural transport. This valuable report was simply shelved. A good independent look at what is actually driving the decisions Transport for NSW make, is long overdue.

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