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Transit gap strands seniors

by Stephen Stetson

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Their only crime is getting old. Across Alabama, innocent elderly people are being imprisoned, often by their own children.

Arranging to have a parent's driver's license revoked or confiscating the car keys can be an agonizing step for everyone involved, taken only when the person becomes dangerous behind the wheel. But does giving up the car keys have to mean house arrest?

As much as elderly Alabamians rely on family, friends and neighbors for assistance, it's often tough to simply "catch a ride." For many, it's a matter of pride. They'd no sooner ask for a lift to the grocery store than they would ask to borrow money. Some "old school" types would rather endure pain than impose on someone to take them to the doctor. The social isolation of non-drivers can be especially tough in rural areas, where distances are longer and potential helpers are in shorter supply. Of course, some who have had their wings clipped will find a way to dodge their restriction — risking accident and even arrest.

I recently heard an Alabama sheriff talking about the plight of senior citizens in rural parts of his county. While he's glad most of them aren't careening down the highway without a license, he sees too many left stranded in undercooled or overheated homes. He and his officers make a point of checking on seniors during hot and cold spells, but their department isn't equipped to provide the necessary supports.

It doesn't have to be this way. Many states have created services to keep seniors and other non-drivers mobile and connected. Public bus systems in urban and suburban communities are an obvious answer, but there are workable options for rural areas, too. Transportation call centers can send vans on demand, picking up folks at their door, taking them where they need to go, and returning them safely home. You don't have to run a fixed-route bus system to help non-drivers make it to the grocery store, the dentist or the county senior center for some air conditioning and much-needed social contact.

Closing the rural transit gap will require state funding, which lawmakers long ago placed out of reach. A 1952 amendment to the Alabama Constitution forbids using state gasoline tax revenue for anything other than road and bridge construction and maintenance, and we remain one of only five states that provide zero dollars for public transportation. It will take another amendment to break that lock. Alabama spends millions each year on roads and bridges, but nothing on services that would help non-drivers use that infrastructure. Transportation assistance is available for Medicaid recipients and some dialysis patients, yet thousands of Alabamians go without routine medical care and chronic disease management for lack of wheels. If you're elderly or disabled or can't afford to own and operate a car, you're up the proverbial creek.

Advocates for urban transit in Alabama have a hard enough time making their case to lawmakers squabbling over shrinking budgets. For rural advocates, the job may be even tougher, involving cultural challenges as well as fiscal ones. Connecting country roads with urban centers often means crossing county lines and securing permission from cantankerous and suspicious leaders, many of whom don't understand — or acknowledge — the basic human dignity issues at stake.

What's so hard about standing up for disabled, elderly and low-income Alabamians who are stranded in their rural homes? The federal government stands ready to supplement rural transit programs — but only when the state is willing to create and sustain them. Alabama is more than eager to spend taxpayer dollars on incentives to attract industry. Why not apply the same principle to federal matching funds? A state investment in public transportation would create good jobs and improve lives.

Nobody wins under a system that leaves people stranded and disconnected. Access to medical care, commercial opportunities and social contact should be a basic right, no matter where in Alabama a person lives.

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