

# #15

**COMPLETE**

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Page 1: Award Categories

**Q1**

Directions: Read the descriptions below and select a category for which you would like to make an award nomination.

**Community Transportation System of the Year - Small System**  
Defined as providing service in areas and places of a rural setting where the population is 50,000 and below AND/OR the agency receives 5310 or 5311 funding. Typical CTAA membership demographics that would apply for this award include: NEMT/specialized transportation services, rural and tribal transit systems. Recognizes a community transportation system for:- Innovative and creative services in the community;- Being responsive to its customers' and community needs;- Actively coordinating and collaborating with other public and special services transportation;- Effectively helps the community accomplish their goals;- Creates partnerships with a wide-range of organizations, both public and private;- Providing accessible transportation service;- Building transportation alternatives that are intended to meet a wide range of the communities' needs.

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Page 2: Why is This Nominee Outstanding?

**Q2**

Innovative and creative services in the community.

Respondent skipped this question

**Q3**

Being responsive to its customers' and community needs.

Respondent skipped this question

**Q4**

Actively coordinating and collaborating with other public and special services transportation.

Respondent skipped this question

**Q5** Respondent skipped this question  
Effectively helps the community accomplish their goals.

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**Q6** Respondent skipped this question  
Creates partnerships with a wide-range of organizations, both public and private.

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**Q7** Respondent skipped this question  
Providing accessible transportation service.

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**Q8** Respondent skipped this question  
Building transportation alternatives that are intended to meet a wide range of the communities' needs.

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Page 3: Why is This Nominee Outstanding?

**Q9**

Innovative and creative services in the community.

The Southwest Initiative for Mobility (SWIM) implemented by the Southwest Area Regional Transit District (SWART) in 2019 is a prime example of innovative and creative services in the community, particularly in the rural areas of Texas. SWIM's approach to addressing the mobility needs of residents in the Middle Rio Grande Region demonstrates a commitment to grassroots solutions and a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the region.

One innovative aspect of SWIM is the adoption of a case management approach, which goes beyond traditional transportation services. By establishing a referral system involving over 35 regional partners, SWIM aims to create a network that addresses the unique mobility challenges faced by residents in the 8 rural counties, covering an expansive 11,000 plus square miles service area. This collaboration fosters a holistic and integrated approach to mobility solutions.

Moreover, SWIM's focus on achieving mobility self-sufficiency for residents adds a creative dimension to their services. The initiative recognizes that simply providing transportation options may not be sufficient, and thus, it offers case management to resolve or minimize challenges individuals may face in becoming self-sufficient in their mobility. This demonstrates a commitment to not only facilitating physical transportation but also empowering individuals to overcome obstacles, enhancing their overall quality of life.

In addition to conventional outreach strategies, SWIM's incorporation of travel training and community event participation reflects a proactive approach to engage with the community in the vast region. This multifaceted strategy ensures that residents are not only aware of the available services but are also equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to utilize them effectively.

SWIM's commitment to flexibility, offering a range of transportation options including public transportation, contracted services, or hybrid modes, further exemplifies its innovative approach. Recognizing the diverse needs of the region, SWIM tailors its services to accommodate various preferences and circumstances, thereby increasing the accessibility and inclusivity of the program.

SWIM stands as a model for innovative and creative services in the community by combining a grassroots approach, comprehensive case management, collaboration with regional partners, and a commitment to mobility self-sufficiency. The initiative goes beyond traditional transportation services, addressing the unique challenges of rural residents and actively working towards enhancing their overall quality of life.

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## Q10

Being responsive to its customers' and community needs.

SWART's responsiveness to its customers' and community needs is exemplified by the strategic implementation of 7 mobility managers funded through the 5310 program as part of the Southwest Initiative for Mobility (SWIM). This dynamic team plays a pivotal role in understanding and addressing the diverse needs of residents throughout the region, ensuring a client-focused and community-driven approach.

The four mobility managers responsible for client intake are instrumental in gauging the basic needs of potential riders. By engaging in a thorough intake process, they gather essential information to identify challenges and determine the appropriate level of support required. Furthermore, these managers follow up with individuals who have completed their case management, ensuring a seamless transition to mobility self-sufficiency. Handling rider concerns and actively monitoring and tracking the quality assurance of services provided by both SWART and SWIM, they contribute to the ongoing improvement and refinement of the programs.

The three mobility managers operating in the field play a vital role in bridging the gap between potential riders and the services they need. Conducting detailed intake processes, performing home visits, and actively engaging in referrals, travel training, and outreach, these managers are at the forefront of understanding the unique circumstances of individuals. Their involvement in community events and partnership building underscores their commitment to fostering collaborative relationships that enhance accessibility to transit services.

The holistic approach of these mobility managers extends beyond physical transportation needs to address the broader well-being of residents. By considering the physical, financial, and emotional capabilities of potential and current riders, the managers play a crucial role in ensuring that individuals can access transit services independently. This comprehensive perspective aligns with SWART's commitment to not only providing transportation solutions but also promoting overall community well-being.

SWART's responsiveness to its customers' and community needs is evident through the strategic deployment of mobility managers. Their roles encompass client intake, follow-up, quality assurance, field operations, and community engagement, contributing to a customer-centric and community-driven approach that goes beyond conventional transportation services. The implementation of mobility managers reflects SWART's dedication to understanding and meeting the diverse needs of the community effectively.

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**Q11**

Actively coordinating and collaborating with other public and special services transportation.

SWART's commitment to actively coordinating and collaborating with other public and special services transportation providers is evident in its role as the sole provider of rural public transit services in the expansive Middle Rio Grande Region. Covering counties such as Dimmit, Edwards, Kinney, La Salle, Maverick, Real, Uvalde, and Zavala, SWART recognizes the importance of fostering partnerships with various entities to create a comprehensive and effective service delivery system.

SWART's collaboration extends to private providers, inter-city carriers, social service providers, healthcare facilities, nursing homes, and ambulance services. Despite these partners offering minimal services to their clientele, they heavily depend on SWART services to address a significant portion of their transportation needs. This mutual reliance underscores the integral role that SWART plays in connecting diverse services and meeting the transportation requirements of the community.

The success of the Southwest Initiative for Mobility (SWIM) program has further strengthened these collaborative efforts. In response to the identified mobility challenges, SWART, alongside its partners, has laid the foundation for a community/regionally based coalition. This coalition aims to work collectively to address mobility issues, particularly during periods when SWART services are not available, such as after-hours, on weekends, and holidays.

An innovative aspect of this community-based approach is the empowerment of community champions—residents who actively contribute to the planning and implementation of initiatives designed to solve mobility challenges in their respective communities. Recognizing the diversity of the region, which spans from the Texas Hill Country to the border of Texas and Mexico, this approach ensures that solutions are tailored to the specific needs and geographic nuances of each community.

The formation of this coalition not only strengthens the ties between transit providers but also engages the community in finding solutions. It exemplifies a proactive strategy to involve residents as stakeholders in shaping the mobility landscape of their areas. This collaborative and community-driven approach aligns with SWART's dedication to creating a resilient and inclusive transportation system that responds effectively to the unique challenges of the Middle Rio Grande Region.

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## Q12

Effectively helps the community accomplish their goals.

SWART has been instrumental in effectively helping the community accomplish their goals through the implementation of the Southwest Initiative for Mobility (SWIM) program. This initiative has not only allowed SWART to continually assess the unique needs of each community within the Middle Rio Grande Region but has also facilitated the inventorying of support services, fostering ongoing partnership building and collaboration.

One notable impact of SWIM is its role as a major driver in supporting and enhancing the economic and community development of the region. By understanding the specific mobility challenges faced by residents, SWART has been able to tailor its services to directly contribute to the overall well-being and progress of the communities it serves.

Recognizing the success of SWIM, SWART sought alternative avenues of funding to expand the program and encompass additional services for the region. While many mobility management funding opportunities were traditionally available to non-profit organizations, SWART, as a local government entity, faced challenges in finding suitable regional non-profit partners willing to take on the fiscal responsibility of overseeing the rapidly growing mobility management needs.

In response to this challenge, SWART took an innovative step by establishing its own non-profit organization, Partners In Transit, Inc., in May of 2023. This non-profit entity was specifically created to support and facilitate a broader scope of work for the SWIM program. The mission of Partners In Transit, Inc., to provide "Mobility Solutions for All," reflects the commitment to addressing the diverse needs of the community and ensuring that mobility is accessible to everyone.

Through this strategic move, SWART not only overcame funding obstacles but also expanded its capacity to assist communities throughout the region. By actively participating in community development and addressing mobility challenges, SWART, through Partners In Transit, Inc., empowers each community to work towards achieving its goals for the well-being of residents.

SWART's proactive approach, from the inception of SWIM to the establishment of Partners In Transit, Inc., demonstrates a commitment to effectively helping communities accomplish their goals. The focus on mobility solutions, economic development, and community well-being underscores SWART's dedication to making a lasting and positive impact on the Middle Rio Grande Region. It is not just about providing rides, but providing a the built capacity for residents in the massively rural area to be mobility free.

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**Q13**

Creates partnerships with a wide-range of organizations, both public and private.

SWART has demonstrated an exceptional ability to create partnerships with a wide range of organizations, both public and private, in the Middle Rio Grande Region. Long before coordinated regional planning was mandated in Texas, SWART took the lead in regional planning efforts as early as 2000. Over the years, the organization has set a precedent in building creative and impactful partnerships across various categories of organizations.

Currently, SWART boasts over 35 partnership agreements that go beyond the provision of services, encompassing an expansive referral and support system. These partnerships span a diverse array of entities, including but not limited to health care facilities, nursing homes, faith-based groups, public and private school systems, higher education institutions like Southwest Texas Junior College and Sul Ross State University - Rio Grande College, mental health organizations, law enforcement agencies, workforce entities, disability support groups, retail establishments, other local governments, private businesses, the Texas Department of Health & Human Services, veterans services, renal care management companies, social service organizations, river authorities, and chambers of commerce/tourism.

Each partner plays a crucial role in contributing to a collaborative network that extends beyond mere service provision. SWART has fostered a culture of shared responsibility and engagement, with each partner actively participating in various networking and focus group meetings. SWART's Southwest Regional Planning Stakeholders Committee, spearheaded by the organization, serves as a platform where representatives from partner organizations come together to discuss and address mobility challenges in the region.

This collaborative approach reflects the visionary mission of SWART, which is "To provide safe, reliable public transportation with integrity to guide mobility enhancements in support of our communities' quality of life to benefit local economic development." By actively engaging with a broad spectrum of public and private entities, SWART has transformed mobility into a communal initiative in the Middle Rio Grande Region. This inclusive strategy not only enhances the quality of life for residents but also contributes to local economic and community development by fostering a resilient and interconnected community. SWART's proactive and collaborative efforts have not only set a precedent within the state of Texas but have also positioned the organization as a model for effective regional planning and partnership building.

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## Q14

Providing accessible transportation service.

SWART has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to providing accessible transportation services throughout the Middle Rio Grande Region, offering primarily demand-response services to cater to the diverse needs of the community. Annually, SWART facilitates over 85,000 one-way trips, traveling an extensive 700,000 miles. The organization operates with a fleet of over 45 vehicles, providing both local and out-of-area routes to ensure comprehensive coverage.

Regional routes are available six days per week, while routes to larger cities such as San Antonio and Laredo are offered five days per week. . The provision of two fixed routes in Eagle Pass adds to the flexibility of services offered by SWART. SWART has been a vital presence in the region since 1981, initially operating under a community action agency before becoming a standalone entity in 2012. Notably, the organization maintains an impressive record, boasting a complaint rate of less than 1%.

SWART has adapted to the unique challenges posed by its vast rural area, encompassing over 100 different "colonias" throughout the region. The commitment of SWART's drivers is exemplified by early morning pre-trip routines starting at 2:30 AM, ensuring the provision of services for a full 14-hour day on out-of-area routes. Out-of-area routes are extensive in time and distance with over 200 miles travelled one-way. This dedication reflects the organization's understanding of the essential nature of accessible transportation in the lives of its riders.

Over 83% of SWART's ridership comprises individuals over the age of 60 or those living with a disability, highlighting the organization's emphasis on serving vulnerable and underserved populations

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, SWART remained resilient, with no reduction in routes or services during this critical period. The organization's unwavering commitment to service provision during the pandemic earned recognition from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Administrator in 2021. SWART was acknowledged as one of six rural systems in the United States for its resilience and dedication to maintaining essential transportation services.

In 2022, SWART received further accolades, being recognized by its peers as the Texas State Rural Transit System of the Year. This acknowledgment underscores the organization's outstanding performance and dedication to serving the community.

Looking forward, SWART is poised for future service enhancements, with plans to implement micro-transit services in its larger areas, including Uvalde, Eagle Pass, and Crystal City/Carrizo Springs. In addition, SWART has been working on a vanpool project to address employment transportation needs. SWART's ability to remain flexible and its ongoing assessment of the region's needs highlight its commitment to adapting and evolving to better serve the diverse communities within the Middle Rio Grande Region.

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**Q15**

Building transportation alternatives that are intended to meet a wide range of the communities' needs.

SWART's commitment to building transportation alternatives that meet a wide range of the community's needs is exemplified by its proactive and adaptive approach. The recognition that the framework of each community in the Middle Rio Grande Region is dynamic and evolves has been a driving force in the organization's ability to provide safe, reliable, and affordable transit alternatives.

Over the last decade, the Middle Rio Grande Region has undergone significant transformations, such as the highly active Eagle Ford Shale and the immigration influx on its Southern Border. SWART has showcased its versatility by adjusting its services and programs to rapidly address the evolving needs of each community. The formation of the Southwest Initiative for Mobility (SWIM) program is a testament to this adaptability, fostering collaboration with diverse partnerships to create comprehensive solutions.

SWART's responsiveness extends beyond traditional transportation challenges. Recent events, such as the fear stemming from the pandemic and the 2022 Robb School Shooting Massacre in Uvalde, compelled SWART to reassess its safety protocols and customer service approach. Recognizing the emotional impact on riders, SWART has been proactive in easing anxiety and promoting emotional stability among its passengers.

Furthermore, the organization has recognized the increased mental health needs within the community, prompted by both the pandemic and the tragic events in its vicinity. Mental health awareness, detection, and treatment have become integral components of SWART's service delivery. The success of SWIM, with over 180,000 encounters with the public and the transition of over 30 individuals to mobility self-sufficiency through mobility case management, sets a precedent for other transit agencies to be creative and think innovatively.

SWART's vision extends beyond counting numbers of riders, miles, and hours. It emphasizes providing a platform for the community to have the freedom to dream, be, and do anything they choose, with mobility serving as an enabler rather than a deterrent. The organization aims to leave a lasting legacy, impacting individuals' lives rather than being defined solely by vehicles, properties, equipment, routes, and buildings.

In promoting comprehensive solutions to challenges faced by rural communities, SWART envisions a future where mobility is not an obstacle. The organization seeks to empower residents to make choices freely, allowing them to go where they want without constraints. SWART's holistic and community-driven approach represents a paradigm shift in rural transportation, emphasizing the importance of providing not just a service delivery system but a platform for personal and community growth.

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Page 4: Why is This Nominee Outstanding?

**Q16**

Respondent skipped this question

Have demonstrated an extensive history of community engagement;

**Q17**

Respondent skipped this question

Have created long-standing partnerships with other stakeholders that allow its residents to flourish.

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Page 5: Why is This Nominee Outstanding?

**Q18**

Respondent skipped this question

Providing creative, effective and continuing training and technical assistance programs.

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**Q19**

Respondent skipped this question

Using new concepts, strategies, procedures and policies to provide support to local transit systems.

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**Q20**

Respondent skipped this question

Communicating local transit systems' concerns and issues at the state and national level.

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**Q21**

Respondent skipped this question

Advocating for public and community transportation at the state and local level.

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Page 6: Why Is This Nominee Outstanding?

**Q22**

Respondent skipped this question

A record that reflects ongoing and exceptional growth in contribution to the profession and increased levels of leadership, responsibility and sphere of impact

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**Q23**

Respondent skipped this question

A recent track-record in the transit field reflects a strong career trajectory with the possibility of forward advancement and potential for appointment at the highest levels of the profession

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Page 7: Why Is This Nominee Outstanding?

**Q24**

Respondent skipped this question

Go that extra mile time and time again, encapsulating the spirit and professionalism of the workplace and the community transportation industry.

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**Q25**

Respondent skipped this question

Exudes the spirit and professionalism of community transportation at its best

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**Q26**

Respondent skipped this question

This award can include nominations from any of an agency's frontline positions (examples include drivers, dispatchers, etc.)

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Page 8: Tell Us About Your Nominee

**Q27**

Name

Sarah Hidalgo-Cook

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**Q28**

Title

General Manager

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**Q29**

Organization

Southwest Area Regional Transit District (SWART)

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**Q30**

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**Q32**

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Page 9: Tell us about yourself: who is submitting this nomination?

**Q33**

Name

Sarah Hidalgo-Cook

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**Q34**

Title

General Manager

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**Q35**

Organization

Southwest Area Regional Transit District (SWART)

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