



Strategic Plan **2022**



**National Center for
Rural Road Safety**

A Federal Highway Administration Center for Excellence

RuralSafetyCenter.org

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Overview

The National Center for Rural Road Safety, or Rural Road Safety Center (RRSC), is the premier national entity to provide and facilitate roadway safety technical assistance, information sharing, and training on rural road safety to local, rural, and tribal road owners and stakeholders. The RRSC was funded as a National Center for Excellence through a cooperative agreement between the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Montana State University (MSU) in 2014. A new cooperative agreement was established with MSU in February 2022 through a competitive process (NOFO Number 693JJ321NF00009). This strategic plan is an update to the original strategic plan from the 2014 term and covers the Base Period and projected Option Years of the new agreement through 2027.

We define “rural” as state, local, and tribal roads in those parts of the United States located outside of an urbanized area.

The tools and resources that the RRSC provide allow rural road practitioners to maximize safety performance on a traditionally underserved portion of the roadway system. Our work fills a vital need for agencies challenged by increasing workloads, diverse skillsets, and limited access to state and/or Federal resources, and this plan will guide our efforts to serve rural customers, partners, and stakeholders. We define “rural” as state, local, and tribal roads in those parts of the United States located outside of an urbanized area, and our goal is to continue and reinvigorate the connection to the rural road community through more focused safety training, technical assistance, and technology deployment. We seek to provide the nation’s best resources on FHWA’s most pressing topics for rural road safety.

By increasing the ability of rural road practitioners and other partner agencies to address the safety of their roadways beyond their current capabilities, the RRSC will help improve rural transportation safety outcomes and system safety performance, achieve significant cost, time, and resource savings, and reduce the risk of inefficient or ineffective efforts.



The Rural Road Safety Challenge

The rural transportation practitioners and policy makers that manage their part of the Nation's roads continue to confront a known problem: despite ongoing safety efforts, fatalities, serious injuries, and crashes on rural, local, and tribal roadways persist – and are on the rise.

Traveling in rural areas continues to present a disproportionate risk of severe injuries and fatalities to users. According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics at USDOT, 68% of total lane-miles in the US are in rural areas. Though only 19% of the population live in these parts of the country, 43% of all fatalities occur on these roads, and the fatality rate is 1.7 times greater in rural areas than in urban ones per 100 million miles traveled.



Rural areas:
9,494 lane-miles per
100,000 residents



Urban areas:
1,056 lane-miles
per 100,000 residents

These disproportionate data point to a significant equity challenge for rural road users. Almost by definition, rural roads connect populations and communities that have been historically underserved and/or adversely affected by poverty and inequality. An additional focus for the USDOT National Roadway Safety Strategy (NRSS), for example, is the disparate safety impacts and increased risk factors that affect certain groups on our roadways. According to FARS data for 2019, the 40 percent of counties with the highest poverty rates experienced a fatality rate 35 percent higher than the national average.

U.S. DOT Vision for Roadway Safety Together, we must strive for zero roadway fatalities. Zero is the only acceptable number of deaths on our highways, roads, and streets. The United States Department of Transportation is committed to taking substantial, comprehensive action to significantly reduce serious and fatal injuries on the Nation's roadways. However, no one will reach this goal acting alone. Reaching zero will require U.S. DOT to work with the entire roadway transportation community and the American people to lead a significant cultural shift that treats roadway deaths as unacceptable and preventable.

Fatality Rate Per 100 Million Vehicle-Miles Traveled is 1.7 times greater in rural areas



Rural
1.84



Urban
1.08

We can no longer accept fatalities and serious injuries as the price for continued mobility or the net effect of limited resources. We must also strive for more equitable outcomes for both the diverse users of rural roads as well as the communities who own and operate rural roads. Achieving the goal of zero deaths, however, will require all stakeholders in rural transportation – including the RRSC – to accelerate proven and effective methods for equipping rural practitioners while also pursuing more meaningful collaboration and partnerships. This includes increasing awareness of the RRSC among local networks that may not be aware of the assistance we can provide.



2022 Strategic Plan

The MSU team used a phased approach to establish and grow the RRSC through its first term. This included initial startup through mid-term enhancements in available rural safety training and resources, with the goal of implementing a nationally recognized single point of contact for rural solutions. The goal of this approach was to provide value beyond accumulating information and resources. By leveraging the latest safety knowledge and connecting partners and stakeholders locally and nationwide, the RRSC sought to transform the safety culture by integrating, creating, and sharing tools, best practices, and knowledge through a unified brand for rural road safety.

The current Rural Road Safety Center team believes this initial goal has been achieved. The foundational elements of the RRSC, its position within the rural road community, and its essential work efforts are in place. For the new term, the focus will shift towards maximizing the efficiency and effectiveness of the RRSC in its role as a “center of centers,” ensuring its safety training, technology transfer and deployment, and information exchange products and services are consistent and tailored to rural needs.

The RRSC will also respond to emerging efforts that change the way we think about rural safety challenges and the methods we take to address them. Our efforts in rural road safety are aligned with the NRSS, and we are focused on doing our part to drive rural roadway fatalities to zero. This includes helping rural practitioners in applying the Safe System Approach to the design and operation of rural roads, a new way of addressing safety challenges by considering five key elements of a safe transportation system – safe road users, safe vehicles, safe speeds, safe roads, and post-crash care – in an integrated way. As we develop a better understanding of the intersection of equity and roadway safety, the RRSC will use this strategic plan the RRSC to incorporate that knowledge into our efforts.

New 2022 Vision Statement

We will be the premier national hub for training, resources, and technical assistance that help drive rural roadway fatalities to zero.

Through 2021, the RRSC focused on both sharing and delivering integrated, multidisciplinary, and systemic approaches that address safety. That operational vision has supported the overarching national goal of providing safe and efficient transportation services to rural agencies. For this term, the vision statement has been updated to clarify our goal for the future-state of the RRSC: to become the preeminent source for rural road safety knowledge, resources, and tools that moves us toward the shared vision of zero deaths.

New 2022 Mission Statement

To develop and share multidisciplinary rural road safety training, resources, and technical assistance that are dynamic, collaborative, and responsive.

Recent USDOT initiatives are shifting emphasis from the traditional mission of the national highway network to added focus on the needs of rural, local, and tribal roadways. The updated RRSC mission statement reflects our support for this shift through improved and augmented operations and communications within the rural transportation community to ensure current and emerging rural road safety needs are addressed.

New RRSC Approach to Operations

To meet new challenges while maintaining and improving upon previous efforts, the RRSC will undertake the following strategic approach:



Create a cycle of continuous improvement for existing products and services. *This will ensure RRSC work is of the highest quality and includes the latest, most relevant rural road safety information.*



Increase and maximize outreach and collaboration with Federal programs, USDOT and State DOT offices, and national transportation safety organizations. *We are natural collaborators and should leverage each other's resources and communication networks.*



Work with FHWA to define projects that have the most impact on rural road safety. *We will focus our efforts on those tasks, thus reducing and/or eliminating inefficient and duplicative work.*



Collaborate with FHWA to propose and introduce new rural road safety training, assistance, and deployment efforts. *These will include innovative technologies, practices, training, and technical assistance that address the emerging needs of practitioners.*

Many current activities will continue under this new term and will be built on the foundation laid in the first term. We will forge deeper relationships with national, state, and local partners in this space while we continue to collaborate with other traditional and non-traditional transportation safety partners at all levels. Our work will continue to support Federal and State DOT policy goals and performance targets for rural road safety, including the NRSS, ROUTES, and any subsequent or related efforts.



Continuing Phased Growth for the RRSC

This 2022 update will take a phased approach to the new term of RRSC activities that builds on the 2015 Strategic Plan. That earlier document projected RRSC progress from startup through growth in three phases:

Phase 1: Build the Foundation

Phase 2: Enhance the Center

Phase 3: Implement a Center of Centers

With those phases completed, the new RRSC will focus on bringing our collective efforts to maturity and beyond. This means increasing our capabilities, multiplying our resources, and expanding our reach to better serve the rural road agencies and communities they serve through the next three phases of growth:



Phase 4: Evaluate Current RRSC Training, Technical Assistance, and Technology Deployment Activities and Expand Outreach (short-term) – *In this phase, we will connect with stakeholders to learn what they like about the RRSC, the rural road safety resources they need from us going forward, and where we can improve. We will also use that information to update and improve RRSC management and operations to better deliver on those needs. Tasks include:*

- Update and expand understanding of stakeholder rural road safety needs, existing programs, and training
- Evaluate their effectiveness through needs assessments, gap analyses, and direct stakeholder engagement
- Widen communications and outreach efforts to include deeper and more direct connections to end-users





Phase 5: Upgrade Capabilities and Augment Stakeholder Input (medium-term) – In the following phase, we will implement any changes, alterations and upgrades identified to existing work efforts, while simultaneously processing feedback and ideas for new work into options for FHWA review and approval. Tasks include:

- Enhance and upgrade RRSC technical assistance, information sharing, and training products and services to better meet stakeholder needs in a timely, efficient, customized manner
- Analyze feedback obtained from both FHWA and the rural road community to assess and propose new projects to meet identified rural road safety needs
- Maintain and expand networks for ongoing interaction with rural road practitioners and related organizations



Phase 6: Develop New Products and Maximize Center Effectiveness (long-term) – This subsequent and ongoing phase will focus on the development and delivery of approved new projects while nurturing and maintaining existing work through continuous improvement. The overarching goal will be to maximize RRSC quality and capitalize on RRSC successes. Tasks include:

- Develop and deliver new products and services that increase the growth, reach, and visibility of the RRSC
- Continue to manage, monitor, and improve ongoing high-quality, efficient rural transportation safety solutions for the RRSC
- Continue to engage rural road stakeholders in the “push” of RRSC products and services as well as the “pull” of needed RRSC project feedback to ensure the overall quality, success, and growth of RRSC work

Specific work on products and deliverables that support and/or complete the tasks in each phase will be captured in the required annual product and project plans we deliver to FHWA. Data collected by the RRSC on program performance will be used to inform ongoing reporting, assess RRSC progress, and inform future decision making on RRSC activities. Throughout all phases, we will leverage our ongoing partner relationships among primary stakeholders and the wider rural roads community alike to solicit and process continuous feedback on the efficiency and effectiveness of the RRSC.



New Focus Areas

We will bring a tighter focus on our internal business processes to ensure that RRSC efforts are as efficient and effective as possible. This will allow us to maximize scarce resources to deliver more to rural road practitioners. The RRSC team will work closely with FHWA to further drive efficiencies in RRSC operations by reimagining how we provide our training and education, technical assistance, technology transfer, and research efforts wherever possible. In close concert with FHWA, we will provide strategic and organizational options that more closely align our training, technical assistance, and technology transfer efforts with the needs of the agencies we serve.

Our new approach to the work of the RRSC will be deployed through five focus areas. The annual project and product plans will define and measure the work we do through these focus areas:

Continuous Product Improvement. *We will implement an ADDIE-style process (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) of continuous improvement for existing training, technical assistance, and technology deployment. Our products will get better and better as we gain additional feedback from FHWA and key stakeholders.*

Strategic Partnerships. *We will make best use of our existing network of organizations and their audiences for distribution, support, and feedback. We will also grow this network through targeted and sustained engagement.*

Focused Operations. *We will ensure that the mission-critical needs that FHWA wants to address in the rural road community are being served. Work assigned to the RRSC will be delivered on time and with high customer satisfaction levels.*

Proactive Fulfillment. *We will leverage our considerable experience in the rural safety community to think two steps ahead about emerging and future needs for our rural road constituency. We will transform that access into the knowledge to build tomorrow's tools today, and we will continually bring new ideas to the table for FHWA to consider.*

Dynamic Marketing and Outreach. *We will take our communications and relationship-building capabilities to the next level. We will make best use of all available tools to foster increased awareness and use of RRSC resources.*



Projected Performance Measures by Focus Area

The RRSC is committed to delivering improved levels of quality, increased alignment to FHWA rural road safety priorities, and greater accountability to FHWA for delivery of those services. To do so, we will define ongoing performance in terms of a) the effective output of resources, training, and technical assistance, as well as b) the impactful outcomes for safety on the rural road system that are responsive to the rural road communities we serve.

Tentative performance measures are as follows:

Continuous Product Improvement

- Qualitative data evaluating efficiency/effectiveness of RRSC outputs
 - Summit satisfaction
 - Resource efficiency and effectiveness
- Direct liaison with key stakeholders for general feedback on RRSC work
 - Webinar attendance/feedback
 - Qualitative conversations
 - Direct queries from customers
- Focused stakeholder groups for specific, deep-dive reviews
 - Number of meetings held
 - Feedback and ideas captured/intended action

Strategic Partnerships

- Number of presentations requested and delivered, including attendee data
- Number of collaborative efforts with key partners
 - Joint meetings, resources, materials, and messaging
 - Attendance at conferences/webinars
 - Planned activities and agreements

Focused Operations

- Number of trainings and attendees by agency
- Number of events and meetings hosted or attended, including general attendee data
- Number of materials distributed e.g., technical briefings, guidelines, fact sheets, & handbooks
- Technologies deployed, including qualitative data on type and agency where applicable

Proactive Fulfillment

- Capture all requests for technical assistance received and fulfillment status
- Research projects requested and completed
 - Project status, progress, and budget updates while underway

Dynamic Marketing and Outreach

- Various data on website (e.g., Google Analytics) and social media efforts (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube)
 - Web traffic
 - Growth/engagement on social media platforms
- Resource downloads

The Future of the Rural Road Safety Center

Strategic plans are by necessity works in progress, living documents that assess the evolution of program goals and help organizations make substantive changes and corrections along the way to improve. The updates envisioned by this plan may therefore lead to other ways to assess the provision of rural road safety assistance at the national level. Categorizations that we have come to rely on to define the provision of these services may change, transform, or even become invalid. This can include everything from the training, technical assistance, and technology deployment that the RRSC provides to the nature of the relationships that rural practitioners require. In this changing environment, nothing is untouchable – including RRSC products and methods – as we work to reduce and eventually eliminate fatalities from our rural roads.

The collection of relevant program performance data will be invaluable to achieving that vision. The growing data set should allow decision makers to leverage information on whether the RRSC is keeping pace with the constant state of programmatic change in rural road safety, whether our products and services resonate with customers, and whether ongoing operations are addressing emerging rural safety practices and challenges. In turn, as our efforts mature under this plan, further changes to how we manage our individual work efforts, such as sharing and obtaining training, may emerge. Across the rural road landscape, the RRSC is committed to instituting a culture of continuous improvement that ensures the closest possible link between our roadway safety efforts and the local, rural, and tribal customers we assist in our drive to make our vision of zero deaths on rural roads a reality for all Americans.

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