

Tech-Driven Independence: How AV Can Improve the Lives of Older Adults

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Transportation is a key social determinant of health for older adults, and lack of access is associated with [negative health outcomes](#), like social isolation and depression. For elders who no longer drive, access to alternative modes of transportation is important for health, wellbeing, and independence. By harnessing emerging technology like autonomous vehicles (AV), we can improve the freedom and independence of older people and others with limited mobility.

There are [62 million](#) adults ages 65 and older living in the U.S.—about 18% of the population. By 2054, that number is projected to reach 84 million. As the population of older people here (and [globally](#)) rapidly increases, we face challenges in ensuring that our industry is prepared for this demographic shift and able to meet the mobility needs of all. Autonomous vehicles are already operating on our streets, and researchers expect [4.5 million](#) partially or fully autonomous vehicles to be on the road by 2030. How can we harness this mobility shift to empower older adults?



Source: Waymo

People want to know that autonomous vehicles are [dependable and safe](#). Some older adults also express a preference for social interaction with drivers, which might decrease their desire to use fully autonomous vehicles versus other modes such as a bus or light rail (where they might interact with other people). Increasing knowledge about the safety of autonomous vehicles is a good place to start. Additionally, rideshare agencies that use fully autonomous vehicles can tailor services to older adults to encourage them to use AV to meet their needs. Specifically, the use of shared autonomous vehicles (SAVs) may be [especially helpful](#) for this population, especially those who live in retirement communities.

Autonomous vehicles may also prove beneficial to the mobility needs of people with disabilities. In 2023, about [half](#) of the requests placed by wheelchair users to rideshare apps did not receive a response. The two most popular rideshare apps do have wheelchair-accessible vehicle programs, and all of their cars

are required to transport foldable assistive devices—but this does not stop many of the 57 million disabled people in the United States being denied rides because of a mobility device or service animal. Disability advocates are pushing for more emphasis on considering disability in designing autonomous vehicles and related technology.



May Mobility has partnered with the CCTA to launch an AV microtransit service designed to improve access to healthcare in Martinez, CA. Source: May Mobility.

Fortunately, change is happening. Last year, AV tech leader [May Mobility](#) announced its partnership with the [Contra Costa Transportation Authority](#) (CCTA) to begin providing microtransit service to improve access to healthcare in Martinez, California. This partnership will be a part of CCTA's existing transportation network, expanding its fleet with seven autonomous vehicles, three of which will include ADA-compliant accessibility features like wheelchair ramps.

While disabled communities are advocating for changes so they can more easily use AV, many older adults may be apprehensive to adopt new technologies because of ability, lack of knowledge, or other reasons.

Recently, my 82-year-old father (who is my personal hero and role model for success) took his first ever ride in an autonomous vehicle on the streets of San Francisco. Of this experience, he said, "From start to finish, my very first ride in an autonomous vehicle was easy peasy. I used my phone to choose where I wanted to go and to unlock the vehicle. Another simple interaction with the car had me on the road, riding along smoothly and listening to music just like on any other drive. Safe and super simple, even at 82 years old. We're living in the future of transportation today!"

This inspiring reaction to the experience reveals that autonomous vehicles may really be a mobility solution to increase independence and quality of life for many, no matter how old. Doubtlessly, AV tech will continue to evolve to meet mobility needs, but we have already come so far and are only going to keep going.

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