

# Berkshire Rides Youth Program

## A Model of Vehicle Sharing Across Agencies

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During the past 11 years, BerkshireRides has helped over 6,000 residents commute to work and volunteer opportunities in northern Berkshire County (Massachusetts). A program of the Transportation Association of Northern Berkshire, Inc. BerkshireRides offers employment related ride service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, each day of the year, assisting any resident in need of a ride throughout the Northern Berkshire region of seven cities and towns.

In 2007, the non-profit transportation service expanded its mission to include transporting younger residents to after-school and summer programs throughout the community. In collaboration with area schools and youth programs, and using an \$81,000 three-year grant from Northern Berkshire United Way, BerkshireRides added three vans to its fleet to specifically transport children to programs. The youth transportation program, a first for this rural community, resulted from a 10-month cooperative effort between the North Adams Public School System, the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, the Northern Berkshire YMCA, and the Church Outreach to Youth program. This collaboration exemplifies how local agencies can partner to provide youth—or other population—access to a variety of programs they may not otherwise have been able to attend.

The concept for the service was born after multiple meetings with local agencies that offer youth development programs. In the past, these agencies were able to use public school vans during after-school hours to transport youth to programs. But, as that fleet aged, the vehicles became less available. The YMCA's vans were also headed for retirement, so suddenly the community was faced with a transportation crisis.

After exploring many different ways to mitigate the problem, the community presented Northern Berkshire United Way with its proposal for the youth transportation service. An \$81,000 grant from Northern Berkshire United Way enabled BerkshireRides to purchase three new vans, each fitted with school bus lights and pupil plates, for use to pick up students from local schools and take them to after-school summer activities. One of the vans is a 12-passenger van that can be used for larger groups.

The program's first priority is assisting member agencies with their youth development programs. Currently, there are seven member agencies. All three vehicles are shared among the agencies as needed, under the sponsorship of BerkshireRides. Each van may be used for multiple trips on any given day, with each agency using the vehicle for the hours they need it to provide youth transportation. When not reserved by one of the collaborating partners, the vans may be used to support BerkshireRides' greater mission of removing transportation barriers for local communities. Youth ride free of charge.

In its first six weeks of operation, 871 children were transported for a total of 2,913 miles. Participating agencies each pay a monthly fee to cover insurance, safety inspection, registration, and maintenance costs. Member agencies also recruit drivers and maintain and re-fuel the vehicles. BerkshireRides maintains a list of qualified drivers. Drivers are required to pass a criminal background check and have a safe driving record before they are accepted into the program. The drivers are employed by each individual agency. Some might volunteer, others are paid, and others are full-time agency employees.

who drive as part of their program responsibilities. BerkshireRides coordinates the schedules for use of the vans; member agencies are entitled to priority scheduling of one vehicle.

When one of the “paying” partners has not requested use of a vehicle, it is available for use in meeting other community transportation needs. For example, prior to the service’s maiden voyage, the Mayor of North Adams contacted Jana Hunkler Brule, Project Manager for BerkshireRides, looking for a way to get two families to attend their children’s performance in a play. About 3 hours after being registered, a volunteer driver went to the housing development where the families live and shuttled them to a neighboring town’s summer theater festival so they could see their children perform. Brule said, “It was a wonderful feeling” to be able to provide this service.

The member agencies attend scheduling meetings 3-4 times per year during which they plan their programs in such a way that the small fleet of vans can be shared between all. A separate daily rate for agencies with occasional transportation needs is also being considered. Much of the program’s success is accredited to the fact that participating agencies were part of the service from the start and actually conceptualized the model.

Current funding for the program includes an advertising arrangement with a local credit union. Outreach to attract additional partners, necessary to sustain the service, is ongoing . Private foundations are also being approached for support. Support for the youth transportation service, initially provided by donations from the local school system and a hospital outreach/education program, allowed BerkshireRides to bring parents to schools for meeting and school-related events. Without this service, these parents would not be able to participate in their children’s academic lives . Furthermore, adult students, with a referral, were able to attend prevention programs such as smoking cessation or free mammograms for the uninsured offered by a local hospital.