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**SPEAKERS**

Bill Wagner, Sage Kashner, Kelly Ast

**Bill Wagner** 00:15

Good morning. Today we're talking with Kelly Ast. New Growth transit. New Growth transit is a volunteer driver network located in west central Missouri. We're talking to Kelly because of the unique way new growth transit started, how it was funded, and the great work they're doing meeting vital needs in a very rural part of our world. Before we get started, some general housekeeping. Today, we are going to be recording this. We will take questions, please enter the questions in the q&a box. At the end of the webinar, we will answer as many questions as we have time for and then the web's the webinar, and the questions will be posted on our website National Center for Mobility management.org. The morning, Kelly, and thank you for joining us today and sharing the great work you're doing. Can you tell me a little bit about new growth transit and how it began?

**Kelly Ast** 01:16

Yeah, definitely. So new growth transit is a community development corporation. And we are an affiliate of West Central Missouri Community Action Agency. We are in west central Missouri. So it's a very diversified area. We have very small, isolated communities. And then we have Cass County, which is one of our counties. That's the suburban to the south of Kansas City. So we're in the Ozarks lakes regions, we have beautiful hills, and we've got lots of agriculture. We have very small school districts. We have four hospital networks within our territory. We have quite a few clinics and one FQHC. So we have a lot of distance to our territory.

**Bill Wagner** 02:09

miles and miles. Yes. Kelly, one of the things I found interesting about new growth was the way that you started. Funding originally developed, I believe, with a HERSA grant and some local foundation money. Can you can you talk a little bit more about Tell us how that came together and how you started that way?

**Kelly Ast** 02:33

Yeah, so in 2019 to 2020, we were funded by Health Resources and Services Administration to do a network planning grant. So we had nine months to configure community partners across nine counties. And what we can say is that we were able to be successful, we were able to bring stakeholders over 40 stakeholders actually, that were engaged in looking at the needs in the area for transportation, looking at the gaps. And then we explored different solutions. And so we were blessed, because we started this in the fall of 19. And then it was, we completed it in the summer of 20. So even through the pandemic, we were able to continue those meetings with partners. And I think that speaks to the level of importance that those partners felt on that strategic plan. They were able to have the input, we were able to put all of our entities that we represented aside. So that was everything from employment, to medical providers to educators, we invited all of our civic servant, civic service agencies, as well as senior centers. We just invited anybody and everybody to the table. And we started to see there was this networking happening. And so while we were regionally looking at a solution, we found people across the region that found similarities to challenges, and even some of them had solutions or shared resources in transit providers. But maybe they weren't aware of those hours of operation. So we established what existed. And then we looked at those gaps, then I think that was very important in our planning. We weren't trying to throw anything out or scratch anything or start bare bones, we were looking to add, and then from there that led to that community asset based approach. So what are the values that exist in these communities? Who are the players who's not here? And one of those players we found out is we did not have very many county commissioners at the table. And so that became and we'll talk about it later, but that actually became part of our funding opportunities. So we even had ambulance districts, Bill. I mean, we thought of anybody that in any way shape or form pharmacies because they do delivery. If they weren't at those initial meetings. We kept exploring who wasn't They're an adding to those meetings. So we had an ebb and a flow constantly to the partners that were engaged in those strategic plans with HERSA. And then we continued to grow that we looked for Missouri foundation for health for grant support, you know, we were creating great data and research. And so we we looked at everything from state grants, foundations, and then we were able to secure in 2020, we were able to secure funding through cares. And so that was going to help us actually launch a volunteer transportation network. And then that strategic plan, we discovered that that could be a solution. In that planning, though, it was unanimous that our biggest challenge was going to be recruiting volunteers. And I'm happy to say to this day, that's not our biggest challenge. So we're able to take the cares funding, and then match that with some funding for Temporary Assistance for a year from mobility management from Missouri Rural Health Association. So then we could have an additional staff person, so we had two people, and we had $20,000. And we were going to book rides and find volunteers and certify them. And we were able to accomplish that. What's really surprising is we're able to accomplish that, and one of our most isolated and underfunded counties. And it's because they had a lot of Mennonite population, they had a lot of drivers in that area, they had a lot of neighbors that were taking people long distances for non emergency medical. So that was our county that outperformed, we thought it would be our most underperformed and it turned out to be our outlier and support for volunteer transportation, then we moved in 2021, we needed to scale and spend some money on technology. And we were able to get private funding from Patterson Family Foundation, they had never funded anything in regards to transportation. So what appealed to them was the idea of scaling, and a technology investment. So we began a very long discovery. And I know we'll get into that later about different technology and what it offered. And what was great about that private foundation funding is it was somewhat unrestricted, we were still in a research phase. But we also knew that we had momentum. So we had stakeholders, just a year prior that said, we need this. We had cares funding, we were starting to do it. But then we had to find technology. And we couldn't go out in a bid process. We needed to meet with individuals. And so this happened very quickly within six months, and had we not had private funding, I don't think it would have been as quick. And then the past two years, we've built additional service agreement partners, areas of aging with care connection, we work with all the regional senior centers, we have a private foundation paying for rides. And we've also received state appropriations through the governor's office, from Missouri, again, to help us expand our territory, expand our staffing, and continue to invest in progress with the technology to support the demand that's out there for transportation utilizing volunteer drivers.

**Bill Wagner** 08:16

That, that's great. I love how you have brought many different funding sources and blended them together. And many non traditional transportation funding sources. But I want to go back one quick second to that HERSA planning grant, was that initially designed to address healthcare needs? And the planning process brought transportation recognized transportation as the need? Or was it right from the get go? We're going to plan a transportation for health care group to get together.

**Kelly Ast** 08:56

So those were all the questions, those were all the questions that we brought to the group. So we were looking at how to create more access for individuals that needed access to medical care. And so we did when we started that initial meeting, we brought together majority of it were medical partners, FQHC, large providers, clinic managers, as well as behavioral health, and of course, the ambulance group. But by that second meeting, they all sat there and they said, Kelly, where are the employers? Now, some of our medical providers are the largest employers in some of these small communities. But they knew very early on, we needed to diversify. And so yes, originally in the HERSA grant, we were looking to just create more access to medical, but the need is so great. You know, if somebody goes to the doctor, they need to go after before after they go to the doctor, they need to get access to a grocery store or retail facility. And so this just continue to come up through the strategic plan. So our prior already was non emergency medical. And still to this day, our number one destination is to non emergency medical. But very quickly, we saw two other important destinations, which were to retail services for food, or for employment, those were creeping into that strategic plan. And we incorporated that dialogue in our plan with HERSA. You know, so they understood, you know, all the research was showing that there was so much great need, you know, to this day, our average trip length is 27 miles. So, we're going a great distance to just even get to basic medical care, not even specialty care. And a lot of times those are over an hour and a half away. So yes, the mission in the beginning was, was to create access. And then from that the gap everybody saw were more transportation services. And then it became, from our lens and community action, we understood it had to be asset based. And we also knew that we couldn't afford a very large investment in transportation to get people the medical access they deserved. You know, we weren't a large transit authority, we were just a lot of isolated communities, and nonprofits trying to figure out who was going to connect and create the transportation network to get people to these essential services.

**Bill Wagner** 11:26

That's, that's great. Thank you. Um, I think that, you know, especially in looking at rural areas, transportation becomes that barrier to so many things. And I think when we look at the federal level, when we see, you know, multiple federal agencies looking at, you know, braiding funding, and bringing it together, I think it just becomes a much clearer, more efficient way of getting the results such as what you're doing out there. So, tell me, why did you decide on a volunteer driver program? How did what brought that up? I think you touched a little bit on this, but let's talk about that.

**Kelly Ast** 12:05

Yeah, I think the benefits we saw on the volunteer driver program was that it was sustainable, and it was affordable. You know, look at all these in the model development here. You know, we've had to bring in so many different types of part of partners, to create, you know, to put together the strategic needs for a volunteer transportation network. But one thing that we talked about where we're going to spend our time, you know, coordinating volunteers, I'd seen it successfully done throughout the United States, or we're going to spend money on bus stops, and spend money on passenger vehicles. And then these rural areas, we don't have density of population, our biggest challenge is distance. And sometimes it's even the roads, you know, you got a Farm road that washes out, you've got gravel roads, you've got detours in the summertime with lots of construction on these two Lane County roads. So the volunteer transportation network appealed to us for many reasons, we were able to customize the route. We were also looking at it was affordable. So we didn't have large infrastructure, fleets of vehicles, bus stops, you know, maintenance of those bus stops. Additionally, we we felt like it was more secure. And some of that early research. With that HERSA planning grant, we talked to individuals that were not, it was not appealing to them senior adults to utilize public transportation. In rural America, we grew up driving a pickup truck, you know, you go you you drive at a very young age, maybe you backup a trailer helping your dad out, but the culture is driving. And when you either as an adult, you lose that ability to drive for multiple reasons. There is a hesitation to use public transportation, and a volunteer transportation network like this can offer additional security. And oftentimes individuals are forced into that chapter of life or due to whatever's happened, they are forced into making a decision that they can no longer drive. And so, and again, I talked a lot about the volunteer transportation networks are community based. In rural America, you there are not a lot of marketing outlets. The newspapers are gone. They are advertising their three pages. They're doing it once a week. We do have social media. We have very in our large municipality, you know, our large cities, they have new stations, but we're all fighting for a soundbite. And so a community based approach meets the needs and it reduces that barrier to marketing. You know, I can't buy a sign on 54 highway that's gonna get enough people to see it and understand what we're doing. So we work a lot with civic groups. We go to a lot of Lions Clubs, rotaries, then a lot of our volunteers belong to those organizations and they go out and share the news about becoming a driver or about our rights or This, this year will be our third year. And this is the first year we've ever had a marketing budget. Nonprofits normally do not have the luxury of having funding to have for marketing. So we knew that to sustain this, it had to be community based. And you can do that with asking your neighbor to drive, or people within your community volunteers.

**Bill Wagner** 15:28

nonprofit marketing budget is word of mouth. And we all we all can talk, but we don't have a lot of funds to put into it other than that. So one of my things, I often say in the world of transit is, we don't necessarily need to reinvent the wheel for innovation. I know you did a lot of research and you came up with this model that you're using. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Kelly Ast** 15:57

Yeah, we actually, like I said, we had private funding. So we had the luxury to talk to a lot of different entities, we looked at some standard more public software providers. And we just didn't feel like they truly understood all the workings on behind the scenes, and all of the connections and what it takes for a volunteer transportation network. And it was actually through a webinar through an CMM that I had heard Sam purging from volunteer Transportation Center. And so I followed up and call them check them out on Facebook. So and what I was most impressed by this organization is that they were also a nonprofit, their staff and leadership were mission driven. They knew that their main mission was to utilize volunteer volunteers to get people where they needed to go. And they operated in rural New York State. And we this all learning about VTC happened during the pandemic. So we entered an agreement, we just followed that organization through an iPad, different people within the organization carried us around through an iPad, and we watched how they operated. So still to this day, what we're gaining is we're gaining the technology support, but we're also gaining that the partnership, you know, we're changing processes, we're constantly looking at different ways. Their model is similar, but needs to be adapted for the needs here in Missouri. So I can't say enough. Thanks to that staff and the leadership there. But definitely mission driven.

**Bill Wagner** 17:39

Yes, Sam does a great job at the volunteer Transportation Center in New York. So Kelly, there's other people on this webinar today that may not be familiar with the volunteer driver program and how it works. Can you talk and talk us through how your program works?

**Kelly Ast** 18:01

Yeah, if so, first of all, you may ask Which comes first, the funding the driver or coordinating the ride, so the funding, you've got to secure the funding, and then you have to recruit drivers. We're constantly recruiting drivers. That is the fun part about this job. There's multiple reasons but we have a full time recruiter and trainer who is out there looking for volunteers. Again, it's very community based. So we're going to let us civic organizations we're talking to ministerial alliance we're going to the YMCA is so we recruit that individual, then we get their application, we run a background screening on their application. Then once they pass the background screening then becomes a certification process. It is a bit lengthy. We have a handbook and 17 point font, multiple pages, well over 20 pages, but we set and we work with that potential volunteer, we crane on HIPAA. We also talked to them about different scenarios. So they are a volunteer just receiving the reimbursement. So we go over multiple scenarios. So they understand their responsibility as a volunteer and their responsibility as a volunteer driver. And then once they complete that process, and they're on boarded at that point, then we also supply them with a tablet. So the app is used either on their phone or a tablet. And there's that's also an educational curve. The average age of our volunteer is about 64 years old. So we're working a lot in technology and a tablet. And so sometimes there's multiple trainings, and then that individual tells us their availability. So then my staff, we have four full time coordinators right now. And so they're taking the ride reservation so they're coming in And they're doing a short intake process on those individuals, they're finding out, they're where they live, who lives with them get a second contact information, as well as sometimes just listening to their needs. Sometimes we get people who are in crisis, they've been turned down multiple times, or they're a little sheepish about utilizing public transit, such as volunteer, so we talk to them, get them into the system, then I have coordinators that are we have a 48 hour notice. So I have coordinators then that are looking at volunteer drivers availability, they're matching those rides, they're putting together the ride schedules. And then they send them out to the volunteer drivers, they receive the ride schedules, PDF format, all of that's on our protected server that they receive on their tablets. And then they accept the ride. So the night before the volunteer driver calls, the individual tells them their name and make and model of their vehicle and what time they're going to pick up. This is really important, because we're already starting to troubleshoot if the appointment has changed, if there's possible, the writer is going to back out for whatever reason sickness, this is when we start troubleshooting before we send a volunteer driver out there. So then they complete the ride, they utilize the app during the ride, we can see when the ride is in progress. Then once that ride is completed, they attest to the ride. Every two weeks, I have a finance team of two and a half people. So two full time one halftime that are calculating the reimbursement. And so then we electronically submit that to the volunteer drivers twice a month, their reimbursement. So there's a lot of details in there. And there's a lot of ride coordination. But I do want to say I think it's very important that within our network that we're constantly doing, we're taking a phone call. So when we began this process, we thought we were going to develop an app. And people were going to utilize an app in rural Missouri to access transportation, the app we needed was for the volunteer drivers, not the writers. So that's been kind of evolution of our models that we found, it's very important that that relationship over the phone and that intake from the writer to our coordinators, there's a lot of challenging. People don't know their destinations, they don't know the proper drop off. So we're working with them. We're also working with them to ride share. I think that's something that we don't talk about and rural areas. So we'll call them back and ask them if they don't mind sharing the ride, because we were going to the same destination as a medical clinic. And so then we note their account that this individual is open to ride sharing. So we're doing more and more of that, because the technology allows us to

**Bill Wagner** 22:49

so you talked about the reimbursement that's for the miles that the drivers travel, correct? Yes. And do the riders pay for the rides?

**Kelly Ast** 23:01

No, they don't. So yeah, we're all you know, these are volunteer drivers. And all of the funding for the right is is we write grants, and we get appropriations. And so that's part of that fundraising we do we work with commissioners, and you know, I look at the investment for entities to buy into a volunteer transportation network is very small in comparison to purchasing fleets of vehicles. So yes, the rides are free, and they will remain and we do believe in community mobility. I think that's another thing that's important here is we're just not transporting somebody to go to a you know, a physician's appointment and come home. We have different buckets of funding. So they may want one leg is to is at one fund. And then another fund, you know that maybe our fundraising that we do on our side pays for that individual to then go the grocery store and return home. But our technology allows us to keep all of that straight. And I think that's very important aspect of rural transportation,

**Bill Wagner** 24:10

or your clients that you're transporting. Are they Medicaid eligible or non Medicaid? Variety? Tell us about that?

**Kelly Ast** 24:22

Yeah, we transport anybody from the age of 18 to 101. And that's one of our oldest riders. So we have people that it's we're public transit, so we're going to transport anybody, we're not income eligible. And again, we get a lot of questions about transporting people, for anything, so but we believe that there are so many people living isolated and stranded in these rural areas. And so if we truly want to change the system, create more access, we believe in community mobility. And so with all of our funders, We talk a lot about community mobility and define it and give examples. And so we're able to provide transportation evenings and nights into all sorts of destinations. We're very proud of it. Oh,

**Bill Wagner** 25:12

that multiple sources of funding and being able to blend that to meet the needs of the of the community. That's great. I just have one question, if I turn 100 into you make me walk or be aware. So about your drivers a little bit. But before we do, we have a little video that we pulled from a video that I believe you did, or HERSA, when you got the grant, I'm not really sure the origin of it, but I love some of the quotes in here, some of your drivers so sage, can you play the video for us?

**Kelly Ast** 25:54

I will say bill that the video was actually gifted to our program from rural health hub. So they just completed this this last spring.

26:06

Thanks a great retired people that are looking for something to do something to give back to their community.

26:12

I have been blessed. Since then, to get acquainted with a number of people who really need transportation. They don't have any way to get anywhere on their own. And so that's what pulled me into the program was the desire to help people or it's ideal for somebody like me who's retired, doesn't make me a champion, it makes the program the champion, because it exist to help people you know, you can continue to live in the community that is your home. And we can get you where you need to go when you have a doctor's appointment or shopping or you know, other other necessary trips, some

26:51

drivers will only do rides in their town, we have some that just say, I'll go anywhere that you will send me and we have some of them, they want the long rides, you know, in our rural areas to get specialized medical care, it's nothing to drive an hour to two hours for that specialized care. I noticed with this program, that there's a sense of purpose. For the drivers,

27:16

this gives me a chance to get out of the house, meet new people and do something for other people, which is what I do. It's not

27:26

a way to get rich. The reimbursement helps because it covers my gas and and you know, some maintenance expenses on the vehicle drivers

27:35

and riders build relationships, you know, where they get to know each other, I kind of

27:41

consider all I've been friends now. Some of them are very talkative. So I'm a Marbury targeting. But, you know, we always try to visit a little bit as we're going and I think it makes the program more personal to them to to actually get acquainted with the driver. But I don't really see a time when I wouldn't do it unless there comes a time when I can't do it. At that point, of course, I you know, I wouldn't. But at that point, I'd become a client, I guess, rather than a driver.

**Bill Wagner** 28:10

And love some of those quotes. Kelly, I think, you know, a sense of purpose, meet new people, friends, all of that, you know, the clinical healthcare world is recognize that, you know, that social part of it is such a huge piece. And I think that this shows that you are offering to your drivers as well as your community away for improved health. So you think that's pretty common? I mean, they were, were they your top three drivers that we showed there? Something you know?

**Kelly Ast** 28:44

No, so we didn't know, I'll be honest with you the day that filmed. That was not our pick. One of our drivers ended up sick. And it was just you know, it was one of those days, we had everything planned, yet it is common. I mean, this is what we consistently hear. What's hard to believe is that people truly live isolated. They really live stranded, you know, they for whatever reason, and so we have lots of volunteer drivers that have certain individuals that that too, they take, you know, they schedule their doctor's appointments around it, they schedule their appointment to go to the bank and check on so security around when that driver is available and they're willing to move those appointments. And that's part of the social context that we are building with transportation, whether it's a volunteer transportation, whatever public transportation, that is a huge gap in these rural areas is just being able to walk into a bank and have a conversation with a teller that you know, I'll one of my favorite stories is we had an individual that was aging out of foster care, and this individual needed to go for six weeks to receive some training, technical training at a college, about an hour and a half away, because he was an orphan to the Joplin tornado, he had severe triggers to noise and smells. We had one volunteer driver that committed to take this individual for six weeks, when this individual completed his testing and successfully was able to work in medical billing, the volunteer driver called us and said, Can I take him to Hong Kong buffet, this individual had never been to a buffet. And so there we had a volunteer driver that committed to take this young man to complete a course that would change his life and help him to earn a living wage in a very isolated rural community. And this volunteer driver took it upon himself. And that relationship that they built there, they would have not known each other without the volunteer network. And so there's just so many stories like that, where we see, you know, people of all ages coming together and gaining access that they just otherwise wouldn't have had.

**Bill Wagner** 31:04

Yeah, I think the importance of that social connection was really, you know, stated clearly when it was creating friends was really more emphasis than the mileage reimbursement for putting gas in his car. So I think you know, your one drivers said it really well.

**Kelly Ast** 31:20

Yeah, another thing we see is when a rider for whatever reason, isn't booking rides, drivers reach out to us, Hey, we're so and so they're, you know, they know their schedule. And so it's a way of holding each other accountable and keeping track of each other. But I think it's also part of that purpose driven mission, even with the volunteer drivers.

**Bill Wagner** 31:42

Exactly. Um, so you talked a little bit mentioned this, you've moved, you know, into transporting people for jobs for employment purposes. How did that? How did that come about? Again, you started this with a planning grant from HERSA, you know, really focused on access to health care, and that and, and now you're driving people to work. Tell me tell me that how that came?

**Kelly Ast** 32:08

Well, like I said, in that second meeting of the strategic plan, the medical providers in the room, were saying, Hey, where are the employers, you know, they knew as some of the largest employers in these rural communities, how important transport how important transportation is to employment. So we saw that trend grow very quickly, even with that initial 20,000 that we used with Karis funding. Now, what we tend to see is we did some early research looking at areas where we had dense populations of unemployment, then we overlaid that map, and we showed that we had quite a few large and small employers. And there were two counties like that. So we just started talking to us before the board Regional Planning Commission's and then this is when we went to the county commissioners and started asking them for investment in transportation is because we knew that we could diversify who we were transporting, we knew we had the referral networks through the medical providers, and that would get people to grocery stores in the medical facilities they needed. But we also knew there was kind of an untapped market with employment transportation, and that is growing rapidly. So for the last two years, like I said, that tends to be the second or third top destination, a lot of individuals living with disabilities, but they are working part time. And they're working very odd part time shifts, you know, they're working like midday, they're working evenings, weekends. And so the flexibility of the volunteer transportation network meets these diversified needs for employment, a lot of employment in rural communities, gets the focus for employment is with Shift employment, seven to three, three to 11. And so we need to align more public transit resources with those shifts, and then pick up those gaps and our service. We're micro transit, we're not on demand, we still have a 48 hour notice. But we can help pick up those gaps for employment. And a lot of those rides are where we book our ride share to these different employers. So we see that quickly emerging. Another thing in rural markets is we have seasonal employment, with tourism and agriculture. And so micro transit, like what we're offering offers that flexibility, because you're going to have demand seasons with, you know, different off hours, and we can book those things. And so I just think we're gonna see that continue to grow. But that's a part of transportation and rural communities that I don't think people give a lot of consideration for we just assume people have, have a vehicle. Another thing though, is what we found in our research, is the average home in Missouri and rural Missouri has 1.24 vehicles per household. So, you know, and there's a lot of low income households and so we believe the more we can offer transportation services, maybe we can get more than One individual working to help sustain those households.

**Bill Wagner** 35:05

Yeah, I think often something that's overlooked. When we look at areas where they're employing people part time, is, it costs you just as much to travel for a four hour shift as it does for an eight hour shift. And you don't take home as much so that I think that fills a real void a real need in your community. Now, the part I like about this is, again, that relationship with a driver, you know, they're getting a mentor maybe or a job coach, kind of, for individuals with disabilities or whatever that are going to fill in for that little short term employment. So I think that's a great thing. And I'm was really pleased to hear when you said that, that you started to do that. Kelly, I have no other questions prepared for you to anything else you want to say before we go into the questions and answers.

**Kelly Ast** 36:00

We just want to say that when we started transportation and rural communities, everybody says, oh, yeah, we don't have it, or Oh, yeah, that's like everybody knows it's an issue. And so I guess I just want to give the call to action to individuals that are out there. There are solutions. There are partners think innovatively and keep it a priority. I believe it's, I love rural America. I live in rural Missouri, and I always will. And I just think we need more emphasis. And we need people to really understand all of the different aspects of transportation. So keep plugging away, you'll come up with a solution.

**Bill Wagner** 36:43

Thanks, Kelly. Sage. Do we have any questions from the viewers? Yes,

**Sage Kashner** 36:50

we have one in the chat. Do you have any wiggle room for riders who need a ride with less than 48 hours notice, I asked because some of our riders need to get to mandatory drug tests within hours of notification.

**Kelly Ast** 37:05

So I think we're definitely working more towards a 24 hour notice. For us, like I said, we just started about three years ago. So it was capacity for us, you know, capacity with our ride coordination team, and then also building the rapport and the experience with our volunteer drivers. So we're working towards we have a lot of different opportunities with service agreements and specific partners. So we do do additional services for partnerships like that. So and I'm inspired, I have a wonderful staff, I think it's because our mission is just so basic, they came to me, and that's one of our 2024 goals is to go down to a 24 hour notice. So all I can tell you is it's in the works. But I would reach out individually, and we can see what we can do.

**Sage Kashner** 38:02

I believe that's all the questions we have. If anybody else has one, please type it very quickly. Everyone else just says thank you for the information.

**Bill Wagner** 38:14

And Kelly, I'd like to kind of recap a little bit. Again, we you started with a planning grant, I'd love the fact that the access to health care planning grant led you down this road to developing a volunteer driver program. Your funding that you have and you know, we saw the slide, you've got a lot of different choices or a lot of different sources of funding. Tell us where what are the funding? You What's the funding use for you've got mileage reimbursement to your drivers. You've got some staffing costs, I'm sure administrative overhead and that will tell us more

**Kelly Ast** 38:57

about our overhead cost. Also the technology, the investment. Yeah, the investment. And then, you know, we also purchased a lot of tools for the volunteer drivers first aid kit, blanket, flashlights, seatbelt extenders, so but the majority of our costs go into staffing and reimbursement for the rides. So but that braided funding, we will always be a model that is public and privately funded. Because we need to provide community mobility, we need the diversity of funding to provide for what the individual's needs are. And so another thing that bill we had talked about is when we were in that strategic plan, we found amongst our main stakeholders and partners, this misunderstanding about what transportation was provided and what funding came for that. And that was one of our gaps that we uncovered was that there was no real local ownership for what communities had or what they envisioned for transportation. And this braided funding. You know, we're taking state funding, and we're taking national foundations and local commission funding, and we get checks in the mail every week from individuals that want to pay for those rides. And so we're bringing transportation more locally owned, we have people that call us and ask us about the public transit providers in the area. And when they're available. So we keep those lists up to date, what's their number? I know, I can call them. So the concept of braided funding brings back brings more importance on keeping transportation locally sourced, and that I think that's important, because it seems to be that it's like, oh, that's FTA, or that's, you know, that's somebody else that funds that when the grants gone. There's just no forethought into sustaining that. And so we're we feel like we're sharing data with all these counties who were transporting, when we're transporting, what are the destinations to build more local ownership?

**Bill Wagner** 41:02

Yeah, and the other benefit of bringing that local and private funding in is you've created match, when you are looking at applying for federal funds, it's much easier to have match to pull in, that is often required, in most cases required when you're applying playing for federal funds. I have a one other question I wanted to touch base, as I'm looking through my notes. You talked about recruiting drivers. And, you know, you mentioned you don't have a huge marketing budget and everything. What types of things do you do for recruiting?

**Kelly Ast** 41:43

So we host we host donut and coffee sessions at local YMCAs. We also host them at the local coffee shops, we reach out to all the ministerial alliance, when we go to all the senior centers, we've got a great relationship with all of our local senior centers, we talk to retired teachers, associations, independent living organizations, you know, they have individuals, families, we talked to those we go to their resource fairs. So that's kind of our marketing budget, our staff and we rotate that amongst our staff, even our coordination staff, take the different events. So we get out of the office a little bit, they get to see our faces, they know that we're local. And I do a lot of presentations, Lions rotary sorority club. And I think again, we're not only talking about our program, but we're educating people on public transportation in rural areas, showing that their options, and then exploring those gaps. And so we get a lot of annual gifts from foundations, and sometimes they're 1000s of dollars, and sometimes they're $250 or $20. But we always try to thank those individuals and let them know that that funding is gonna go towards volunteer drivers, or get people the access they deserve. very mission driven, and we keep it very basic.

**Bill Wagner** 43:13

And I'm guessing based on what we heard in that video, your drivers are often your best recruiting tool. Treating them right. I'm having them speak on what they get out of the program helps recruit more drivers. So I'm guessing

**Kelly Ast** 43:29

Yeah, they do. You know, they, they're very active in their community. They all they also had their coffee clubs. So another place we recruit as with realtors, we're in a lake region, we've got three different major lakes here in the Ozarks. So we have given a lot of our information to Realtors Association, because they know individuals that are moving into the area. And so that's been a really interesting relationship. They also know people moving into the area that need transportation, so and our chamber, all of our chambers in the area, they do a lot of free advertising for us. So and we give a lot of programs there. But yes, our volunteer drivers, and we invite our volunteers to come with us to some of those resource fairs and chamber luncheons, because there's nothing better than hearing our volunteer drivers promote the program. So we really great,

**Sage Kashner** 44:24

I have a few more questions from the audience for you. Have you had any circumstances in which you have had to reject a rider or driver?

**Kelly Ast** 44:34

A driver? No. Well, if a driver doesn't pass a background screening for whatever reason, it's just maybe not a fit a rider? Very, very few and it's usually extreme situations, aggressive language. And a lot of times we have an additional contact and so we can we can do it. We need to do to try to transport that person no matter what. But there just have been very few circumstances. When we book a ride, there are more people on the phone that say bless you. Thank you. I actually have a thank you note here from a woman that lives in Warsaw. And she just says this is she's just thankful that people are providing a much needed transport service. And may you all have a blessed, good day. So those are more of the responses that we get on a daily basis. That's

**Sage Kashner** 45:30

wonderful. And what is the name of the driver scheduling and monitoring platform that you use?

**Kelly Ast** 45:38

And that's through volunteer Transportation Center, and it is their network or their system? And it's called Snap.

**Sage Kashner** 45:48

Wonderful. And is it a challenge to find drivers willing to drive three hours each way plus wait time at the destination?

**Kelly Ast** 45:57

No, and that's part of that training that I was talking about. It's an extensive training that we we give them a lot of scenarios. So volunteers know that they are not getting reimbursed for their time, the app does allow them to go into personal mode. So we have one woman that loves to go to Hobby Lobby. So she likes the two hour drive. And then she flips the app into personal mode runs all our errands in the city, goes back picks up the individual, which then she enters out of personal mode. So we do offer if the appointment lasts longer, let's say it's a medical appointment, they have to do additional testing for whatever reason, we do supplement and an offer to pay for a meal. For those volunteer drivers. It's the least we can do. And if they ever incur costs, such as toll or parking, we reimburse for those costs. But volunteer drivers know in advance that they're going to wait sometimes up to multiple hours on that individual without getting a reimbursement.

**Sage Kashner** 47:03

Thank you. And I believe this is the last question. Did you plan the iteration? That I, John, would you mind elaborating? In the meantime, I believe everybody. Ah, did you plan for growing over time? Um,

**Kelly Ast** 47:28

I'll be honest with you in the beginning, we were very short sighted. I don't think we understood the demand from the outside. But we like I said, you guys, it was like $20,000. And we took that money of cares funding, and it just it just was like wildfire. And to see in our most isolated counties with the least amount of resources to see this thing, just catch on. And then we had other people, you know, the commissioners writing checks, and we had private foundations. So we knew it was solution. We know it was cost effective. And we knew it had flexibility. But we I don't think we understood how quickly the demand would come in. And so we're pleasantly surprised. We plan on just staying in the counties we're in right now. You know, we're operating within 16 counties. So 14 here on the west side of the state. And then there's two counties on the other side of the state that we just helped them consulted and help them to start a smaller version of a volunteer transportation network. But we're okay with our our territory right now.

**Sage Kashner** 48:40

Wonderful. I believe that's all the audience questions. And here's contact information. If anybody missed the first time it was up.

**Bill Wagner** 48:50

Here, we want to thank you for your time today. I think you're a great example of what mobility management is a great example of blending multiple sources of funding and meeting some rural, very unmet needs. And supporting transit work does exist. So again, thank you for your time doing great work.

**Kelly Ast** 49:12

Thank you for the opportunity. Take care.

**Bill Wagner** 49:17

Again, our website our This webinar will be posted on our website. And any further information contact Kelly or myself. Thank you