Nicole McCleary Zoom Audio

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**SPEAKERS**

Amy Conrick, Nicole McCleary

**Amy Conrick** 00:00

Nicole is from citrus connections, and I will let her tell you a little bit about our program.

**Nicole McCleary** 00:05

Thank you. Good afternoon everyone. I am Nicole McCleary. I am the Director of Strategic Planning and Innovation at Citrus connection. Can you hear me now? All right. Let me try again. Good afternoon everyone. I am Nicole McCleary. I am the Director of Strategic Planning and innovation with citrus connection. Citrus connection is located in Polk County. How many people do we have from Florida here? Oh, we've got a couple, but the majority are not. So let me tell you guys, where Polk County is. Whole county is in between Tampa and Orlando smack in the middle. It is the largest growing County in Florida. It is the third largest growing cap or fastest growing county in the nation. It's a big county citrus connection is responsible for the transit for the whole county and a lot of it is still rural. But that's not why I'm here today. I'm here to talk to you. Are you okay? Let's see, I'm here to share with you today a pilot program that we did. And this really ties into what we talked about earlier community health workers and really understanding what the community needs and developing something that really responds to their needs. So how did citrus connection ensure access to healthy food with transit? This happened in the city of Lake Wales in Polk County. And let's go ahead and get started. Okay, so Lake Wales, they actually had a task force that had nothing to do with citrus connection. This task force was formed really to understand inequities with in Northwest Lake Wales, and specifically the census tract 43.01. They were really looking at food access. What they found was this area was high in social vulnerability. They had food insecurity, they had issues with mental health and health equity. So just to give you an idea of where Lake Wales is, you can see we have the state of Florida while mostly Polk County there you see Lake Wales is a tiny little bump there by highway 27. And within that is that census tract. Census Tract 140 3.01 is only 1.3 miles, three square miles is it has a population of 1500. It's 81%. African American, the median household income 27,000 per year, that is 54%. Below the state of Florida median income of 59,000. The poverty rate is 37%. That is 24% higher than the state of Florida, which is 13%. So within the census tract of just 1500 people, the adults there are plagued with diabetes, high blood pressure, COPD, asthma, things of that nature. So the task force found three key identifiers, three key issues in this area. One was lack of knowledge and resources on how to get fresh healthy food were to grow it things like that distribution points. The second one was transportation limitations. So within the census tract 10% of people don't have access to a personal vehicle. The route that we had there previous to this project was very long. They didn't feel safe at the bus shelters. People with disabilities were having a hard time accessing the bus, the bus stops and shelters. So there was a myriad of things going on and then lack of access to healthy food options. When Bill called me about this project, I was like you know what, I really need to go out there and see what's going on this supermarket was the only supermarket that the people that live there had access to. This supermarket has no healthy food options. Lots of great snacks, lots of party favors, but no healthy food options. So we really had to think about how do we develop a route that the residents will not only use, but really meets their needs. So citrus connection answered the call. And when I say that we answered the call. I say that because it wasn't our project, right? We really didn't know about this until after the project was done. We answered the call on the two items that we could, which was transit, and access to healthy food. Previously, we actually had a route in Lake Wales. The problem with this route was, as you can see by the timetable there, it ran from every hour and a half to every two hours. I think Monique touched on this right? How do you get to where you're going? When if you miss your bus, you're now four hours behind schedule. How do you get your Iceberg lettuce or your ice cream home if you got to wait two hours for the best, right? So these were the things that they were dealing with. You can see here in the slide that the old route 35 In one year, we only had 931 riders, which told me that we were not meeting the demand of our residents. This route was not taking them where they needed to go this route was not helping them to do anything. We initiated this pilot service, the circulator, almost 5.5 times the ridership has increased in less than a year or so we haven't even had this service running for a full year yet. And we have 5.4 times more ridership. Thank you. So the lake Well, circulator, what does it do? First of all, it comes every 30 minutes. So that gives them fast access, they can get to a mall, which then can get them across the county if they need to. Right. So that's one thing that it does. The second thing that it does is it provides them with access to grocery stores, there's a Walmart, there's a Publix, there are some pharmacies within the area that they can easily get to using the circulator. The next thing that it does is really provide them with access to health care, right. So there's the health department, but also other medical facilities along this route. We really focused our design of this route to say what can we hit the most, it was truly shocking to citrus connection to realize a we had a route that really wasn't productive 931 riders in a month or a year that wasn't really doing anything for anybody. And then that it wasn't even taking them to the main things that they needed to go to a grocery store and knowing that the grocery store the supermarket that they had in the area really did not provide them with healthy food. So as I said, this route now allows them to access fresh fruits, vegetables, really thinking about the distribution points of the food areas, and then allows them to easily access the health department. But it's about more than just transit. And I think we heard that today as well. With this project, they also did a community garden. The community garden is on the route of the sub circulator. And it's located at the community center. So some things I heard today about getting older people to the community center and out of their house and doing things. One of the things we talked about was the lack of knowledge. That was something that the study found. So this community garden allows people to learn about, hey, where do our food sources come from? How do we grow this? What makes sense here during this time period, right, like in the fall, we plant lettuce. In the summer, lettuces gonna die. It's too hot here in Florida. So things like that.

**Nicole McCleary** 09:48

Again, just showing you that it takes more than transit. This pilot project was started in partnership with the state of Florida Department of Transportation Then they really helped us citrus connection, get this off the grid off the ground with a grant. And then when we think about the community garden, there were a lot of partners as you can see here. And with that, and I know the fact that we are very short on time, I will open it up to questions.

10:21

Yeah, thank you so much, Nicole. It's a great project really appreciate and it's it's still ongoing.

**Nicole McCleary** 10:27

It is still ongoing. As I said, we are in the first year. So our year will end in October, but the rail has been so successful that we do plan on keeping it.

10:38

Oh, that's wonderful news. Okay, we probably have time for one or two questions, if there are any. Okay, we have one question here.

10:51

You mentioned that sometimes, like there's, I'll just say like, before, I've seen that transit agencies think that there's not the need because there is low ridership. But you said that it's because it's not taking them to where they need to go and not meet the needs? How do you show a transit agency that that's what's really going on?

**Nicole McCleary** 11:12

I definitely think with studies like this, that the task force did, that was eye opening to us that, hey, we have a bus service that doesn't even take people to the grocery store, in one of the poorest communities in our county in our service area. It made us really take a step back and say, What are we doing? How do we fix this? So I definitely think those independent studies, as well as studies of the transit agency, but sometimes those independent studies are more eye opening, right? Because as transit providers, we have our own agendas, right, so

11:54

great. And we have time for one more question. And if you guys need to leave again, I really encourage you to fill out the evaluation that how did we do card? One last question. Okay. And then we'll move on.

12:11

So you mentioned that it was low income area? What is your fair system? Like? You said that they could take the bus to the mall or wherever and then they could go across the county from there? Is that a one fee each time or does it cost them more to use this connection?

**Nicole McCleary** 12:31

No, it's one fee each time they can use a transfer. I believe it's up to two transfers actually, with our system.

12:40

Okay, great. Thank you.

12:43

Nicole, thank you very much. Can you join me in this thing and thank you to Nicole. Thank you