

A WINNING DRIVE



RIDERSHIP SKYROCKETS FOR ATHENS ON DEMAND TRANSIT

Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council Grant Launches Transit Program in Athens County

JOSH BOYER WITH HIS MOTHER, PAM



Even by the standards of rural Athens County, Josh Boyer's home is far out in the hills. He lives with his mother between Athens and The Plains, and the nearest county road is a mile away. Josh has cerebral palsy and walks with the aid of crutches. Finding a way to get Josh to the doctor, the store or work has been a challenge for his mother, Pam.

"It's never been easy to get Josh to work, and he just loves his job," Pam said. "When they extended his hours, I was having trouble with the schedule. I had a stroke nine years ago, and sometimes it's difficult for me to get around. The last thing I want is for Josh to feel like a prisoner in his own house, but with the price of gas, my health issues and his expanded work schedule, it was a problem."

Unfortunately, the Boyers' situation was not unique. In the hills of Athens County, dozens of individuals with disabilities felt stranded. They lacked personal transportation, and Athens County lacked a reliable public transportation system for its rural citizens. Not only was it difficult for individuals with disabilities to get to the doctor or the store, but the lack of transportation eliminated many employment opportunities, compounding the problem.

"We knew there was a need for reliable transportation in virtually every county in the state, and the last thing I wanted to do was conduct another study of a problem that everyone knew existed," said Carolyn Knight, executive director of the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council. "We offered a grant to attack the problem. What we got in return has been a model program - Athens On Demand Transit. The program that has been developed in Athens County has been a successful, collaborative effort that changed lives for many individuals. The blueprint for this program can be used anywhere in the state."

It was no secret to the staff at the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council that there was a transportation problem in Athens County.

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According to a report created by the Hocking-Athens-Perry Community Action Program (HAPCAP), a variety of issues contributed to the problem.

- While the city of Athens has a transportation system, it does not operate outside the city limits.
- Athens is an impoverished county. More than 20,000 Athens County residents - about 30 percent of the population - are living in poverty.
- Issues make it difficult for people in rural areas to hold a job. Even when transportation was available, it was extremely limited. The Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities operates a transportation program for individuals receiving services. However, its 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. schedule makes it impossible for some individuals to maintain employment in the community, particularly in the service industry, where many are employed.
- Residents in rural Athens County also found it difficult to get to medical appointments, the grocery store or the bank.

Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council Policy Analyst Fatica Ayers was charged with exploring needs within the Ohio developmental disabilities community. While many issues face county boards, a lack of reliable transportation was a recurring theme. Thus, in July 2011, the Council put a five-year, \$109,000 transportation grant out for bid.

In November 2011, HAPCAP was awarded the grant. On Jan. 1, 2012, Lantz Repp, Mobility Coordinator for HAPCAP, began planning the creation of Athens On Demand Transit, a new, collaborative transportation system for Athens County. Athens On Demand Transit's primary focus would be supplying transportation services to individuals with developmental disabilities, with special emphasis on evening hours and weekends. The new service began running routes Nov. 8, 2012.



“...the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council grant allowed us to launch the project.”

– Lantz Repp

“We operate an efficient system, but there are limitations to what we can do,” said Eric Young, superintendent of the Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities. “We needed a system that could fill in the gaps.”

“This was truly a cooperative and collaborative effort,” Repp said. “Everyone in Athens County recognized the problem, but the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council grant allowed us to launch the project. The response from the residents has been terrific and very appreciative. We are definitely addressing a need.”

While establishing the program, Repp conducted a countywide survey to determine the number of individuals interested in the service. Using information from the survey, Repp created a program that provides transportation primarily to individuals with disabilities and senior citizens needing transportation to medical and social services appointments throughout Athens County between 8 a.m. and 9:30 p.m., six days a week. In the first three months of operation, Athens On Demand Transit supplied 596 trips for the 324 Athens County residents registered for the program. Of those trips, 167 were to and from work.

Cliff Warren, transportation supervisor for Athens On Demand Transit, said ridership was increasing 30 percent a month by early 2013. It has five vans in use.

“We had a woman who was taking a cab to and from work at a laundry and it was costing her \$17 one way,” Warren said. “She was making about \$40 for a five-hour shift, and paying \$34 for transportation. How would you like to work five hours and earn six bucks? She started using us, and it cost her \$2 a trip.”

The program has been a successful collaboration between HAPCAP and several county and state agencies.

- After winning the grant from the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council, HAPCAP was awarded a one-time grant of \$142,000 from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville. HAPCAP used funds from the grant to purchase a used van.

- The Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council grant was used to purchase a new, \$35,000 handicap-accessible van and lease a second.
- The Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities provides its buses to HAPCAP for evening and weekend use.
- Funds provided by the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) enabled HAPCAP to purchase two additional handicap-accessible vans.
- The Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville funds were used to provide the 20-percent match required by ODOT for the vans.

A side benefit to the transit system has been additional jobs for the area. Athens On Demand Transit has hired a full-time supervisor, a dispatcher/driver and six part-time drivers.

“This program is going to continue to grow in both popularity and use,” Repp said. “As more people become aware of the program, interest is only going to increase.



Riders Never More Than a Phone Call from Help

Because many of the individuals served by Athens On Demand Transit are developmentally disabled or elderly, extra steps have been taken to ensure their safety when they leave the confines of the van.

When a rider is taken to a store, he is given a lanyard with a card that contains the name and cellphone number of his driver. If the passenger gets lost or confused in the store, he or someone helping him can use the number to call the driver. All drivers are supplied with cellphones provided by Athens On Demand Transit.

Figuring out how to provide transportation for the underserved is a challenge, but we’re making great strides.”

For Josh and Pam Boyer, Athens On Demand Transit has given Josh the ability to tackle all the hours they want him to work at his job at Diagnostic Hybrids. “I like them,” Josh said of the staff of Athens On Demand Transit. “They’re friendly and dependable, and they make it easy for me to get to work.”

Pam is also a fan. “Praise the lord, this outfit came along,” she said. “It’s been just great for Josh.”

Athens On Demand Transit a Blessing for OU Professor

Carolyn Bailey Lewis is an accomplished woman with a lot to offer the students at Ohio University.



However, she also is confined to a wheelchair, the result of a spinal-cord tumor. Getting to her teaching job at Ohio University was a challenge before the creation of Athens On Demand Transit.

“Honest to goodness, I use it just about every day,” Lewis said. “My husband died in 2004 and I’m confined to the wheelchair, so Athens On Demand has been a true blessing. I’ve taken it to get to work, to the store, physical therapy, doctor’s appointments, basketball and football games. A friend of mine was getting married, and I was able to take the van to their house for dinner. Without this service, I would miss so much, and for \$2 a trip, you can’t beat it.”

Lewis was the director and general manager at the public television station in Athens, WOUB, from 1997 until 2011. She now teaches three classes at the E. W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University.

“My friends say they never know where I am,” she said. “The drivers are great and (transportation supervisor) Cliff Warren is just wonderful to work with. I call a week or two weeks in advance with my appointments, and they put me on the schedule. It’s had quite an impact on my life, and I am so pleased.”



The Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council is one of a national network of state councils, committed to self-determination and community inclusion for people with developmental disabilities.

The Council consists of at least 30 members appointed by the governor. Members are people with developmental disabilities, parents and guardians of people with developmental disabilities, representatives from state agencies, and nonprofit organizations and agencies that provide services to people with developmental disabilities.

One of Council's goals is to educate and inform how state and local government services and policies can be improved, expanded, or strengthened on behalf of people with disabilities.

Athens On Demand Transit is a result of support from the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council. For more information on the program or funding for similar programs, please contact the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council.

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