

CHARLES DICKSON : Our first panelist today comes to us from Cedar Rapids, here in Iowa. Mike Barnhart has spent much of his career assisting people to overcome barriers to employment. He is now the executive director for the neighborhood transportation services and of which provides access for people during hours not served by traditional public transportation. During his tenure at NTS, they have more than tripled the number of rides delivered each year and the NTS has become a national solution partnership model for the Pew Partnership Solutions for America Project and was the recipient of the Iowa League of Cities All-star Community Award. So please welcome Mike Barnhart.

MIKE BARNHART: Well it is good to see all of you out here today in Des Moines for the CTAA Joblinks Conference. First of all, I would like to thank Charlie, Carolyn, and everybody else with CTAA for doing such a wonderful job like they always do with these conferences. I was a little surprised when Carolyn called me, to ask me to be a panelist on here. We just run a small organization in Cedar Rapids. I asked her why. She said, "Well, you run a model transportation service there in Cedar Rapids." So I thought about what she said. I looked it up in the dictionary; model - small imitation of the real thing. So she called me back a couple of days later and I asked her about that. She said, "No, no, no that's not what I meant. Mike, I just know that your going to be very warm up there on the podium." So after the first remark, I looked that up; warm, not so hot. So, for whatever reason, here I am today. And look, before I get started I wanted to tell you a little bit about myself, and, you know I have a degree in social work. I never imagined that I would be involved in transit, but I'm doing that today and I thought I looked at it as a different perspective. But, I think everybody here looks at it at this perspective that, transportation should never be a barrier to employment.

And I think that we all can agree to take that one step further that transportation should never be a barrier period. Whether it is employment, healthcare, shopping, recreation... whatever it is, transportation shouldn't be a barrier.

I am going to try to touch on three things today. zgirst I want to talk about NTS, the services we provide. Then talk about some of the collaborations we do and then finally what our vision for the future is. NTS started out as a true grassroots effort. In the early 90s, there was a perception that there was an influx of gangs and crack dealing - people coming in from Chicago into Cedar Rapids. And the center of this crisis seemed to be in the Wellington Heights neighborhood. And Wellington Heights had a very strong neighborhood association and they decided to do a televised town hall meeting, to address this issue. Well out of it, somebody stood up and said, "Well, the issue I have, is that I work the third shift at the local hospital. I have to be to work at 11 o'clock and the taxis won't come in into the neighborhood after dark for fear of being robbed and the buses stop at six o'clock. I can't get to work." So, in attendance was the director of Cedar Rapids Transit, Diana Fallon from the Wellington Heights Neighborhood Association, and one of the city commissioners. They got together and decided to write a grant to HUD and purchase one minivan to serve that one neighborhood to do rides between 6:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. The first year, they got it going, they got the grant. The neighborhood association ran the program, it was not a city-run operation at all, and they had no experience in transit whatsoever. The first year, they did about 566 rides. Since then, we have grown from serving that neighborhood to serving all of basically the urbanized area around the Cedar Rapids, Cedar Rapids, Marion, Hiawatha, and during our peak year, prior to the flood, we did about 57,000 rides. And since the flood, it's dropped off about 20%; I mean like the day of the flood, bam, it dropped off 20% and, you know, a lot of the area affected by the flood were low-income housing and we do not know if the people left. Some of jobs were gone and I am not sure what happened, but you know, and the economy at the same time, but anyway we've tripled in size since then. And, the way we grew into the other areas... we started collaborating with surrounding towns. We got, first, Cedar Rapids gave us a little bit of extra money. We went and talked to corrections,

they gave us a little bit of extra money, because people in the halfway house, they have to work, but they can't have a car. And many of the jobs, the entry-level jobs that they would get - restaurants, you know, whatever the service industry jobs, some factory work or mostly second and third shift jobs, so they were a natural partner. They give us money every year. We went to the city of Marion, they gave us a little bit of money. The city of Hiawatha, they give us little bit of money. So we expanded our service area. And a few years after I took the job, United Way came to me and said, "You know, I think there is a need for people." We stopped at two o'clock in the morning at that time, "I think there is a need for people who need to be worth between two and six. The buses start around six o'clock." So we turned decided try that and now we provide service, virtually, in Cedar Rapids, if you want to get to work you can get to work pretty much 24 hours. We work the exact opposing opposite hours of the bus service. We provide more service hours than they do. They have more vehicles and more rides and everything, but we run seven days a week, all day Sunday, basically, 6:30 to 6:00 in the morning, Monday through Friday, then Saturday morning we run a little bit later to cover all the hours. You know we do not try to compete with them. It's truly a collaborative effort.

You know there's people that will try to, you know they would rather ride with us, because we take them directly there. Like say they have to be at work at 6:30, but we'll work with them, we'll give them a transfer, you know we'll give them a bus ticket so they can get on the bus we'll take them down there's a central transfer point, we'll take them down there and they can transfer onto the bus and take the bus to where they need to go. We kinda, you know, we have to be aware of what the bus routes are for that. And the cost of a ride with our service is five dollars a ride. Now, most people don't pay that five dollars a ride, some people do. About 80% of the people who ride with us, earn under, or 90%, earn under \$18,000 a year, so they couldn't afford that five dollars a ride and most people would ride one way. You know, they would ride to work, take us home, or vice versa. So, about, I guess it was about 8 or 9 years ago, I don't know exactly when, but when the job program first came out, at Cedar Rapids, we developed a system where people could get, low-income people could get subsidized rides. So with us, the first month they ride for free. The next three months they ride for a dollar; the next three months two dollars; the next three months three dollars and then it goes up to four dollars and stays at four dollars as long as they have a referral source. It's a referral-based program, usually a human service agency or sometimes an employer will refer people into the program.

There's also a program in Cedar Rapids called Cabs to Augment the Bus Service (CABS), which is for people with disabilities and they would pay down two dollars for the ride, so it cost folks with disabilities to participate in the CABS program three dollars to ride. And as I got into this, you know being a social worker, I was always looking for unmet needs, that's what we do. And people, I hate to go to meetings, because I go to meetings and people would say, you know, "Well I need transportation from here to there or there to here or here..." and I just didn't have in my budget. They're coming asking me for things and it finally dawned on me you know, what I could do is, you know, the agencies needed to start thinking that they needed to start writing some that the transportation costs, you know, into their budget or into their proposal or whatever. And I told them, if you're writing a grant, what I can do is, I typically cost, charge, you know "X" amount of dollars an hour for transportation. You write in your grant proposal, I'll give you half of that as an in-kind donation and you can use that as a match for your grant and we started doing transportation for the Young Parents Network, where Judy used to work. We give people rides to parenting classes once a week. Hawkeye Area Community Action Program, we gave kids rides to the Boys & Girls Club all summer. We did an ARC Summer Day Camp for people with disabilities. I know, I am forgetting things. We've done a lot of collaboration in that way, oh, the Area Substance Abuse Council; we take women like, four times a week to counseling and substance-abuse classes, but it was once, you know it took a few years, but once they got that mindset that Mike can't do

it for free, you know they started thinking, well I can go to the community foundation or I can write a grant you, just, they just forget to include the transportation component into what they're doing and then they expect you know what, to be able to come to somebody and provide it and it's not realistic, so, you know if you can start talking to people and start thinking in that way, you know, that works. I think one thing that we benefited from, you know, we're a private nonprofit, you know, so were very flexible at what we can do, you know, we can shift on the fly and we've utilized JARC funding for, we did some shuttle buses to some employers that weren't served by the city bus. So we would run the shuttle for a period of time, now MacLeod, a telecommunication company, was downtown, moved to the outskirts, like a lot of companies do; they find a cheap footprint, don't care how people get there.

And, you know, so we would shuttle people back and forth and what you find is somebody else who worked at a nearby place - we call you up, "Hey, you know we work nearby there can you stop and drop us off?" So, we would add three or four businesses on there. And, eventually, there's a city bus that runs out there now. And the same thing happens on the other side of town. The city bus went out there and started taking people. You know, they would call us and they'd figure it out.

And now the interesting thing is, the people who need this service, they find you. And I heard people talking about the business community? They don't know we exist. And I think it's even worse with us, because we run at night. They never see us. The people who work day, they never see our vehicles pull up there. So that's kind of, this is my future segment, you know what we want to do is, we want to try to partner with businesses, get them more involved, how do we do that? And, traditionally we've done a fund-raising event every year and, my board of directors, this is what's amazing, my board of directors came to me with this, is they said, "Well you know what we should do, we should reach out to the business community. Rather than have a fundraiser, why don't we take those same people that are sponsoring the fundraiser and sponsor a reception and invite community leaders, business leaders, etc. Take a list of all the people where you give rides, invite them to the reception, get the transit, anybody who is involved with transportation there and just have an informal, you know, reception with hors d'oeuvres or whatever and just talk about transit." And I thought that was a great idea and I don't know if that'll work, I'll let you know in six months or so what were gonna to do. We've got the venue reserved for a fundraiser, so we're going to do it at the end of February or beginning of March.

And, I heard some comments about, you know, green, that transit is a great, you know, great fit for green. I mean that's, that's what we're going to try to position ourselves. You know, right now, in Cedar Rapids, Cedar Rapids was built to drive, you know and it's a big mindset, you know, when a new building is built, they have to have a parking lot there, they have to, you know, somebody waits two minutes at a light, they try to put it in another lane, but you have to, you know, you really have to change the way that people view that, you know, that you have to, it's a lot more effective long-term. It's no benefit to have people moving outside of the city, how does that benefit Cedar Rapids? How does that benefit Des Moines? It hurts that your tax base is going out. So you know you wanna do some in-fill and you know try to get people living in town and making it convenient for them to do that, and I think there's, at least in Cedar Rapids, there is momentum for that to happen and you know I see it coming from the highest office. There's momentum for that kind of thing to happen and I think that this is a good time for transit and a good time to make that happen. So, I wanna thank CTA and Charlie and everybody for having me here today and hope you all have an enjoyable experience.