

JANA HUNKLER-BRULÉ: Alrighty. So I'm Jana. I'm from Berkshire Rides. We are a small demand response service in Western Massachusetts. I'm right on the border of New York and Vermont, so a little tiny corner in the Berkshires. And we do several things. Our really first effort to get people back and forth to work is to try Transit First. So anyone that we can put on the bus, that we can teach to use the bus, that we can give two bus passes to until they get their first paycheck, we put them on the bus. That's always the first thing we do.

Our transit service, because we're such a small, rural area, is spotty, I guess you'd say. Buses run from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and they only do main corridors, so we also do a lot of feeder service or first and last mile. We'll bring people from the hill towns down to the bus stops, they take their bus back and forth to work, they get back on our service, and we take them back home. As I said, we're basically an employment demand response service. Folks would call us at least a day in advance and book to get on one of our vans, so we run the vans, we pay the drivers, and we do kind of a shuttle service. We do a rideshare van service depending who has to go on what day and where they're headed to work. The other thing that we do is we've started a shared vehicle program I'll talk about a little bit later. We are looking into doing some more things with ridesharing, and I'm developing one relationship with the state—with an agency in the state of Vermont and it looks like we're going to actually be able to bring people across the state lines to some manufacturing sites that are still in Vermont that have left the Berkshires.

So in our basic service, our employment-based vanpool service, we serve seven communities. It's about 600 square miles and it's only about 40,000 people. We use JARC funds and we actually purchase the trips in this service, so we contract out for regular employment vanpool service. We operate, like I said before, when and where fixed-route bus is not in service and we've been in operation since 2002. We have served at least 27% of our employable population.

So we have—basically, we have people that don't drive, we have a few people that choose not to drive, but an area of low-income and right now very high unemployment, so we've done—we've brought a lot of people back and forth to work and we've gotten several people that are able to take better jobs because they can stay longer, they can work at night, they can take those premium shifts that they didn't—weren't able to before because they depended on the bus service.

The other thing that we did in 2007, and this was a response to a need in our community, is we developed this fleet of community-shared vehicles. We had a crisis for our after school programs. They were using 15-passenger vans at our YMCA to pick up children after school and bring them to different community after school programs, some at the Y and some at other places. In 2007 in Massachusetts, we needed to take those 15-passenger vans off the road for passenger travel and suddenly there was this crisis of no one's going to get anywhere after school. So we got together with four other agencies and with the Northern Berkshire United Way, and we wrote a grant to purchase three vehicles. The United Way granted us 100% of the money to purchase three vehicles owned by Berkshire Rides, insured and maintained by Berkshire Rides, and available to all of these other small community agencies that all of a sudden didn't have access to transportation.

So we did all this with no federal dollars, which is really a big thing. We've done—we purchased the vehicles with United Way funding and each of the agencies that has access to the vehicles pays us either the annual fee that covers insurance and maintenance or people also can sign the vehicles out kind of one day at a time for a one-day fee. So we're not quite in the black. I have a board member here [laughing]. But we're getting closer every year and it's something that's really worked out for our community. One of the things that we do a lot is go out and look

for new and different partners. Many people want the vans at the same time for after school. We have five vehicles now.

But one thing I was pretty excited about, and I actually—I think I talked with Amy about, is just about two months ago we got an agency that does sheltered workshop work. So now we have the vehicles out during the day bringing people back and forth to sheltered workshop work, and then they're back in the afternoon in time for people to pick children up after school and bring them to their safe after school programs.

The other thing that really has impacted the community is that the collaboration over the years has gone way beyond transportation. We started off with these four agencies that didn't even want to be at the table together. They each wanted their van and that's all they wanted to do, but the United Way was not going to give everybody their van to do transportation three or four hours a week. So my job, I felt, was to keep bringing these people back to the table because we weren't going to get it if we didn't have the partners. So we worked on that, we got everybody together, we got them all to sign up on the grant. We've gone as far now as two of the agencies needed to share a vehicle at the same time, so one agency goes and picks up their kids and brings them to a basketball program. While they're at the basketball program, the other agency goes there and gets their vehicle, gets their writer's workshop kids, brings them to the writer's workshop, basketball kids go home, writer's workshop kids go home. They did that for about three or four months. Now those two agencies, which really, truly were two of the ones that didn't want to sit at the table, are sharing their space. So now they still have those two programs going, but instead of bringing the kids to different places, they're just bringing them all to one center. So it's been—in addition to filling that transportation void that we had, it's really helped these agencies start to work together and we really need to do that in the small communities. In that pool we're doing about 700 rides a month.

So what we're working on now, hopefully very soon, and I was hoping by the time I got here we would have signed a contract, we're working on doing some kind of ridesharing. And we looked at trying to develop our own website, we looked at national websites, and what it looks like we're going to do is we're going to go with a locally grown website called Ridebuzz. It was developed in the county next to ours and it's like other, you know, other websites. It's like what Don had shown. You know, people can go on and look for a ride, people can go on and offer a ride, you can set up individual groups so that they're protected. If your seniors want to go on and they only want other seniors to be able to see their information, that kind of stuff is on there.

What we're working with Ridebuzz on is that they're trying to customize some software for us. So this will be new for them as being a small company. When someone would click on Ridebuzz through my portal, they'll get information about rides that they ask for. You know, "I have to get to Boston on Wednesday," or, "I work in Pittsfield every day," but they'll also get the bus schedule and they'll also get my van's schedule. So when someone looks into this portal, they'll see everything that we currently have for transportation in the Berkshire County area, so that's something—maybe within a month we'll have signed on to that.

The other thing that we're doing which in our area anyway is innovative and we've been looking at for quite a while is trying to figure out how to get across the state lines. We're right in the corner, like I said, of Vermont and New York. And in Bennington, Vermont, which is only about 12 miles from the border, there's still a solid manufacturing base. That's what Berkshire County used to depend on and we really don't have that almost at all anymore.

So I found another non-profit that works in Bennington that has gotten permission to cross the state lines, and she started coming down just twice a day to meet the Peter Pan bus so

people could get into the city of Bennington from Berkshire County. So she and I are working on an agreement where I can get people—if I get people to that bus stop on the Massachusetts side of the line, she can now take them into Bennington and drop them at the various manufacturing plants. So for a dollar they're going to be able to get up to their plants. The plants are still looking for people and they pay much better than service industry jobs that we have here. You know, that's something we've worked out between us and now what we need to do together is get to the manufacturers and make sure that they know that they can now pull employees from our area and we can get them back and forth to work at least for the second and third shift job. I'm not sure we can do first yet, but at least if we can start with second and third shift we can get some of my folks to work and they can get some of their work finished.

I think that was under eight minutes. I tried to go really fast. So I want to just—what I wanted to comment on at the very beginning is I was really happy to hear the other panel that was on for this morning. I felt like we were kind of validated. We did—the Workforce Investment Board, we just added a member to our board of directors at Berkshire Rides and it is the Regional Employment Board Executive Director, so that will be a—it's a spin. Instead of us going out to them, we're going to have her right in our policy-making board, which will be great. And then the other thing is we talked a lot about the census, and one of the other things that we did at Berkshire Rides is we were the conduit to bring some census equity funds into the community so we could do outreach into the immigrant population and the hard-to-count population. So those are things that are, you know, maybe on the fringe of what a transit agency should do, but it's what our community needed and it does benefit me in some ways because, you know, if our numbers aren't accurate, our funding may not be accurate. But it benefits all of our community and that's really what we're there to do. Thank you.