

Marcia Mehle: Thank you, I'm very pleased to be here and I'm very short, okay. Rural Rides was developed in response to the needs assessment done in 2007. And, that was done in our seven-county area. We haven't covered all seven counties yet. We're still in four counties. That needs showed that there was a need for existing services and improved flexibility and mostly we're concentrating on the improved flexibility. Also transportation education and individualized planning.

Who do we serve? We serve a network, we have a network of transportation advocates that serve low-income job seekers, entry-level employees, and persons who are at risk of losing their job because of unreliable transportation. Participants must be living at 150% or less of the poverty level. And we actually case manage people. They have to fill out an application and sign an income verification form, and the rides must be employment related. That includes job searching and job-specific, short-term training.

Well, here's the map. I want to show you how rural we are. The red areas are the four counties we're serving at this point. We have a population of about 170,000 people up there and approximately 13,000 square miles. And Dan took my thunder, I was going to say we have more deer per square mile, but he already used that for Michigan, but I think probably in some of these counties we have more moose per square mile than people. If you do the math, it's about 13 people per square mile.

Some of the challenges in the Arrowhead region are these small towns spread over a large area and employment opportunities are often a great distance from home. And not only are they a great distance from home they're often very small employers, which makes it little bit harder to, to organize either vanpools or carshare or rideshare situations. And there's always a challenge of coordinating public transit between the small towns, because it's just, isn't economically feasible. We also deal with extreme weather conditions. And it was interesting to hear that, so many people are biking in Minneapolis, but I don't know if your climate is a little better there or not, but it's often difficult to walk, bike, or keep a car in working order, especially if you're low income.

Low-income families are facing additional barriers, you know, obviously the cost of a bus ticket, the cost of a flexible transportation option which you know realistically is the taxi and the cost of operating a car. A lot of low-income workers are working the second and third shift jobs. They have day care drop-off and pick-up issues, lack of a valid driver's license, and the inability to obtain car insurance.

How do we outreach? We're very fortunate, because the AEOA is a large community action program over a seven-county area and we give employment and training services through the counties, to, for people who are transitioning from welfare to work. So I would say that probably our best partner is the employment and training counselors. We also partner with the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and the county health and human service providers in our area. We work with the churches and I've found that the churches are a very good source of volunteer drivers. We outreach to the homeless shelters and organizations such as the Salvation Army. We do outreach to local employers. A lot of our employers are very small. The larger employers in our area basically are higher-paying wage and the people who work there don't qualify for this

particular program. We use public service announcements, radio, newspaper, websites, mostly when we're going into a new area, not once we're established, because the demand, we're worried that demand is going to exceed our capacity.

Transportation advocates, otherwise known as mobility managers, I guess. What do they do? They qualify the participants. They do an intake application and off that information they create an individualized transportation plan. Then they provide support using our toolbox of solutions. They work on creating linkages between the transportation options available and maintain records and case notes on each person served. Also our advocates, and myself, we try and identify and address the gaps that are available in services and move the client towards transportation self-sufficiency.

Some of the factors that play into the transportation plan are daycare needs. That can be an issue with public transit for dropping a child off at daycare or picking one up, at least in our area. Distance to work or training sites can be very far. Worker training schedules, the barriers, if you live off the bus road, you have no license, no vehicle, no insurance, or you're homeless, and your address is changing often. This all, plans, plays into this plan and special needs, such as a handicap accessible vehicle.

What's in our toolbox? We have bus tickets, rideshare support dollars, our work buddy project, which is something I'm kind of proud of and I'll talk more about, volunteer drivers, and taxi vouchers.

The work buddy project, it's our rideshare support program. The participant registers and demonstrates the need for assistance, but we always first go to public transit. Using public transit cannot be an option to get if you're going to get support for rideshare. But, with the small town spread out, this quite often happens. Qualifying rides are for employment or job-specific training. The participant identifies an individual at their job or training site with whom they can ride, and we call that the work buddy, and submits a request and a copy of their work schedule to their advocate. The driver buddy must register with the Rural Rides program. The driver buddy must show proof of insurance and a valid driver's license. This is when the realization hit me, how many people are out there driving without insurance. We lost a lot of driver buddies that way, because, typically in the lower income bracket jobs, people can't afford this insurance. Driver buddy submits a weekly mileage sheet and receives \$0.29/mile at this time, with a monthly cap of \$150 and that, that will vary depending on our budget. The arrangements must be reviewed and approved by the advocates on a monthly basis.

A lot of you people are from urban areas and I'm sure you look at these statistics and they don't get you too excited, but they sure get me excited. We serve 512 persons and we supported 30,737 rides in the first 18 months. And I'm happy to say we did most of it by public transit. Next came volunteer drivers. Volunteer drivers have been kind of the heart of our program. When you've got somebody working, like I mentioned before, at 7-11 at one o'clock in the morning there is just not going to be another option. Even our taxi services stop at that time. And we've been fortunate enough that we've been able to support some mileage payments to our volunteer drivers, so we do have a pretty good bank of drivers. But it's not realistic to think that you're going to have a volunteer driver picking you up at your door and taking you to work at one o'clock in the morning for any

long period of time. We try mostly to get people stabilized in a job and help them find a solution to their own transportation need. We have been fortunate to, to work with taxis and they have given us a break on the rates up there and that's working fairly well too. And then our buddy program is at the bottom of the list. I'd like to move that up higher, but often people are working jobs where there are not large employers in our area and it's hard to find a buddy that's on the same shift or the same schedule that you are.

The primary funding source for our program is through the Minnesota Department of Transportation through a JARC grant. We also receive some money from The Blandin Foundation, a private foundation, for an expansion into Itasca County, and we receive support from Itasca County Health and Human Services, Cook County Health and Human Services, and it's not a lot, but it is a participation, because they understand how important the program is. We are asking to expand into another county next month... next year, and if so, we did get support from that county also.

I guess that's my presentation on my program. I just want to stress, we're very rural. We've been very happy with this program. We started our toolbox approach about 12 years ago, 11 or 12 years ago, with the, with a grant that was helping people transition from welfare to work. At that time, we were doing some support of cars and private vehicle ownership. At this time we're not, but it's, I think that when that money is available to help a car, to help you get a car, you're a little less likely to move into the public transit when it is available. So this is working quite well for us and we're getting a lot of great feedback from the job counselors from the counties and from the participants at this point. And I appreciate the opportunity to come up and talk about the program, because we're excited about it and it's been a good program. Thank you.