

Small Town, Big Impact



System: WEXEXPRESS- Cadillac Wexford Transit Authority

Service Area: Wexford County, MI

Background

Cadillac Wexford Transit Authority “WEXEXPRESS” is located in the Northern-lower part of Michigan. Wexford County has approximately 33,000 people and is considered a rural area. WEXEXPRESS offers two types of transportation service – public transportation with buses, and a volunteer driver program. WEXEXPRESS’ busing service provides transportation throughout Wexford county, which spans over 575 square miles. Busing service also offers a regional connection for Grand Traverse County, a neighboring county. The bus service provides rides three times a day to Traverse City Mall and Munson Hospital. The transit authority offers busing service that is demand response, door to door service.

The New Freedom Volunteer Driver Program is coordinated through WEXEXPRESS, the local transit authority. This program provides riders the ability to travel outside the normal county boundaries throughout the state of Michigan. The volunteer drivers use their own vehicles. WEXEXPRESS offers 2 wheelchair accessible vehicles, a MV-1 and minivan with a ramp. Volunteers are trained to drive these vehicles to provide wheelchair transportation. This program allows WEXEXPRESS to expand outside county borders and provide transportation for residents needing to see a specialist or travel to other areas of the state for treatment. The volunteer driver program offers door to door service, and 3-day advance notice is recommended. The program started in 2018 and went from 63 rides per month to 400 rides per month with 15 volunteers.

Service Area Population	33,631
Service Area Size (sq. mi)	575
Data Year	2019
One-way Trips per Year	2016 – 114,393 Rides 2017 – 130,942 Rides 2018 – 139,539 Rides which includes 1,322 New Freedom Volunteer rides 2019 – 146,618 Rides which includes 3,891 New Freedom Volunteer rides
Miles of service	900,217 Bus and 166,149 volunteer driver program
Annual Operating Expenses	Regular bus service: \$2, 619,920 Volunteer driver program: \$78,801

Fleet	28 vehicles used by the Bus service and 2 wheelchair accessible vehicles used by volunteer drivers. The New Freedom Volunteer Driver Program also has 15 volunteer drivers who use their own vehicles.
Major Funding Sources	Millage, state and federal grants, contracts, bus advertising
Partner Agencies	Wexford County Council on Aging, Area Agency on Aging of Northwest Michigan, Wexford County Department of Veteran Services, Cadillac Public Schools, Cadillac YMCA, Northern Lakes Community Mental Health *There is a link to become a partner on the WexExpress website.

Coordination

Coordination with local agencies has allowed WexExpress to provide services through contract or partnership agreement. Some examples include the following:

- WexExpress contracts with Hope Network for rides for residents of an Adult Foster Care home to get to work.
- Employment rides increased to 6,810 in 2019, up 2.2% from 2018. In January of 2020, the highest number of rides was for work purposes.
- The Lake Township in Missaukee County, where there is no public transportation, helps pay for the cost of the trips of their residents to use WexExpress services to travel throughout Wexford County.
- WexExpress contracts with the Cowell Cancer Center in Traverse City to provide rides to radiation treatments at the Cowell facility on an hourly basis. This is a door to door service and scheduled by the Cancer Center. The Cowell Cancer Center approached WexExpress about providing this service to their patients.
- Healthway Express in Wexford County provides rides only for medical services and was created when facilities approached WexExpress. WexExpress provides rides to dialysis patients and to a physical therapy center. If the patient cannot afford the trip, the medical facility may pay for the trip.
- WexExpress also provides transportation for Munson Hospital, several nursing homes and assisted living homes. These partners help reimburse the volunteers for mileage, fuel, encourage drivers to volunteer, and either the hospital or the rider can call to secure transportation.
- The local Department of Health and Human Services contracts with WexExpress if their volunteers are unable to provide a ride.

- Other agencies in town help provide trips and are valuable for filling the gaps in service. Love INC (Love in the Name of Christ) is another group in town that helps provide rides for residents.

The New Freedom Volunteer Driver program is an example of an entity outside of traditional transportation working to improve mobility. While this program is open to anyone, the primary focus is on older adults, people with disabilities and Veterans. The idea of a volunteer driver program was originally put together by a group of community members and a group called SNAG – Senior Networking Advocacy Group. These group members represent individuals, businesses, and agencies who have a passion to improve the lives of older adults in Wexford and Missaukee County. These groups formed committees to focus on transportation issues in the county and eventually merged into one group once the program launched. The committee looked into grants through WexExpress and were able to secure funds to hire a Mobility Coordinator to work with the agencies to develop a volunteer driver program. This group met every month for a year until funding was received. This process helped to facilitate communication between organizations.

The partnering agencies play a significant role in the New Freedom Volunteer Driver Program. The partners help to recruit volunteer drivers and also provide information about the program to the community, and more specifically to their clients. The partnering agencies have the rapport with the clients and can help encourage the riders to use the service. The partners provide the additional funding that is matched by Section 5310 dollars to provide the volunteer drivers with reimbursement for the miles they drive. Therefore, the partner agency must approve each ride – mostly medical, but they can approve other services if deemed necessary.

Even though the members of the committee and the frequency of meetings has changed a little over the past two years, the core group is still very active in the program. Currently, the committee is made up of a board member and staff members from WexExpress, as well as a representative from each of the 3 main partners. Wexford County Council on Aging, Wexford County Veteran Services, and Area Agency on Aging.

Successes

Many of the WexExpress system changes were driven by the new Executive Director who worked with staff to create a roadmap for the future. Many focus groups were held, and community engagement was done to establish the priorities and create the plan. For example, the community asked for call reminders, dependability, and on-time performance. Since 2016, many investments have been made to be responsive to the community and a new funding source from Michigan DOT was accessed that allowed for expansion to nights and weekends

These include the following:

- Implementing the volunteer driver program
- Rebranding to “WexExpress”
- Equal service community-wide
- Extended hours (nights)
- Weekend service (Saturday) – paid for with Federal funding they previously had not applied for
- Bike racks on buses
- Better rider communication
- Mobility Coordinator (new position)
- New dispatch system
- On-Board GPS bus location tracking
- Rider alerts
- New website

- Online booking with existing dispatching software that was purchased with state and Federal funding
- Mobile ticketing through (Hopthru App) – partnered with the app to pilot and therefore received it for minimum investment aside from nominal monthly fee
- Enhanced Call Center phone system
- Camera capability on every bus
- Exploring a new service app and premium service in the evenings

The roadmap allows the agency to apply for grants that became available in order to meet the goals of the plan.

Challenges

The New Freedom Program Volunteer Driver Program is relatively new, so there is still a learning curve. Recently the volunteer driver program has faced challenges in scheduling patients who are having surgery or procedures. Many offices do not provide a time for the surgery until the day before which makes scheduling a ride difficult. There are also times when a rider is admitted to the Emergency Department. Despite program guidelines, it is difficult for the volunteer to know if they need to wait, or if the rider will be admitted to the hospital. To resolve these issues, WexExpress worked to improve communication with the medical facilities through the use of a medical waiver so information can be released about transportation needs of the passengers.

Another challenge is that many offices require another person to be the responsible party for the patient due to the procedure. The volunteer driver cannot act as the responsible party. Solutions to this have included a friend riding along with the patient to act as the responsible party or 2 nurses in the community, not affiliated with the transit program, will provide this service as a fee.

Keys to Success

The WexExpress bus service and the New Freedom Volunteer Driver Program have seen several years of record ridership by offering a safe, reliable service. The coordination efforts with their partner agencies have allowed the program to be known and respected throughout the county. Services are promoted through presentations which have also included the two low-income high-rise buildings in their community. Senior housing residents and veterans are thankful for a live person to talk with to schedule rides. By working with partners including the Veterans Service Office, matching funds are often available to reduce or eliminate transportation costs. The volunteer driver program offers a higher level of service – door to door, to help meet the needs of riders.

Because of the transportation services offered, many the clients are now keeping their regularly scheduled appointments with their doctor. Doctor's offices have expressed how grateful they are to have their patients no longer cancel the appointment because they could not find a ride. Several children of clients contact WexExpress to comment about how grateful they are to have this program. They no longer have to take off work or drive a long distance to take mom or dad to a follow-up visit to the doctor.

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