

Amish drive public transit demand

Cheri Perkins

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What began as a program to help the elderly in LaGrange County get to medical appointments has turned into one of the fastest-growing public transit services in the state.

It all started simply enough: The LaGrange County Council on Aging wanted to help its clients get to early morning dialysis appointments, so it started a vanpool service. Once patients were dropped off, drivers had about four hours until it was time to pick them up again.

Cheri Perkins, executive director of LaGrange County Council on Aging and LaGrange County Area Transit (LCAT), saw this as an opportunity to offer public transportation to the community.

She saw the need clearly. At least half of LaGrange County's 35,000 residents are Amish. Because they don't drive, they were limited where they could work. At the same time, the RV manufacturing and manufactured home industries needed workers.

LCAT made the connection. The service has gotten so popular, the 11 vanpools that run daily are filled, and Perkins said she could fill at least 15 vans if not more. In addition to the local workers who rely on the service, Amish teachers and children use it to get to the area's roughly 20 Amish schools.

Parents don't want their children walking to school on busy roads, so LCAT picks them up at their homes and runs routes similar to a school bus, dropping them off at their schools and picking them up again at the end of the day.

Perkins said she can't imagine what would happen to her county if funds were cut and vanpools weren't available, but she knows one thing: Unemployment rates surely would go up, and businesses would suffer.

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