Hope Network: A Grand & Rapid Embrace of Mobility’s Future

By Rich Sampson

The final day of the Michigan Transit Tour began with the Grand River Valley – home to Grand Rapids – socked in under a dense fog. Making out landmarks and terrain was almost impossible as we cautiously headed south out of downtown Grand Rapids to the suburban community of Wyoming, home to our penultimate destination: CTAA-member Hope Network (see photo at right – ed).

Turning off the main thoroughfare into the light industrial park that’s the home base of one of Michigan’s largest non-profit service organizations, our field of vision was still largely awash in a fine, damp mist. But standing out among the collection of buildings and parking lots was a fleet of bright red body-on-chassis vehicles and minivans proudly bearing the Hope Network livery. We knew we’d found the right place, for as the agency’s transportation program slogan goes, “if you see the red bus, you know it’s us.”

Hope Network’s signature vehicles are only the most outward symbol of a collection of transportation services that helps the agency achieve its mission of allowing people to live independently and with dignity. To that end, it deploys mobility options that may initially appear geared towards the needs of seniors and people with disabilities within and beyond the Grand Rapids region, but also encompasses a never-ending quest to meet needs through innovation.

Supporting the Team

Some in the transit industry consider their job to be moving vehicles and their work is providing transportation. Since its inception in 1963 as The Sheltered Workshop at Pine Rest Christian Hospital and becoming a stand-alone organization with its current name in 1986, the agency has sought to provide resources and programs to allow people to maximize both their opportunities and outcomes. The need to move people to access these options became apparently quickly, and has offered transportation service for most of its history. It has never considered itself a transportation provider.

“We’re a support arm for all Hope Network’s other programs,” says Steve Harman, Executive Director of Hope Network Transportation Services. “We are a Christian organization that seeks to help
individuals achieve their highest level of independence. Everything else is second to that.”

In all, Hope Network employs about 2,800 people serving more than 20,000 current customers at 240 locations, mostly within Michigan but a with a handful of programs in other states. Its service groupings are objective-oriented: rehabilitation, behavioral health, development and community support, of which transportation falls under the latter, comprised of 50 employees and 85 vehicles. It melds a mix of public and private investment – ranging from federal Section 5310 funds to contracts with local non-profits to foundation support – in providing more than 200,000 rides per year throughout Kent County and portions of Ottawa County.

In covering such a wide swath of programs and purposes, there’s rarely a moment of pause for the Hope Network transportation program. The first drivers of the day often begin their trips as early as 3:00 a.m., with the last runs wrapping up at 1:00 a.m. the next day. Service operates 365 days per year. Many of the agency’s 35 drivers working early or late hours are authorized to bring their vehicles home to reduce deadhead time. The organization also contracts out all vehicle maintenance to several area garages, again to boost operational efficiency.

Despite the seemingly voluminous level of service, the agency knows it could provide even more access if it could recruit more drivers.

“We’re in growth mode now,” says Hope Network Operations Manager Joan Konyn-dyk, who joined Steve Hartman for our visit. “We have good retention rates – driver turnover is only 17 percent and average experience is eight years – but bringing in new drivers is always a challenge. As a non-profit, we can’t beat anyone on pay.”

“Right now, we’re turning away business because we don’t have enough drivers,” adds Hartman, who began his career as a pastor before starting at Hope Network as driver. “We hire for heart, not for skill. We can teach skills. Most of our drivers stay because they’re mission-minded and love their customers.”

Intentional Innovation

While Hope Network’s services tailored for seniors and people with disabilities function as the core elements of its transportation program, the department is fully invested in the larger organization’s belief in continual improvement. Hope Network describes its approach to innovation as “making bold moves from well-informed decisions.” According to Hartman, the mindset is borne out of enthusiastically embracing opportunities.

“The needs are so great that the opportu-
“Opportunities are unlimited,” says Hartman. “The question we’re always asking is ‘how can we be more aware?’ That comes, in part, with a recognition that some of our barriers in responding to opportunities are self-imposed.”

In practical terms, Hope Network’s path to constantly seeking out avenues for improvement are twofold: an internal commitment to question ways of doing business and an outward engagement of the community at all levels and venues. During both facets, the organization has found that two assumptions must always be disclosed and investigated – first, the solution cannot be prescribed at the beginning of the process and second, those with the most at stake in the outcome should guide the process.

“You always have to have your ears on the rails,” Hartman says. “The key to a community collaborative process is avoiding the solution mindset from the outset. And that requires being involved with the community beforehand. If you’ve had prior engagement, it’s easier to work open-mindedly and listen carefully.”

While the agency’s inclusive engagement process might seem to be rooted in pure altruism, Hartman is open about its motivations. Across the organization, Hope Network never rests on the belief they are uniquely indispensable to do the work and that strategic thinking is essential were little is not subject to change.

“Hope Network has many silos of service but our CEO Phillip Weaver works for coordination across the organization through a strategic process,” explains Hartman. “We’re always thinking about how to position ourselves for the long-haul, and that work never ends.”

But what should be made out of Hope Network’s internal and external re-imagining efforts in terms of practical results? The launch of the organization’s relatively-new employment and on-demand luxury shuttle programs illustrate its innovation principles in action.

**Wheels To Work: Employment Is Independence**

As Hope Network Transportation Services engaged the organization’s ongoing strategic planning process in 2014 and 2015, it identified becoming more involved in providing trips to employment locations as a natural addition to its overall mission. As the agency strives to assist individuals improve their degree of independence, few factors are more likely to help a person achieve independence than obtaining and maintaining employment.

Although employment transportation was a logical extension of Hope Network’s mission and capabilities, it was more important to determine if the need for such a service existed and, if so, how it should be thoughtfully designed to address that need. Through the organization’s ongoing engagement with community players via its portfolio of programs – not just transportation – throughout the region, a need for employment-oriented service was identified in the city of Walker. A community of more than 23,000, Walker borders the city of Grand Rapids to its north and west.

While Hope Network describes its relationship with The Rapid – the region’s fixed-route public transportation network, which includes routes connecting Walker...
and Grand Rapids – as excellent, gaps existed for low-income and entry-level workers in reaching jobs in and around Walker itself and along the Three Mile Corridor. In collaboration with The Rapid, the city of Walker, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder’s office, local employers, the area’s workforce development network and community partners like Disability Advocates of West Michigan and the Kent County Essential Needs Task Force to pinpoint employment transportation needs and craft a framework to address them.

The result of that effort was the creation of Hope Network’s Wheels to Work program, which launched service in the Walker area on June 12. Riders access the service through a series of community hubs, from which Hope Network vehicles transport workers directly to their job site. Although the $11 round-trip fare reflects the organization’s fully allocated cost to provide each trip, most employers participate share in or contribute to the cost of the ride. In many cases, the fare is a dramatic savings from cab rides that could run as high as $20 each way. No fares are exchanged on-board, as Hope Network bills employers directly. As of December 2016, the program was attracting more than 3,600 daily riders.

“In the past, we’ve had employees taking expensive cab rides to and from work and others who took the bus to the nearest bus stop and then ended up walking the rest of the way to work,” says Jenny Redes, Human Resource Manager for Custom Profile, an employer that took an active role in the creation of Wheels to Work. “The Wheels to Work program gets employees to work and to work on time. We are hoping it will bring candidates to us. The idea is to be able to recruit a new population of employees.”

“We have known about the gaps in public transportation here in the city for years,” said Walker Mayor Mark Huizenga. “We started talking to The Rapid a couple of years ago about how they could service additional parts of the city but so far hadn’t been able to find a solution with them. The industrial corridor in Walker has continued to grow and expand jobs, and without public transit in that area, it’s been a problem. I think the governor’s office is treating this as a pilot project to help fill in that transit gap and work on the kinks and figure out how to make it efficient on this side of the state.”

For Hope Network, the initial success of the program is a testament to its commitment to a design thinking approach in responding to opportunities, but also a sense of humility in recognizing they cannot go it alone.

“The goal is helping to get people out of poverty and the key to independence from poverty is a sustainable job,” says Hartman. “When we started this process, we recognized our role was the transportation experts, and it was important to have similar expertise in community development and workforce development outside our organization, so we worked with partners who are such experts. This was really a community experiment. We didn’t have the answers
going in, but we were willing to take some risk and learn from the process.”

Moreover, the organization views success differently than a perpetual source of riders for its service. According to Hartman, if riders “graduate to car ownership because they’ve sustained their job, that’s still a win for us. It’s the outcome that matters.”

Nonetheless, Hope Network believes Wheels to Work is a concept with long-term viability, but will continually monitor and enhance its efficiency and utility.

“We want the program to be sustainable long term,” says Debbie Coleman Hope Network’s Economic Development team and serves as its Brand Ambassador to area employers. “We put together a program where the employee pays a fee and the employer pays a fee, and by combining those it will pay for itself. Once the bugs are worked out, the program will extend to other communities. It would be wonderful if we could expand this to Caledonia, Ada, even Holland or Muskegon.”

**Adapting the TNC Model to Specialized Mobility**

Inasmuch as Wheels to Work marks the culmination of an iterative, community-based approach to designing a new service, an entirely different service has emerged from internal and strategic business planning at Hope Network. Like most organizations and companies involved in moving people, Hope Network had observed the rapidly growing and evolving model incorporated by transportation network companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft. While offering immediate, on-demand mobility service was a bit beyond the agency’s technological and operational capacities, was an untapped market of potential customers available by offering a new and improved level of service with off-board payment and point-to-point travel?

Hope Network staff turned to its Director of Service Development and Special Projects, Mike Hall, to explore how it could attract new customers of some financial means who usually had not utilized its core services for seniors and people with disabilities.

“Sometimes, when we listen to the community, some folks say they feel using a public service makes them feel like baggage, not individuals, and so why these people may have mobility barriers, they don’t take advantage of our services because they don’t feel its for them,” says Hartman.

After three months of conducting market and demographic research along with seeking input from Hope Network staff – within, and beyond, the Transportation Services department – Hall returned with a service strategy that emphasized three core tenants:
hospitality, comfort and simplicity. Hall explained that an undeserved customer base was waiting who were willing to pay the full cost of a trip if it were accompanied by an experience matching its price. Rather than focusing on connections to medical appointments, group meal sites and rehabilitation programs, the new platform would be tailored for rides to a nice restaurant, an evening out at the theatre or an event at church. Chauffeurs – not drivers – would be trained in hospitality industry fundamentals and provide point-to-point service in well-appointed, black MV-1 vehicles allowing for greater comfort for seniors, people with disabilities and fellow passengers accompanying them.

“What we’re looking for is a new transportation experience, one that puts the guest first and foremost,” Hall explains. “It takes cues from the hospitality industry, in that when you make a reservation with us, you can expect a comfortable experience in the form of easy-to-access vehicles, superior chauffeur service, and easy payment methods—specifically for adults who cannot, or choose not, to drive themselves.”

Hope Network launched the new program – branded GoLux, emphasizing luxury – in the summer of 2016. Since the organization is a fully independent, nonprofit organization, it has the ability to establish programs targeted to specific audiences. Go Lux service is priced by the hour and includes as much coverage as the customer desires, including reservations available 24 hours per day, seven day per week. Hall is currently working on an on-demand scheduling platform that could ultimately expand beyond GoLux service (reservations are currently available by phone only) as well as a membership plan that would allow for unlimited use during a given period.

“This is an experiment in action,” says Hartman. “We received tremendous insights from both our drivers and riders in designing this service. We’re trying to thread the needle between the cost of a taxi and the product of a limousine and a standard of training and assistance people with disabilities and seniors expect from us. It’s an exciting time to be involved in something this dynamic.”

The Unending Mission

As we prepared to head out from Hope Network’s transportation headquarters, the morning’s heavy fog had largely burned off, bringing a sense of clarity much like that of the organization’s approach to all its work. By stressing outcomes that are the products of its overall mission, Hope Network and its Transportation Services operation take nothing as so precious it can’t be questioned. Opportunities abound, and continual vocation to do better provides the resources to engage them, thoughtfully and innovatively.

“If you don’t innovate, you’ll be an also-ran,” says Hartman. “We’re never afraid to ask if the decisions we make in management having an impact. We’re about providing independence here and we never lose sight of that vision.”

Transportation has played a key role in Hope Network services since its inception in 1963 as a branch of Pine Rest Christian Hospital.