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Wheels to Work program is rolled out in Walker

Service through Hope Network gets employees to and from jobs.

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Employees and employers share the cost of using the Hope Network vehicles to get to and from work. **Courtesy Hope Network**

A new transportation program has launched in the city of Walker to help connect employees with employers.

The Wheels to Work program has been on the road since June 12, and its community partners say they believe it will be a big success.

The program utilizes Hope Network's buses and software to efficiently line up rides for employees in need of transportation. The Rapid provides some rides through the program.

While The Rapid operates in Walker, its service route does not extend down the Three Mile corridor, where many manufacturing facilities are located.

“The industrial corridor in Walker has continued to grow and expand jobs, and without public transit in that area, it's been a problem,” said Walker Mayor Mark Huizenga.

“The Rapid is conducting a viability study right now, but it will take some time. This project doesn't replace it; it fills in the gap.”

Jenny Redes, human resources manager for Custom Profile, a plastics extrusion firm in Walker, said one of the barriers to recruitment and retention for the company has been inadequate transportation options.

She said there is a great pool of talent on the southeast side of Grand Rapids, but right now many of those potential employees can't get to Walker.

Custom Profile tried cab service before partnering last year with Hope Network to bus employees in from different parts of the city using the nonprofit's existing transportation system.

Partnering with Hope Network proved to be a great solution, but it wasn't cost effective.

"You need a critical mass to make the numbers work," said Christa Bird, chief people officer at Custom Profile.

Debbie Coleman, business development specialist at Hope Network, said employers and employees share the cost of Wheels to Work, with employers paying \$2.55 per employee per trip and employees paying \$3 per trip.

"We want the program to be sustainable long term," she said. "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."

Custom Profile and Hope Network are working to build a network of employers to try to reach the critical mass necessary for a sustainable program.

They also partnered with the City of Walker, the governor's office, The Rapid, Disability Advocates of West Michigan and the Kent County Essential Needs Task Force for additional support.

The program, which operates during all three shifts, serves six employers at present and is in talks with 28 additional employers.

In the meantime, Coleman said it is operating with startup funding provided by some of its partner organizations to bridge the funding gap.

Coleman said the program operates through payroll deductions. The employee portion of the fee is deducted from the employee's paycheck, and Hope Network bills employers for their total usage.

Often, new hires don't have the money to pay for transportation at the point of hire, so Coleman said employers have committed to paying the entire transportation fee until the employee's first paycheck. She said some employers have opted to foot the bill entirely.

Redes said Custom Profile has five employees using Wheels to Work, but she expects that number to grow as the company brings in new hires.

“We are hoping it will bring candidates to us. The idea was to be able to recruit a new population of employees,” she said.

She also said employees don’t have to use the service continually but can opt in as needed.

For instance, she said an employee might decide to use Wheels to Work if a snowstorm is in the forecast.

The goal of Wheels to Work right now is to raise awareness and get to the critical mass of users needed to sustain the program, but Coleman said she expects 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,” she said.

Huizenga said he expects the program will be used as a model for other communities across Michigan.

“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,” he said.

He said a program similar to Wheels to Work operates in Detroit.