

LOCAL

The success stories of Chillicothe's on-demand transit

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CHILLICOTHE— Mark Fawley of the Chillicothe Transit System starts his bus at 5:50 a.m. to pick up his first passenger, or what he calls one of Chillicothe's "success stories."

He makes his first stop at Donnie Sanford's home at 6 a.m. to go to the YMCA of Ross County. Formerly weighing 500 pounds, Sanford started his weight loss journey in 2018 after developing a heart arrhythmia. After an extensive weight loss journey and gastric bypass surgery, Sanford has lost over 300 pounds.

While he used to walk or ride a bike to the YMCA, the cold weather and a total shoulder replacement at the start of the 2022 stopped him from making the two-mile journey to the gym on his own. That's when the Chillicothe Transit System stepped in.

In January, the transit department started a 12-month pilot program for free, on-demand rides, similar to Uber or Lyft, within city limits. Transit director Aaron Kennedy said the department has provided over 38,000 trips to about 1,400 unique passengers from January to November.

The year of free rides has taken countless employees to their jobs, children to daycare, gym-goers to their workouts and family members to the hospital to visit with loved ones.

"Employers like it because they can support getting their employees back and forth. It's allowing seniors to rely on transit to maintain their freedom," Kennedy said. "We'll pick you up at your residence and take you where you need to go."

Retired teacher Jean Romero, 93, goes to the YMCA at 6 a.m. every day Monday through Friday. She recently decided to stop driving and turned to the transit system for transportation to her daily swim.

Fawley and Romero have a deal— although she is scheduled to be picked up at 6:30, Fawley knows she'll be ready to leave the house by 6:06 a.m.

Romero was a local teacher who taught at Zane Trace, Chillicothe and Huntington during her education career. After retiring, she started leading swim sessions at the YMCA for those with arthritis, which she taught for 10 years.

Now, Romero swims laps at the YMCA every morning to stay in shape. She uses a penny to track how many laps she swims by placing the penny on a further mosaic tile with each lap while she works to complete the 100-mile swim challenge.

Later in the morning, Fawley will pick up Sanford and Romero to return them back home.

Although Fawley doesn't have another scheduled rider until 7 a.m., he knows he won't have much downtime. He expects a call from dispatch to send him on another pick-up in the meantime. Fawley said he has the best job in the transit department since his schedule changes daily. Fawley doesn't mind the fast pace of transporting between 40 and 60 passengers per shift — after 20 years of working at the paper mill, Fawley is happy with the change of pace.

"We take them to their doctor's appointments, grocery stores, pharmacies, mental health, those kind of things, whereas they would have to rely on relatives, sons, daughters, cousins, brothers and that's not always as reliable as us," Fawley said. "A lot of these people don't have anything. It's free, and that helps them a lot with their financial situations."

After about 20 minutes, he gets a call on his walkie-talkie to pick up a commuter on the hill.

Using a mounted iPad on the dashboard, Fawley gets directions to each pick-up and drop-off location and alerts passengers when he is on the way.

Mark Minter has worked part-time at the Bridge Street Wendy's for almost two years. He's been using Chillicothe's public transportation since he returned to the area three years ago.

Originally from Waverly, Minter has spent most of his adulthood traveling. He has lived in Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada and Thailand, in addition to other trips around the world.

Fawley says goodbye to his like-named counterpart by saying "On your mark, get set, go!"

Three riders and an hour later, the sun begins to rise, illuminating the dark interior of the bus. Dominic Turner and Devin Parsley are picked up from their respective apartments on the way to the 7 a.m. shift at Pittsburgh Glass Works (PGW) in Chillicothe.

Turner, 30, has worked with PGW for two years. He said he has used the Chillicothe public transit "on and off" for the past few years but has used it to get to work every day since it's been offered for free.

Before taking the transit consistently, Turner said he would catch a ride with a friend or call a taxi, which was a huge daily expense. Now, he gets transportation to and from work.

Parsley moved to Ohio's first capital three months ago and started his job at PGW three months ago. One of his first acquaintances in Chillicothe was Turner, who he met through the on-demand transit. Now, they spend every morning chatting together on the way to work.

While dropping off Parsley and Turner at PGW, Fawley stays in the back of the parking lot to pick up Wendy McElroy after her graveyard shift packing windshields at the factory.

McElroy has lived in the Alvis Halfway House since September after being released from prison. After living in Chillicothe for a few months, she plans to relocate to the city permanently.

Without the free on-demand transit, McElroy would have to spend about \$10 for a taxi ride to get home from work.

Satish sits inside the National Church Residences senior living home waiting for the bus to arrive. As usual, Fawley arrives at 8 a.m. While Satish makes his way to the bus with his scarf, mask and walker, Fawley prepares to help his passenger onto the bus using the wheelchair lift.

Five days per week, Satish gets a ride to visit his wife, a retired Air Force veteran, at the Chillicothe VA Medical Center. The couple met in Columbus when she was homeless. Satish offered to buy her McDonald's, and they have been together ever since. They have been married for over 40 years.

The retired chemist from India stays with his wife for as long as possible each day before being picked up again by an on-demand driver. Without the service, Satish would not be able to see his wife on a daily basis.

Every day, Fawley watches the sunrise as he takes his own version of a self-guided tour of Chillicothe. He meets new friends and greets familiar success stories while on duty. He goes to work every morning, taking pride in his role of helping fellow community members in Chillicothe.

Riders can schedule an on-demand ride by calling 740-773-1569 or by booking online at rider.chillicotheoh.gov. Riders can get text alerts and track the location of the driver online. All vehicles are wheelchair accessible.

Kennedy said the Chillicothe Transit System will continue to offer free transportation in 2023.

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