

Sheryl: Hello, this is a podcast of The National center for mobility management I'm Sheryl Gross-Glaser and we have today with us Jennifer O'Brian from Lawrence Onboard. From Lawrence, Kansas and Jennifer has been in development with a very innovative right sharing system which she is just piloting now but it is so great that I felt like I didn't want to wait till we shared this news. It is a very simple system I think of it as hitch hiking grown up and so I'm going to let Jennifer explain a little how it works. Then I will ask her some questions about some details.

Jennifer: Great thank for having on the Sheryl, I'm glad to talk about my project, basically it is a way to use all those empty seats in our cars to make a road side ride sharing program that is really flexible and kind of dynamics so that people can use it whenever they need it. It started out because I was out in rural Jefferson County and there is no bus out there and there will never be a bus and I just got tired of driving all the time.

So I started thinking what are some of ways that I can get into town without having to get into my car and one day I heard a freakonomics radio broadcaster Alan Podolski talking about hitch hiking. He said well why don't we hitch hike anymore and it is a great way to get around it is very flexible, it is easy and it is really not as dangerous as people make it out to be. So when I heard that I started thinking hey maybe he's got something there so I did a lot of research and developed my project that I called Lawrence Onboard. So shall I tell you how it works?

Sheryl: Yeah that would be great.

Jennifer: Perfect, well basically it is a membership based systems people can sign up as riders or as drivers or as a combination of both. Everybody is going to get registered and vetted and issued a photo ID and then drivers will get a window cling with the logo on it and the member number. So that everyone knows they are in the network and then the riders get a really little piece of equipment as this holding dry erase board that is really strong and sturdy.

It has got the Lawrence Onboard logo on one side and a Velcro Dots dry erase marker on the other. And what they do is they go to a designated road side where it says where people can pull off and where the rider is very visible, and they write there destination on the white board and then they hold that out nice big bold letters so people can see it. They hold that up and then drivers passing by can see that and pull over and pick them up and take them where they need to go. Then if the driver happens to be a member then when the rider gets in the car they car they can text in the driver's member number to Lawrence Onboard and that they record the ride. So that is a safety backup that also platforms for feedback and helps them, makes the driver eligible to win some kind of little price so it is a little fun incentive there.

We are also working on like a training program and hand book and a map that shows all the good locations that we have tried out so far. There so that is it in a nut shell how it is going to work.

Sheryl: And I just want everybody I'm probably going to put a picture on our website but it is a very recognizable but simple board that people can hold. It has this bright ring border on it and I think that is probably a great aspect of that is very recognizably branded.

Jennifer: Yeah it is a very distinctive and even from the very get-go before anybody knew what we were doing. Where we were just putting riders out to test it out, people would stop and say things like well I don't usually think of hitch hikers but you look like something much more legitimate. And having that write board, having that piece of equipment seems to make all the difference in the world.

Also they really like to know where you are going because a lot of people don't want to stop if you are going in the opposite direction from where they are.

Sheryl: Right, so I have a few questions one is you said that you were going to be vetting your drivers and your riders. Can you extrapolate on that a little bit?

Jennifer: Right we are going too especially for the riders we are going to out of

the reasons background checks to make sure we don't have any creeps getting in the system make sure that everybody is safe. We are not sure exactly how stringent it is background checks are going to be. But probably air on the side is more stringent than less especially at the beginning. For the drivers it won't be quite so it was such a high bar because we want to get a lot of them signed up and because there is more of an accountability with the drivers, because their member number will be right there on their window cling.

So we want to make sure that they have a valid driver's license and that they have insurance and also to think of things like working seat belts, and a passenger doors that opens from the inside. So those are the things that will make the program work a lot more smoothly.

Sheryl: Right, that is great now I know that you appeared before your city commission recently and you have been sort of going back and forth with them with discussions about how to make this a legal action and a safe option. Could you tell us a little bit about those discussions?

Jennifer: Yeah basically what we ran into was there is a standard traffic ordinance that is actually used in a lot of communities around Kansas that states that no person shall stand upon or along a road or highway for the purpose of soliciting a ride. Now I'm okay with those upon part because you know, you don't want people standing in the middle of the road getting run over.

But the along part is the part that we are saddling up against so I went to the city commission and on December 17th and presented my project. I told them about what it was all about how it was going to work, and the potential benefits for the community which are huge. And they agreed with me that they thought it was a good idea and that we should work on figuring out some kind of language to allow what we are doing but also keep in mind traffic safety and personal security,

So what the preliminary meeting has pointed us in the direction of a permitting process that they will keep the ordinance as it. But that the city will decide to allow exceptions in the case of a permitted right sharing organization. And what that permitting rule involved I think is the next step that we are working on. But it will involve some kind of security plan and some enforcement protocols and things like that. So we are still on the early stages on that but I feel really hopeful that we are going in the right direction and that the city has been really great about working with me on this.

Sheryl: So you have already done some pilot testing of this system and could you explain a little bit about what that shown in terms of how long people have to wait for rides and to how the rides have gone, how many people you have crowned to help you with this and what you have seen so far?

Jennifer: Yeah, last year 2013 we did a rough research program, I had twenty three volunteers men and women and they all ranged at age from eighteen up to six nine was our oldest driver. What I basically did was I gave the equipment and pointed out some places that I thought were good locations to get a ride and had them go and write the destination on their write board and held it out and we just had random strangers taking them out. So it is like it said we don't have any member circulating right now in the communities so these were just random strangers stopping by. And the amazing thing that we found out was that average wait time was under seven minutes. So that is still remarkable and

Sheryl: That is really remarkable.

Jennifer: Yeah, this is when we had a hundred and twenty one rides and of those rides we had a 95% success rates. The couple of rides where people didn't get picked up were mostly on account of bad location. Because when we moved into a better location they got a ride right away, so that is really encouraging I'm thinking okay there is a lot of coverage will out there. A lot of people who are just kind and helpful and curious, who are willingly to pick up somebody that they don't even know especially if they have their destination signal and they include you in it.

Sheryl: Yeah it sounds like it is really promising now I know even though you

haven't sort of become a publicly available program yet you are already thinking about expansion because things do look promising. Can you tell us a little bit about what you are thinking in terms of Lawrence to Kansas City trips?

Jennifer: Yeah you know what it's just like I said in the early days were still not sure how well it is going to work in different venues. But one of the big transportation problems we have in the Kansas City large Topeka areas a lot of people live in Lawrence and they commute to Kansas City and Topeka But there is no regularly available bus service, there is no commuter rail it is pretty much you getting in a car and that is a lot of cars and a lot of driving and a lot of gas.

So we want to figure out some ways to expand this to be able to get people to Kansas City and Topeka and one possibility is to team up with some of the smart phones app based right sharing companies that are out there. [Inaudible 00:11:21] maybe one or a carpool.com to see if we can offer that as an option for members who want to do like a little more structured riding something that maybe reimburses them for their gas and gives them a little more of their ability to plan ahead.

So we are still exploring those ideas but I think that is very much needed piece of the transportation puzzle and I would like to be able to help address that.

Sheryl: Well it has been great speaking with you today, I think this is a wonderful type of innovation and something that people could do in other areas where transit doesn't fill a lot of the gaps in terms of transportation demand. It seems like it is simple but very well thought out so I thank you for speaking with us today.

Jennifer: Yeah well thanks for having me on.

Sheryl: Sure and we will keep in touch and find out what happened.

Jennifer: Alright great well you take care Sheryl it was nice chatting with you.

Sheryl: Nice chatting with you to talk to you soon.

Jennifer: Okay bye, bye.

Sheryl: Bye.