

## Cheers and Gears

### The Evolution of a Rural Clubhouse Transportation Unit *by Cirrus House members and staff*

The transportation challenges that face rural clubhouses in the United States are many. Often, public transportation is not available. In the western panhandle of Nebraska, the city of Scottsbluff (pop:14,000) serves as the hub of most social and commercial services in our region, although the nearest major interstate highway, or bus station, is over 45 miles away. Our clubhouse, Cirrus House, is located in Scottsbluff, and is the only psycho/social rehabilitation program available within hundreds of miles. Picking up many of our members who live in the surrounding small communities, coupled with the daily transportation demands of our local membership, can be quite a challenge. The intent of this overview is to shed some light on how we have faced the challenges of rural transportation and created a strong, member driven (literally) transportation unit that effectively serves the diverse needs of our clubhouse community. Attention will also be given to issues such as insurance, procuring vehicles, maintenance and ensuring skilled and safe drivers.

#### **History**

The Cirrus House transportation unit has taken a long time to develop, and has encountered many obstacles before attaining the smooth running operation that is currently in place. Before Cirrus House was developed, we were a partial care program at our regional mental health center. Paid staff picked up people in the morning and took them home in the afternoons. In June of 1984 the partial care program closed and Cirrus House was created.

In the beginning, only staff were drivers but eventually we began to make strides toward member involvement. In the early part of 1985 our sponsoring agency gave approval to allow one member to drive the pick up and take home routes as a paid position, which was labeled a T.E. job. This went well, and another position was added. We now had two paid member drivers to match our increasing transportation needs. We felt that we had our Transportation Unit working smoothly until we had a visit from Fountain House. They told us that T.E.P. should not include paying members for jobs done in and for the clubhouse. Also at this time, members began wondering why one member was paid to drive in the mornings while others were considered volunteer drivers less than an hour later. This started to strain member relationships in the clubhouse.

In January 1987 we hired an individual from an outside agency to do pickup and take home routes. Having a paid driver from outside of the clubhouse worked fairly well for about six months, but then the driver left us for another job. This again raised the dilemma of what to do. In traditional clubhouse fashion, we invited all members and staff to meet and decide how we should handle the morning and afternoon routes. We came up with *Cheers and Gears*, a unit that would provide the clubhouse with volunteer drivers to cover all of our transportation needs. We approached our sponsoring agency with the idea of having members drive on a volunteer basis. Slowly we were able to authorize members to be volunteer drivers.

Initially, we had five authorized drivers. We found that they were busy driving all day long, and that we needed to authorize other drivers. But what exactly is an 'authorized' driver?

## **Making it Work**

To become an 'authorized' driver for Cirrus House, certain criteria must be met. The driver must:

- 1) possess a valid driver's license
- 2) watch the *Special Transit and Rural Transit Safety (STARTS)* video on proper driving procedures and pass a written test related to the video
- 3) pass a driving test
- 4) have an acceptable driving report from the DMV
- 5) be accepted by our insurance company
- 6) read and understand the Cirrus House transportation rules
- 7) learn to complete the required forms dealing with transportation (vehicle check in/out logs, vehicle logs, etc.)
- 8) learn to operate a hands-free cell phone
- 9) know where to find emergency information regarding possible natural safety threats (tornadoes, floods, etc.)
- 10) be trained to handle medical emergencies and/or behavior problems.

While this may seem like many bases to cover, experience has taught us that a driver who meets all ten of these requirements will be able to adapt to most unforeseen circumstances -- examples of which are listed near the end of this article.

The biggest struggle we faced is perhaps the most obvious - insurance coverage for our drivers and vehicles. Many insurance carriers were leery of offering coverage for our program. In order to arrive at a successful solution for insurance needs, we needed to address a major issue: the stigma of mental illness.

Many companies turned us down outright once we explained to them what our clubhouse was all about. As with most stigma issues, overcoming this obstacle meant getting a company to really understand our program. As we negotiated with this insurance company, they began to see that most of our members were capable drivers and responsible adults. We were finally able to purchase group insurance coverage for all our vehicles, but the guidelines were very strict. Our carrier required a five-year Motor Vehicle Report (MVR) that excluded all drivers with more than one violation. Also, all cases of negligent driving and/or driving while intoxicated (DUI) were red flagged and not covered. We recently changed companies in search of cheaper rates. We were successful, but were reminded once again that acquiring insurance coverage is an arduous task.

Currently, Cirrus House owns five vehicles: a 1997 Dodge Intrepid, 1997 Plymouth Voyager, 1991 Dodge van, 1991 Ford Taurus and a 1981 Ford pickup truck. The funding to pay for these vehicles was obtained via grants and matching funds from our clubhouse. We purchased our last three vehicles outright, and set aside maintenance and gas considerations in our annual budget. We have full coverage on the Intrepid and the Voyager with liability on the remaining three.

We supply the insurance agent with an annual drivers list. This list includes the drivers' names, birthdays, license numbers and expiration dates of their driver's licenses. We occasionally have to suspend a driver for erratic driving and/or complications that arise from medication changes. All suspensions are based upon verified driving incidents and/or repeated complaints from passengers. Usually staff in the transportation unit will coordinate suspensions, which are often as brief as two weeks.

We purchased cell phones in 1998 and placed them in all of the vehicles except for the pickup. This was one of the most important improvements to the transportation unit. Having the phones enables us to advise drivers of additional stops while they are out driving, and to check up on the location of vehicles. The obvious safety advantages are also valuable. On more than one occasion our drivers have called 911 after witnessing emergency situations not associated with our program.

### **Billing Considerations**

In Nebraska, as in most of the United States, a system of federal funding called 'block grants' are administered by state social service departments. The state of Nebraska assists our members with many supportive services. Meals, day rehabilitation programs, social recreation, and transportation assistance are available to all who meet the disability and income requirements. Because of this federal support, Nebraska administers funding for most of our members who use clubhouse transportation. Most rides are paid through the managed care provider or the block grant program on behalf of the eligible individual. For the few members that are not eligible, the cost is \$2.00 one way. We are pleased to keep our prices at a minimum. Billing requirements and associated paperwork provide plenty of unit work for drivers and non-drivers alike.

While the clubhouse does provide free rides to all members for T.E.P. jobs, socials, and school, the bulk of our transportation services are billable either to the state or private parties. All rides are logged by vehicle and from these logs the rides are transferred to a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet tally is used to place the number of rides on state billing forms and documents. All rides are billed on a monthly basis.

The driver's trip record is color coded for the color of each vehicle. At the top of each record are spaces for the date and the beginning mileage. The drivers are asked to start a new log each day with spaces for start/end time, driver's name, passenger names and the type of ride given. We averaged slightly over 1,000 rides and 3,000 miles a month and for the year 2000 there were 13,470 rides traveling 39,958 miles.

Grant information is another type of record keeping done in the unit. On these forms we add number of rides, days, hours, and the types of rides for each vehicle. They also include maintenance information and gas usage. This information is very helpful when applying for funding for our transportation needs.

### **Daily Operation**

We use a ride slip system to organize our daily driving needs. Members are asked to fill out a ride slip 24 hours in advance. The slip has listings for the day of the week, the date, time, and destination. All slips must be approved and signed by staff. The slip is then put into boxes that correspond with the days of the month. Each day the slips are removed from the box and placed on a large bulletin "transportation board" that is divided by a.m. and p.m. along with the hours of the day. At a glance, members and staff can see what the transportation demands for the day are and plan accordingly. There are also daily route slips for the morning pickup run. The pickup routes start at 8 a.m. Members are encouraged to sign up for a ride the day before or call in the morning before the vehicles leave.

Along with vehicle logs, drivers must also sign in and sign out the vehicles themselves. Keys are clearly marked with distinctive key chains. When drivers get the keys they are required to indicate departure time, destination, and passenger(s). Once the driver returns the key, the vehicle is checked in along with the actual return time.

## **Unforeseen Circumstances**

What has 88 eyes, 440 nails, 176 limbs, and voyages the roadways upon the Great Plains of the American Midwest? The 44 authorized drivers that make up the Transportation Unit of Cirrus House in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. Living on the edge of the Old West we are fond of our legends and tall tales, but our drivers have had experiences that make the truth seem stranger than fiction. At near 40,000 miles a year something unpredictable is almost guaranteed. Here are few of our stories.

On a sunny afternoon a group went on an outing to the Scotts Bluff National Monument. This is a beautiful scenic drive to the summit of the bluff. The roads are narrow, with tunnels and several hairpin curves. Going up was a piece of cake, however, on the way down we discovered the old Ford van had lost its brakes. Luckily it was a stick shift and Marcia, the driver, was a farmer's daughter. She was able to use the gears and emergency brake to get the group back alive.

Or, how about the time the van door fell off one of the vans? On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July our community had a fireworks display at the local college. We had to go early to get good seats. This particular year we had a van with a sliding door. We went early and had our picnic supper and watched all the pretty fireworks. Then we packed up to go home. As we slid the door closed, it very slowly began to creep downward and fell right off the van onto the ground. 10:30 p.m., on a national holiday, in a small town, is not the best time to find help, so the guys framed the door in the opening and held it from the inside while we slowly drove home.

## **Member Comments**

It is easy to get lost in the overall organizational policies and procedures that are involved in coordinating and planning a busy transportation unit, but it is important to remember that these efforts have an immediate impact upon individual lives. As a group, we benefit from our mutual support while at the same time addressing individual needs and interests. In our clubhouse, one of our most active drivers is also our daily grill cook. The man who tackles the morning dishwashing doesn't drive at all, yet his efforts in the kitchen ensure a healthy lunch for those who use the transportation system. Clubhouse works because of the membership. Our transportation unit could not exist without strong member support. Why they support it is best understood in their own words.

*"Being a driver has given me a sense of independence and pride. I feel that I am a good driver and I can transport members and staff safely to different appointments and socials. I like to drive and I like to help out as much as I can. I appreciate the confidence the staff have in me. It is great to be trusted to drive any of our five vehicles."*

*"Being a driver has enriched my life by giving me responsibility."*

*"Many Cirrus House members are not able to own or operate a vehicle. They are absolutely dependent on Cirrus House for transportation to doctor's appointments or to T.E. jobs. I have great satisfaction in knowing I am providing a service for those who can't do for themselves. I am making a difference."*

*"I use Cirrus House transportation for several reasons. It makes it easier to get to and from doctor appointments. I spend a lot of time at Cirrus House so transportation brings me to and from home. I also work at Wal-Mart. Clubhouse transportation is my preferred method of getting to work. Clubhouse transportation also makes it possible to take part in socials."*

*“I get where I’m going much easier than walking. It is easier when the weather is bad.”*

*“It allows me to attend classes for English as a second language at the Guadalupe Center.”*

*“Driving has really helped me grow. I have new confidence that I can drive even with my meds and illness. I also help to coordinate rides. I found that I can do something. I enjoy this. My self-esteem has really increased. I also know my limitations and can say “no” if I don’t want to drive. I take this responsibility seriously, yet it can be fun. You can visit with other members and it helps you relax. Sometimes it is nice to get out of the unit and around the town.”*

### **In Closing**

As is evident, strong member support and unit work is the true reason for our success. We are benefiting from state support; but, without the dedication and commitment of the membership, the transportation unit could not function at this level of capacity. The future of the unit has a good outlook. We are always getting new members-- which means both potential new drivers and the need for more rides. Grant research and writing is always in the works and we hope the near future will bring new vehicles. Our main goal at this time is to acquire a wheelchair accessible van.

Not every clubhouse has the need for rural transportation services, but those who share this need also share the commitment that no one will be left out or left behind. Many of our members from the surrounding countryside have moved to town to be closer to the clubhouse, but many have not. It is important that we continue to reach out and provide all of our membership with the means and the access to attend the clubhouse. For those who live alone, miles from the nearest services, our transportation unit is a lifeline of support. We can help members reach important destinations -- doctors, social security appointments, etc.-- but it also helps us reach out to one another and continue our goals of recovery in unity.

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*For additional information, please contact the Transportation Unit at Cirrus House, 1509 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Scottsbluff, NE 69361 or call 308-635-1488, fax 308-635-1271 or e-mail us at [cirrushouse@scottsbluff.net](mailto:cirrushouse@scottsbluff.net)*