



Community Action Solutions

July-August 2008

Ring, Ring, Ring Go the Phones in KI BOIS Transit System Office

The two phones ring constantly. From 6:30 a.m. until 6 p.m., Terri Squyres and her staff will field about 400 calls from residents needing a ride on the KI BOIS Area Transit System (KATS).

"It's really gone up," says Squyres who is supervisor of the Tahlequah office. "A year ago we got about 200 calls. It's doubled."

Across the small room that is sandwiched between a Cherokee Nation restaurant and a gift shop, dispatcher Bobbie Anderson takes a call from Tammy who needs a ride from the Northeastern State University library to the Plaza Mall.

"It'll be about 1:45," she tells the rider. She then grabs a radio microphone to alert the bus driver to pick up a rider at the library.

By mid-day, a dozen 15-passenger buses are circling the community picking up residents and transporting them to jobs, shopping and appointments. Squyres estimates about 35 riders take the bus to their jobs.

Squyres, a nine year veteran of KATS, says it's especially busy around the first of the month when senior citizens get their Social Security checks.

"The seniors like to pay all their bills and then buy groceries. They take care of it in one day. It's a dollar a stop."

At the first of the month, two KATS buses work full-time at Wal-Mart. People are stocking up on groceries and other supplies. Some people have two baskets of groceries.

"Going home everybody wants to be first," Squyres says. "The drivers just

do the best they can to get the weary shoppers home as quickly as possible."

The Tahlequah office has 15 full-time drivers. Most have been with the agency for several years.

"Drivers have favorite customers. They know these people so well," Squyres says.

But there are a lot of new faces on the buses. Higher gasoline prices may be driving the increase in ridership. Few buses are empty.

People can call in and provide their name, address and destination. Anderson will log in the call and contact the driver to schedule the pickup. Those with medical appointments will typically schedule their trips in advance.



Terri Squyres (standing) takes a call from a Tahlequah resident wanting a ride while Bobbie Anderson logs in the request and alerts a driver of the pickup by radio.

Transit System Grows to Largest in the State

Twenty-five years ago, KI BOIS Area Transit System (KATS) began with just seven vehicles primarily transporting people for agency programs in a four-county area. Today, KATS is the largest transit system in the state with 183 mini-vans and buses that shuttle thousands of people in ten counties to jobs, medical appointments, shopping and Head Start centers.

"We changed. We now work with so many agencies. That why we've grown," said Charla Sloan, transit system director. KI BOIS is headquartered in Stigler.

KATS contracts with the Department of Human Services to provide rides for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families clients to career centers for job training. The Muskogee County Senior Nutrition Program contracts

with KATS to provide seniors rides to congregate meal sites. KATS has a contract with Logisticare to provide Medicaid recipients with transportation to medical appointments under the SoonerRide program. It also transports children to Head Start centers under a contract with Cookson Hills Community Action Foundation.

Higher fuel costs are causing more people to take the transit. In some areas the agency receives up to 400 calls daily people wanting a ride. This is in addition to the transportation provided under the contracts.

Sloan said fuel costs are also taxing KATS. Fuel costs climbed from \$92,916 in October 2007 to \$143,958 in July 2008.

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Sloan doesn't like to turn anyone down who wants a ride. If there is a shortage of drivers, she and other administrative staff members will drive buses.

During 2007, KATS vehicles made 644,775 passenger trips while covering 4,411,434 revenue miles.

"We are dependable," Sloan said. "It contributes to the rising numbers."

To keep the buses operating at peak efficiency, KATS has acquired a new, massive maintenance facility. Ron Davis, maintenance supervisor, oversees the work of two mechanics in the 12,000 square foot building.

"We have top of the line equipment," said Sloan.

The mechanics can do everything from change the oil to completely replace an engine. Overhead doors provide easy access to even the largest vehicles.

The amount of equipment, tools, tires and parts in the shop is staggering. There are 14,000 pound lifts, computerized front-end alignment machines, tire-mounting equipment and a room filled with thousands of parts carefully organized for easy access.

Sloan said it was a dream to have a maintenance shop with a parts room.

"Before we may have had to wait on parts," she said.

All of this equipment comes at a hefty price. Sloan said the shop has about \$200,000 worth of equipment.

A nearby 8,000 square foot building has an 80-foot long wash bay and storage space.

Davis is glad to be in the new building. Before the move, the mechanics were squeezed into a 30 x 60 foot shop.

"We can do all the work except body work in-house," Davis said.

Total cost for the administrative offices, the two shop buildings, equipment and asphalt parking around the buildings was about \$1.2 million.



Ron Davis, KI BOIS Area Transit System maintenance supervisor, checks the oil on one of the system's vehicles.



Charla Sloan, director of KI BOIS Area Transit System, stands in the parts room.

KI BOIS paid \$286,000 for match. The rest was paid for with discretionary transit program funds.

KATS also administers a \$1.5 million grant to provide state residents with transportation to jobs. Called Road to Work II, the program is a collaboration

of 17 transit systems that are setting up work routes.

The original job access program called Road to Work was launched in 2000. Earmarked funding gradually increased until it reached \$5 million in 2007.

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However, the earmark was discontinued and now annual funding to be distributed by a formula is expected to be only about \$750,000.

Still, it's an important program.

"In Okmulgee, we take over 80 people a day to work," said Sloan.

She is currently working with the Cherokee Nation to set up work routes from Stilwell to Tahlequah for employees who work in the tribal complex.

Sloan expects 25 – 35 workers will eventually ride the transit.



A line of vans are ready to be pressed into service.

Focus Is On Having Safe Transit Drivers at KATS

KI BOIS Area Transit System (KATS) wants to make sure its drivers are trained and ready to serve customers in a professional and safe manner. Under the direction of agency trainer, Edith White, new drivers attend an eight-hour training session.

"My goal is to have safe drivers out there," White said.

White, who drove KATS buses for 10 years, uses a combination of videos and discussion to cover topics including vehicle inspection, passenger relations, backing the bus, road rage, wheel chair lift operations and emergency

procedures. She also provides training on CPR and first aid for Head Start and Developmental Disabilities program staff as well as the drivers.

A training room located in the transit system administrative offices comes complete with a 52-inch flat screen television and seating for 18 drivers.

Training continues throughout a driver's career. Monthly "Bus Talk" safety information sheets are distributed to the drivers. Topics range from backing a commercial bus to braking distance.

"Drivers must sign off after reviewing the information," White explained. She maintains a training file for each of the 171 driver.

On request of a supervisor, White will provide retraining on specific topics. For example, when a driver damaged a bus by backing into a tree, White was called out to retrain the driver on proper backing techniques.

Road rage is becoming an increasing concern for White. She warns drivers to watch out for aggressive drivers.

"I teach them to back off; don't make eye contact," she said.

White admits she sometimes misses driving a bus and will sometimes fill in if there is a shortage of drivers.

"I enjoy the people we transport."



KI BOIS Community Action Foundation trainer Edith White loads a video prior to a training session.

'Choices' Stores Offer Food and Household Goods to Families



Karen Horn, Cookson Hills Community Action Foundation program coordinator, stands beside some of the donated food items waiting to be distributed to the Choices stores.

In May, Cookson Hills Community Action Foundation Executive Director Cleon Harrell and Programs Coordinator Karen Horn spent three days and nights walking the streets of Tahlequah to get a first-hand look at the challenges faced by low-income people and the services available.

"It helped us see where the holes are," Harrell said. "We definitely found out there were needs."

Based on their experiences, Cookson Hills created "Choices General Stores" in the three counties served by the agency. At these Choices General Stores, low-income families can purchase food, clothing and other items using vouchers issued by Cookson Hills.

Harrell, who has combined an entrepreneurial spirit with a passionate desire to help people, engaged a group of local, state and national partners to join in his quest to give people a hand up, not a handout.

Harrell is working with the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, Feed the Children relief organization, National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources donation organization, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Oklahoma Department of Central Services and Reasor's food stores to stock the shelves in the Choice stores.

The agency issues \$50 vouchers for each family member that can be used to purchase items at the Choices stores. For example, a five member family receives \$250 in vouchers. The vouchers can be used during one shopping trip or over several visits to the store. Vouchers can be renewed every two months.

Families qualify for the vouchers through the emergency assistance program. In order to receive assistance, persons must go through a short program called "First Step in Making Ends Meet." The family must complete a questionnaire to help them understand where they are spending their money and where the money should be spent.

"We want to see how they are managing their money. Are they making good choices?" Harrell explained.

Since launching the program in July, Cookson Hill's office has become a virtual warehouse. Cases of disposable diapers and baby bottles line the main hallway. The former kitchen is stacked high with cakes, crescent rolls, cookies, muffins and loaves of bread.

Freezers are filled with chicken, hamburger patties, won tons and other perishable items. Cases of can vegetables, sodas, rice, spaghetti sauce, bottled water, corn flakes, grits, baby food and peanut butter are stacked so thick that only a single path goes through the room.



Cleon Harrell, executive director, checks on items stored in a freezers.

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'Choices' Stores

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People are lining up to get the supplies. During one 18-day period, 397 individuals in 126 families purchased supplies with \$19,850 in vouchers in the Cherokee County store in Tahlequah.

VISTA worker Phyllis Handsaker stocks shelves with diapers, cans of vegetables, bags of rice, onions, bread and a few unusual items – mop buckets and dust pans, wrapping paper and even a tent in the Tahlequah store. An ice cream freezer Cookson Hills acquired through Feed the Children is filled with won ton wraps, tofu and flour tortillas.

"They love the vouchers. They get to pick their own items," said emergency services worker Christine Bean. The store is open Monday through Friday and normally 15-25 families come in each day.

Harrell is willing to go about anywhere in the region to pick up food. He drove to Johnson, Arkansas, to get 144,000 tortilla wraps, to Stilwell to pick up 28 pallets of frozen apples and Texarkana to get popcorn chicken. Harrell estimates the agency has over \$2 million worth of food and supplies.

He picked up 5,000 pairs of under armour underwear that the military had purchased for \$25 a pair; Harrell only paid 25 cent a pair. They'll soon be in the Choices stores available for purchase with vouchers.

Harrell is a very hands-on leader. He'll drive the truck and load the food. He's passionate about helping people, Horn said.

Harrell is quick to praise his staff. "Everyone pitches in," he said. This program has helped bring staff members from different agency programs such as Head Start, weatherization, housing and Foster Grandparents together.

Why is Harrell so passionate about this project?

"When you see the smile on children's faces, it makes it all worthwhile."



VISTA worker Phyllis Handsaker (left) and Cookson Hills emergency services worker Christine Bean stock the shelves in the Tahlequah Choices store.

Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency Presents Apex Awards

Little Dixie Community Action Agency and Community Development Support Association (CDSA) received Apex Awards from the Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency (OHFA) for contributions to affordable housing during 2007.

Little Dixie received an Apex Award in the category of Community Development for rehabilitating 40 homes in Muskogee and helping revive the original townsite neighborhood.

Little Dixie partnered with NeighborWorks America and the City of Muskogee to demolish homes beyond repair and to clear lots of debris. Their efforts resulted in increased property values and new residents in the area.

Ron Walker, Little Dixie Community Action Agency housing director, also won an Apex Award in the Elderly Housing category.

CDSA received an APEX Award for its Paint the Town project.

CDSA worked with Enid Metro Association of Realtors, OG&E Electric

Services and AmeriCorps volunteers to improve and clean up targeted neighborhoods in Enid.

Upcoming Meetings

September 17-19

OKACAA Annual Conference
Oklahoma City

October 14-15

Oklahoma Conference on
Homelessness
Oklahoma City

October 29-31

Community Action Association of
Region VI Conference
Bossier City, Louisiana

November 6

Oklahoma Homebuyer Education
Association Annual Meeting and
Conference
Oklahoma City



Big Five Community Services Walk-A-Thon Raises Funds for Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren Program

Big Five Community Services held a walk-a-thon to raise money for grandparents who are raising their

grandchildren. The funds that were collected will provide the grandparents with additional money to buy clothes and other necessities for their grandchildren.

Participants laced-up their tennis shoes and were ready to hit the road to complete the three-and-a-half-mile walk as they lined up to start at the end of the Big Five offices, located at 1502 N. First Ave., across from Bloomer Sullivan Gymnasium. Two water stations were set up along the path, one between Wilson and Chuckwa, and another at Carl Albert Park.

The walk-a-thon was open to anyone, but included a \$10 entry fee per person. Approximately 41 businesses and local residents sponsored the fund-raiser.

Many items were donated to Big Five for the walk, the only expense the group had was buying T-shirts for the participants. The Coffey-Murray and Dalton-Holmes funeral homes and Tractor Supply offered use of their tents for the event, and Shamrock Bank served hot dogs after the event. Vendor booths were set up in the Big Five parking-lot during the event. The businesses supplied information about their services which included Big Fives services as well.

Big Five Community Services raised an estimate of \$6,000 for the cause.

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Two Receive CCAP Designation

Larry Hall and Kenneth Barnhart, both from KI BOIS Community Action Foundation based in Stigler, have received their Certified Community Action Professional (CCAP) designation from the Community Action Partnership, recognizing them as two of the nation's most accomplished and motivated Community Action leaders who are helping low-income people change their lives.

Hall is director of operations and Barnhart is director of the

developmental disabilities program at KI BOIS.

Their ability to guide and motivate low-income families; involvement in anti-poverty efforts on the local, state, and national levels; understanding of the history and mission of Community Action; and leadership capacity were evaluated through their candidate data form, executive skills portfolio, and written exam—all of which they had to successfully complete in order to become a CCAP.

Deep Fork Providing Energy Assessments for Electric Co-op Customers

Deep Fork Community Action Foundation is contracting with East Central Electric Cooperative to provide free energy assessments for customers in eight counties.

“We go in and inspect the home to see if there are places where the homeowner can save energy,” explained Jeff Schuman, executive director.

Schuman sees the program as a good fit for the Okmulgee-based Deep Fork.

“It’s well within our mission to do this. We may find weatherization clients. We may find elderly people in need of other services.”

In the first two weeks, agency staff performed eight assessments. Schuman expects the numbers to climb as more customers learn about the program.

“The biggest problem is convincing East Central customers that we are doing this without charge,” Schuman said. “They all think there is a catch.” To help familiarize customers to the new program, Deep Fork set up a booth at the co-op’s annual meeting.

East Central provides a kit for each home. It contains a hot water heater blanket, foam pipe wrap, a low flow shower head, two tubes of caulk, two packages of rope caulk, a package of foam gaskets for electric wall outlets and four compact fluorescent light bulbs. The kit is

valued at \$150.

The agency staff member typically spends 3 to 3-1/2 hours at a home. A meter is hooked up to the refrigerator to measure electricity used. Air infiltration is checked with a blower door test. The assessor installs the water heater blanket, pipe wrap and a low flow shower head. The other material is left with the customer to install.

“We show them how to caulk and where they need to caulk. It’s an education for the consumer,” he explained.

Deep Fork currently has one employee working half-time doing the energy assessments. Schuman expects to hire additional energy assessors when the number of assessments increases. The co-op has about 25,000 customers.

The Deep Fork energy assessor collects detailed information on major appliances including the name, brand and model of the air conditioner, refrigerator, stove and water heater. The co-op then prepares a detailed report for the customer.

“East Central will do a written workup for the customer with recommendations,” Schuman said.

As the program grows, there are benefits for all three parties. The homeowners will reduce energy costs; the co-op will have less demand; and Deep Fork may identify clients for other agency services.

Great Plains Improvement Foundation Provides School Supplies



Pictured are, from left, Amy Cabrera, Child Support Enforcement; Lisa Carson, principal of Country Club Heights School; Virginia Spencer, executive director of Great Plains Improvement Foundation; and Jane Torres, office manager for Child Support Enforcement.

Children whose parents are not financially able to purchase school supplies will have the same supplies as other students thanks to Great Plains Improvement Foundation.

Staff members donated supplies as well as money. The agency had an ice cream float and pizza day. To get a float or pizza you had to donate school supplies.

During this first time event for Great Plains, the agency raised \$233 in cash plus the donated supplies and a \$75 gift card from Wal Mart. They were donated to Country Club Heights Elementary School to be distributed as needed.

Amy Cabrera of Child Support Enforcement program organized the back to school fund raiser to purchase school supplies.