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Patchwork people-moving Mission Arlington fills transit gap as best it can

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ARLINGTON - It's 5:30 a.m. on a summer Wednesday that promises more baking temperatures, and Tillie Burgin already has a pot of coffee brewing in the back office at Mission Arlington.

She prepares the coffee for the van drivers, who begin arriving before sunrise to prepare for a full day of picking up and dropping off people who have no other means of transportation.

"The average person would say, if you want to make it in this city, go get a job," said Burgin, the mission's founder and director.

"We help. " The mission helps by offering weekday transportation in three 14-passenger vans from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mission customers are primarily the homeless and those who find themselves without a car for a variety of reasons.

The mission's daily transportation operation is similar to a system that a residents' committee is advocating for Arlington - a jitney system in which small vans or cars carry people on semi-fixed routes.

The jitney panel and three other committees will make presentations next month to the Arlington Community Transportation Study Committee - a 16-member group that has been studying transportation strategies. The panels, including one that will reassess how the city's Handitran system for the elderly and disabled operates, were created in June 1996 in an attempt to address the fact that Arlington is the largest city in the country without public transit.

Mission Arlington, at 210 W. South St., has been trying to fill part of the void for several years, Burgin said.

"When we first started, I've forgotten how many years ago, we had a car, then two cars," said Burgin. "We just saw a need. " One of her drivers, John Sargent, takes the first van out this day, with a 6 a.m. stop at the Arlington Night Shelter on East Division Street. He waits 10 minutes - and 10 minutes only - for those needing to get to work before 7 a.m. "Timing is everything," says Sargent, 35. "People have to get dropped off at the labor companies so they can sign up. " With donations and about \$40,000 annually in federal grants, the mission provided 23,851 one-way trips during the 12 months ending in June, mission officials said.

The mission's transportation clients include people staying at the night shelter and the Women's Shelter, children who need transport to day-care centers or schools, and people with temporary car problems, mission officials said.

"We're short-term help, for one to two weeks until they find other transportation," Sargent said. "There's such a need out there, we can't commit to one person. " After dropping a woman at Labor Ready on East Abram Street where she will sign up for work, Sargent delivers a man, a contract worker, to the General Motors assembly plant.

The next run is to carry Jim Kister, 55, to Dalworth Cement in the 7800 block of South Cooper Street. Kister said he was in his fourth week of working for the company as a driver and heavy-

equipment operator.

"If it wasn't for this van, I wouldn't have a job," said Kister, 55.

When Kister moved from Corpus Christi to Arlington for work, he never questioned whether there was public transportation in the city.

He said he is relying on the mission van until he saves about \$1,500 for a used Suburban.

The mission vans have specific scheduled runs each day based on requests received the day before and regular runs such as the 6 a.m. stop at the night shelter. During the day, the drivers dash back to the mission to check an answering machine where people leave messages such as a request for a ride to a doctor's office. They try to accommodate people within 30 minutes of their calls.

"A lot of the people we deal with are not going through the best of times," Sargent said.

During the first two hours of this particular Wednesday, Sargent drove three people from the night shelter to jobs, one person from the Women's Shelter to the subcourthouse, and made three stops to pick up three youngsters for a drive to Hutcheson Junior High School where they were attending summer school.

Another operating system that serves a particular market is Handitran, which is available to senior citizens and disabled residents. Handitran has an annual operating budget of about \$1.2 million with 25 percent each from the city and state and 50 percent in federal funds, Handitran officials said.

Thirty-nine percent of the system's annual 90,000 one-way trips are job-related, officials said.

The system, which began in 1981, does not provide trips on holidays, Sundays or outside of Arlington and has to refuse almost 200 requests for service a month, officials have said. Clients have to reserve trips at least 24 hours in advance.

The citizens committee that is studying ways to enhance Handitran's service may recommend that the operation offer same-day service as well as expanded hours. Their recommendations will also be presented next month to the ACTS committee along with the recommendations from the jitney committee.

Mission Arlington officials, who turn down about 200 ride requests monthly, said a jitney service would be a welcome addition in Arlington.

John Sargent, meanwhile, said he will continue to rise at 4:45 a.m. to drive his van and supervise the mission's daily transportation service.

"We're here to help," he said. "I think we make quite a dent." Arlington Transit History - 1975. A study by the North Central Texas Council of Governments recommends that Arlington create a fixed-route transportation system.

Arlington's population is about 140,000.

- 1979. Arlington voters defeat a proposal to join the Lone Star Transit Authority, a Metroplex system. 1985. Arlington voters defeat a proposal to form an Arlington transit authority to set up a public transportation system, funded by sales tax revenue.

- 1994. The City Council asks the North Central Texas Council of Governments to help initiate the Arlington Community Transportation Study, or ACTS. The ACTS committee, which includes four council members and 12 residents, works with consultants to develop transportation strategies. Arlingtons population has doubled since the 1975 study to about 280,000.

- March 1996. The ACTS report, which identifies 25 transportation niches, is released. June 1996. The ACTS committee organizes citizen subcommittees whose mission is to find ways to implement the niches considered most important.

- August 1997. The citizen subcommittees are scheduled to present next month their program and implementation recommendations to the full ACTS committee. Arlingtons population is about 290,000.

Source: city of Arlington and North Central Texa Arlington Community Transportation Study citizen panels - Enhanced Handitran Subcommittee Chairwoman: Carol Walters, program managerresearch engineer for the Texas Transportation Institute 277-5503 - Jitney Service Subcommittee Chairman: Wayne Duke, director of student affairs at UT-Arlington 272-3361 - Travel Demand Subcommittee Chairman: Bill Lace, vice chancellor for public affairs, Tarrant

County Junior College 882-5211 - South Arlington Shuttle Subcommittee Chairman: Dan Fernandez, director of business development for Global Integrated Systems Inc. (214) 422-2131
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