

## Interview with Christy Warner, Administrator for Kimball County Transit Service

Narrator (00:00):

This is RTAPgo. The Rural and Tribal Transit Providers Straight Talk on Peer tested innovations for facing operational challenges with grace, grit, and creativity. Hosted by the National Rural Transit Assistance Program, or National RTAP. This podcast is specifically for and by Rural and Tribal Transit programs.

Narrator (00:25):

Hi, transit Maven. Welcome aboard our RTAPgo for episode two, part one, piecing it. Together with Christy Warner, administrator of Kimball County Transit Service in Kimball, Nebraska. On this journey together we'll meet managers just like you, who are working hard to improve access and mobility. One trip, one bus, one step at a time. Many pieces had come together for Christy to take her one bus, one driver, one county system to a 10 bus, 14 driver, 5 county system in just three years. But the larger fleet and staff, Christy has learned to be resourceful, listened to her community, and use technology wisely. In part one, we'll meet Christy and talk about how technology has revolutionized her system and her relationship with her drivers, one of whom just happens to be her daughter. Kristy took time while moving to her brand new transit headquarters to fit the pieces together.

Robin Phillips (01:27):

Hi, my name is Robin Phillips and I'm the Executive director of National RTAP. Thank you for joining us on this adventure today. And I have with me, Christy Warner, who is with Kimble Transit. I, like many of you, woke up one day and was in the middle of rural and tribal transit, with no formal training or experience. And in 1997, I got a job at Oregon Department of Transportation. And 20 years later, here I am sharing my enthusiasm and interest in rural and tribal transit. They are the fundamentals of our mobility system and our trans, our transportation system nationwide. So, let's see,

National RTAP (02:11):

Where is Kimbal Nebraska?

Christy Warner (02:13):

It is a really tiny town, right on the Colorado, Wyoming border in Nebraska. It's about 15 miles from the Wyoming border right on I 80. And so we are in a very highly rural area, less than nine people per square mile. And, you know, we love Nebraska, but we travel the panhandle and into Wyoming and Colorado. So

Christy Warner (02:41):

I know I've been through there because I've driven cross country and I've been in, into Wyoming, and I ended up in Rollins and we were on I 80 because we ate at the I 80 in Iowa and just kept going. <laugh>. Oh,

Robin Phillips (02:54):

You've definitely, you've definitely been past us then <laugh>.

Robin Phillips (02:59):

So how long have you been at Kimball Transit?

Christy Warner (03:04):

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I'm actually still considered a little bit new. I've been here for three years actually, so not very long.

Robin Phillips (03:10):

Wow, wow. Can you tell us something about the area and about the services that you provide?

Christy Warner (03:18):

Sure. We are, like I said, a very highly rural area. So we have lots of villages and towns, but very small populations. Kimball only has 2,500 people, and most of the villages around us only have a couple hundred people.

Robin Phillips (03:36):

Wow.

Christy Warner (03:37):

And so it's, it's pretty remote in the sense of quick, easy stops aren't the same here as they would be in other places. Denver, Colorado, for example, is the next largest city, and it's three hours from here. So, well, where's

Robin Phillips (03:54):

Your closest grocery store?

Christy Warner (03:56):

We do have a little tiny grocery store here in Kimball, but if you wanted to go, say to a Walmart or a Target, it's about 60 minute drive from here. So,

Robin Phillips (04:06):

Yeah, I lived in eastern Oregon for a while, and that was like, well, I had a Safeway near me, but I wanted to do anything besides that. I was going one hour or two hours down the road. Where is your closest medical center?

Christy Warner (04:24):

So we have a small just clinic here in town, but if you wanted to see, you know, a cardiologist or some type of specialist like that, you're looking at least an hour drive. And if you wanted, needed to see a real, big specialist, you'd actually have to go to the University of Colorado in Denver, because it's closer than the University of Omaha. Six hours away.

Robin Phillips (04:48):

Yeah. So who rides your bus?

Christy Warner (04:52):

You know, we started out, this area is a very car driven area because of the distances, but once we got into this and really let people know that we're available, we actually now have, we have kiddos, we have a large majority of elderly and disabled, but we even have the people who, you know, they might break their leg and, and just need to get to work for six weeks or, you know, and then they drive the rest of the

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time. We've really started to expand into all of those different age groups and see quite a few more people coming on board every day.

Robin Phillips (05:30):

That is so cool. So what makes you live there? How, why do you live in Kimball <laugh>?

Christy Warner (05:38):

Well, actually I was born and raised in Kimball, and when I graduated I was one of those kids that said, I want out, I wanna go to the big city. And I actually was a military wife for 16 years. So we moved around and got to see a lot of the United States, Hawaii, Tacoma, Seattle, you know, Fort Lewis, Kentucky, that type of thing. And actually, when it comes to transit, my first transportation ride was on the island of Oahu. And that's <laugh>

Robin Phillips (06:06):

For you? <laugh>

Christy Warner (06:07):

They had an awesome system. You never had to wait more than about five minutes for a bus. And, and then my daughters in Seattle, you know, when they went to school, they rode public transportation. And so we were familiar with public transportation before I moved back home. And so it's been an amazing adventure to bring some of those things back to our little tiny town here.

Robin Phillips (06:33):

That's cool. So if after you've been there for all of three years, <laugh>, if you were gonna be your own mentor on that first day, what would you tell you?

Christy Warner (06:44):

I would tell myself that there is such a huge need that's unrealized because people didn't realize that our buses did public transportation in a rural community, you just don't have the same marketing sometimes sometimes they were set up as handy buses, and so there's that reputation of, oh, it's only for, you know, elderly. And, and when I first started I thought, okay, well I can do this. It'll only take a little bit of time, and next thing you know, you realize the phones just keep ringing and keep ringing. And we hear, three years later, we're still hearing, oh, I didn't even know this service existed. So just getting it out there and letting people know what we really do.

Robin Phillips (07:34):

So, when you think about what you were doing before your prior career skills, what made you think of becoming a transit manager?

Christy Warner (07:48):

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Well, before I did a lot of different positions, but mainly I worked in real estate, so I took, I managed apartment buildings, you know, 300 apartment buildings. And so you do work with a lot of diverse people. You'll learn how they live and interact on a daily basis. But my biggest piece was I went into transitional housing. And transitional housing required that we had grants. I actually ran a program on 17 grants for one, housing. And because it was transitional, you meet people from a lot of different walks of life with a lot of different needs. So, when I started back here at the county, I was actually up in the sheriff's office doing dispatch, <laugh>. Ooh.

Robin Phillips (08:33):

So, what happened on your first day <laugh>?

Christy Warner (08:36):

So, they called me down and they said, you know, would you be interested in working in taking our public transportation over? And I, because they knew I had worked with grants. And so of course I said, well, you have to tell me what the grants, you know, what are the compliance pieces? What are the strings attached? And, when we walked in, I thought it was gonna be a part-time, 20 hour a week <laugh> week position, <laugh>. And that is not, that is not the case in case anybody wants to know <laugh>. So,

Robin Phillips (09:13):

So what, they took you down there, you walked around and you said, oh, yeah, I'll write grants for these people. <laugh>

Christy Warner (09:19):

Yeah, you know, I called Carrie Russ, which is our Nebraska Department of Transportation person here in Nebraska. And I said, what does it require? And, so she kind of walked through some things and I said, okay, well, you know what, it's, it's a, sounds like a challenge. I can do that. And like I said, once we started really investing in our transportation, the phones just started ringing and then it just would ring more often and more phone lines.

Robin Phillips (09:54):

So, what do you mean by investing?

Christy Warner (09:57):

So, the county had been running an in-county transportation system since 1975 actually. And they had one bus and one driver, and that's how we started with one bus and one driver three years ago, <laugh>. And of course, the first thing I said is, we need to go outside of the county because you can't get the resources. You know, when you talk about those doctors' appointments and stuff, they're 60 miles away. They're not even in our county. And I said, we have to be able to take these people to where they need to go. And thankfully, NDOT had come through previously to me and had talked about wanting people to look at a bigger picture for transportation. And so my commissioner said, sure, why not? And as soon as

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they did that and said, yep, we're gonna invest in letting you cross the boundaries, go into a different county, we'll get an extra vehicle.

Christy Warner (10:55):

That's, that is, that was really, if you wanna talk about day one, <laugh>, that was more of a day one because after that we really just took off. I mean, it just exploded. We ended up from going from one driver in one vehicle to, we have 10 vehicles, 14 drivers. We went from one phone line to three phone lines. And, we just, matter of fact, we're just moving into our first ever transit building. So, we're very excited about how in three years we've made such a huge growth and really taken on multiple counties. We cover from the Wyoming line all the way to North Plat, it's about a 250 miles linear on I 80. But when you talk about square miles, because we cover each of those counties in detail, you're talking over 5,000 square miles that we cover.

Robin Phillips (11:56):

So, one of the things that comes up when I hear you say this, you know, when things explode, it's not because no one knew about it. How did people find out you were willing to do those trips?

Christy Warner (12:08):

Well, the very first thing we did was we decided to put wraps on the vehicles, you know, so instead of that just white bus that drives up and down the street, I said, you know, we're, we wanna put wraps on, that's marketing. What, that's what we do. You want people to drive down the road at, you know, on I 80, it's a 75 mile speed limit, and you wanna know that you just passed our bus. And so we had these bright red and blue wraps put on, and if people tease me a little bit because they thought it was, you know, pretty wild and crazy, and I said, well, you know, it's not something you put on your own car that you drive to work every day, but for marketing purposes, it gets people's attention. And that is an absolute true statement. Almost every week, even to this day, we get a phone call that says, I saw your vehicle, you know, at the hospital, or I saw your vehicle in the parking lot and calling for information. Of course, we did other things as far as Facebook and websites and, you know, sending out postcards, all of those good things too. But really it is our day-to-day having the vehicles out and about and, and knowing people can see them miles

Robin Phillips (13:20):

Away. Right. They have no question where those vehicles are from and where they're like, where do you call? Well, right there. Absolutely. What's the website right there, <laugh>. That's great. That is so fantastic. Well, I think one of the things that came up when we've talked about your system, and we were just super impressed when we were talking about how you were using the information system, this really simple information system, and that you had outgrown that. So, can you talk to me a little bit about how you've grown your system and the strong branding? I mean, you've talked a little bit about you got the buses out. Did you have any good partnerships that helped you?

Christy Warner (14:02):

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So, actually, one of the things I really figured out very quickly was we can't expand if we're on paper. So one driver, one vehicle excel spreadsheet, you know, that seems logical, but a lot of our small transits do the same thing. And one of the things I said is we have to get off paper. We have to get a tablet, you know, in the vehicle so that we can send information quickly. And I happened to be at a National RTAP convention here in Omaha a couple years back. And one of your presenters was presenting on the website, actually the Website Builder.

Narrator (14:43):

And our Website Builder enables rural and tribal transit organizations to build and manage a website through transit focused templates and simple design options. Website Builder will help people find your schedules on their phone.

Christy Warner (14:59):

But there were questions about, well, what could we do on, in addition? And so, afterwards we sat down and chatted and had this idea of having a, a way, a database basically that we could use to communicate to our drivers at, you know, very little cost. It's not the same as having software, but it was a way to take that first step in getting more digital and being able to communicate right away with our drivers, any changes, any additions. And, so we implemented that. We worked really hard to figure out how that would work best and get that set up. And that really helped. It's amazing when you move off of paper what limitations are removed when you don't realize it. And so we have, you know, a free database system that we were using.

Christy Warner (15:58):

It was free communication, a walkie-talkie system on the tablets so that we could really communicate well. And so, as those phones started ringing, we could really get our drivers out there and get going and make changes and allow to track, you know, adding multiple vehicles and adding more rides and keeping those consistent. And also getting the data to be able to go to the commissioners or go to other entities, which we do partner with, and show them the data that says, here's how many people we're bringing into your community to spend money and help your community out. Here's how many people we have to take out of your community because you don't have the resources that they need and, but we're helping your community because they're, we're keeping them in their homes and they don't have to move to a larger city to get those resources.

Christy Warner (16:51):

Okay. So, we were on paper just like Rule America taking, dispatching our rides, printing out Excel spreadsheets. Actually wasn't even Excel spreadsheets, it was handwritten. And I went to an r a convention in Omaha, and there was a presenter there about the website, and one of the other transit managers had asked a question about could they book trips on their website. And after a couple of people commented on that, we ended up with a group of us, about 10 of us, talking after the classes. And Devo came up with using Zoho, which is a free software for us basically as a database. And so we can enter rides, we can enter drivers' vehicles and track all of that. The great thing is actually we put the drivers on tablets, and so when my office staff schedules a ride, it automatically shows up on their tablet.

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Christy Warner (17:55):

And it's a really nice format for somebody who's just getting off paper and wanting to take that first step into digital without paying a ton of money for the larger actual transit software programs available. We just didn't have the financing at the time. And so, you know, you can see a list today of the different rides, what time they are, we've decided to color code them. I think one of the nice things about the program is it's so customizable to what you need. So, for people who maybe have different services that they provide, they're able to customize 'em. We took on another county and so we wanted to make sure we knew the difference between the rides we were taking in our own county versus a different county. So we've got 'em color coordinated, and it's a fairly simple process to book a ride. And so, what do you think, how do you think it works as far as booking rides?

Speaker (18:54):

I think it's pretty easy. I couldn't imagine having to write it out on paper and then hand it to the driver and, and go that way. It's super easy to, you know, when our riders call in to book a ride, you just go in and, and basically put in where they're going, you know, that it's easy to add additional stops. If they're doing Medicaid rides, you can, there's an option to do Medicaid rights and collect a signature. But once you put that right in, it goes straight to the driver's tablet and they see it, and we don't have to print anything out. I think it's super easy.

Christy Warner (19:37):

Is there any particular advantages that you like having this particular program? I know one of the things you talked about was even having a, it's on a mobile app as well.

Speaker (19:47):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. So it's really easy, like if we're not in the office, to get on my phone and change, you know, if there's a mistake or, you know, someone calls in and we're running somewhere and we're not sitting at our desks, and we're not able to change it there, we're able to get on our phone and change it on our phone, which is really nice.

Christy Warner (20:11):

Yeah, and there's lots of advantages right now it's set up, not only can we track the rides, but we want to track the purpose of the rides. So, we wanna know how many were medical rides versus how many were shopping services that we provide in the county. We wanna be able to break 'em up by county so that we can go to the different counties and explain to them how many people we bring into their county, or how many people we take out of their county for funding purposes. We also are able to

Christy Warner (20:42):

Take care of our drivers, making sure we have our, our drivers, their credentials are the maintenance on the vehicles. We can track the maintenance on the vehicles. We chose to add payroll to it so that it does our payroll as well. We provide incidental service with Meals on Wheels, and so we were able to add a separate piece for that because it's obviously separate from our regular transportation. And we do even

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have an accounting piece of the Zoho in which we can track the people's prepaid rides. A lot of people here are on a prepaid account, and so they put X amount of dollars on it and it'll subtract those rides as they go. And the biggest piece for us really is the communication with the drivers. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Yeah, letting them get that update and see what's going on. Or being able to figure out if a person got done with their ride at the hospital sooner than expected, we can move those rides around and let the driver see that. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so anything else that you can think of?

Christy Warner (22:05):

No, we're good.

Speaker (22:06):

Yeah, I think we're good.

Christy Warner (22:08):

So anyway, it's great, it's a little, it's a great system for somebody who is on paper and wanted to take that first step. And really, we would not have been able to get as big as we are today if we wouldn't have had this program because we would've been sort of limited by, by paper and by communication with the drivers. And this really allowed us to go from one vehicle to three vehicles to buy vehicles. And now that we're 10,

Speaker (22:40):

It's very customizable. I mean, you can tailor it to your needs and I mean, it can work in many different ways. So

Christy Warner (22:48):

Absolutely. And I would say now that we're up to about 10 vehicles, we're kind of outgrowing it. We probably outgrew about, you know, between seven and 10 vehicles, just because we want to be able to do some of the GPS tracking and take that next step in software. And, and so we are starting to outgrow it. But it's been a great system and like I said, I don't think we could have, we couldn't have ran 10 vehicles. Well,

Speaker (23:18):

I mean, I, I can't imagine, you know, like I said, being on paper instead of this, like, I came in on this and it was super easy to learn. I mean, I caught on really quick, so,

Christy Warner (23:29):

And the drivers and the drivers were able to pick it up and yep. So, we hope that this helps anybody out there to make, maybe make that first step off of paper and into the digital world. Do it

Speaker (23:43):

<laugh>.

Christy Warner (23:45):

All right, cool. And so, we've really worked with other counties. We started out with another county that was, was smaller than ours and was struggling a little bit. And so, we worked with them and both counties partnered together to see what they could do with that. We actually ended up getting some local organizational grants as well. And in our area, we're so small that it's really hard for one organization or one county to really provide large services like this. And so, when we can each get them to each put in just a little bit into it works better. And so, I actually work with five different counties. We have three different private organizations, as well as the state, you know, that puts in and works to collaborate and make this happen.

Robin Phillips (24:39):

So, what I'm hearing is that your system was really helped by digitizing your data, but it sounds like it was customer service that you were able to increase your service. But can you talk a little bit about the service but also the reporting? Because anyone who does public transit knows it doesn't stop when the ride does

Christy Warner (25:03):

<laugh>. Absolutely. So, you're right. You know, the customer service, we had great drivers that represent the service well and that's great. And we have the digitizing allowed us though to provide data, like I said, we, whether it was data to commissioners to show those dates or with to NDOT to say, you know, revenue miles and revenue hours, it lessens the amount, amount of time that you're sitting there hand calculating out what you've got for boardings and sponsored boardings and revenue miles, because you can pull reports that show that. And yes, you might have to go in and make a correction, but it's so much easier to make a correction than it is to recalculate, you know, hours of work that you did manually. And so our time was then changed from being able to have to do manual reports and, and sit there and get the calculator out to, because we can pull these reports, we can see how many wheelchair writers there were or how many, you know, if you wanted to know how many people were out of a particular county, it just was able to get so much information and you could adjust it to what you needed.

Christy Warner (26:12):

So, you know, what we might need in reporting might look a little bit different than what another transit would be able to, would need to for their reporting. And yet you could customize it. And I think that's what's been so helpful is to be able to customize some of those options. So not only do we get the, obviously the really important stuff, revenue miles, revenue hours, that kind of thing, but then we were really able to detail it down so that when we're going back to those organizations and asking for those partnerships, we could explain to them why it, we were a good partner and why their money would be spent well serving their people.

Robin Phillips (26:50):

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One of the other things you talked about, so when you were just mentioning, oh, and we've got tablets and it allowed us to communicate, and that it sounds like you were doing some real time, people called in and you could say, oh, we're able to pick you up, so that you were able to manage your manifests and your drivers a lot more precisely and that that provided you a better level of customer service.

Christy Warner (27:17):

Let's be honest, we can sit down tonight and we can have a perfect schedule for tomorrow and it looks great, but the way it works is somebody's doctor's appointment runs too long or they get done early and, and now you're having to juggle those things around and that's what any transit system. And so it was just really nice to be able to update the drivers, move things around and let them see that new, that change and let them, I mean, they look great to that writer because wow, we were able to move those things around and they show up and they didn't have to wait, you know, till their time because that was what's on paper. And so it was, it really did help. And we were able to take some of those phone calls and say, you know what? Yep, we can squeeze you in today. As if they said people were here and you were just like, when Jeff was here and had people, if we were explaining Zoho, what do you think you would tell them?

Ron (28:11):

Yeah, I thought you would. I didn't know what you would. I know.

Christy Warner (28:14):

So, if we had another transit agency here to look at our Zoho program, what do you think you'd tell 'em?

Ron (28:21):

I think the Zoho program would be, it's a lot better than paper. I'll tell you. It gives you all your routes two front two and from gives you times. I think Zoho was really good for a starting program. It gave you a lot of information. It did build you up to another, a more advanced program to start out. Zoho was really good. It could be changed, it could be worked on. It's a work in progress for Zoho.

Christy Warner (28:51):

Do you feel like we would be able to have 10 vehicles and 14 drivers if we wouldn't have had something like Zoho to start with?

Ron (28:59):

No. No. Cause it organized everything. It organized the drivers. If it was in town or out of town, everybody could see what was going on, see where their routes were. To have 14 drivers, no, I don't think we couldn't have done it without the Zoho for a startup program.

Christy Warner (29:20):

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And for a driver who's never had used the tablets, what do you think you would tell them about using a tablet and a program?

Ron (29:28):

Like, well, to use a tablet, you know, that's just, you know, I would say using the tablet was a hundred percent more than, you know, if you was on paper to get a tablet cause you're organized right there. Everything is right there at your fingertips.

Christy Warner (29:46):

Easy to use.

Ron (29:47):

It's easy to use. Zoho was easy to use. It was easy to explain. And, I don't think anybody that's, I don't wanna say computer illiterate, that they could, they could definitely learn off of it.

Christy Warner (30:02):

Okay. Perfect. Well, anything else you would say about Zoho if you had something to say.

Ron (30:10):

It's a good start program for people. It's a, like I said, I don't wanna say computer literate, but I'm gonna say it again. But it's a good start program to get 'em used to the iPad or, or Samsungs or any tablets, and then move on to your more advanced programs. But it was a good starter program to use.

Christy Warner (30:29):

And we were able to use it for our pre-trip inspections and stuff as well and keeping records of what there might have been with the vehicles.

Ron (30:38):

Absolutely. As you know, we could keep the notes, we could, you know, everybody could see the notes on what was wrong. We just couldn't hit okay or not applicable. We could actually put the notes in there. For the inspection you could make it the way you want it or the way the director or the manager wants it to be. They could line it up to start in the front and then the rear or start in front and inside. And, you know, it was, the programs were, the inspections were really easy. It was down, you know, it was good.

Christy Warner (31:12):

All right. Well thanks Ron. We appreciate your comments.

Ron (31:15):

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You're welcome. Thank you.

Christy Warner (31:18):

All right. Yay. So it's, it's been a great, great success actually. We're very pleased to have partnered with them to get that database done.

Robin Phillips (31:28):

Well, it sounds also like, you haven't, one of the issues in rural areas is access to data and being able to use tablets or use cell phones for communication. Can you talk a little bit about how that's worked with your tablets and your drivers and the communication?

Christy Warner (31:45):

Oh, absolutely. With any rural area, absolutely. We have areas that, you know, you lose service for a couple of miles, or you dip down into a valley. That's absolutely the case here. But the nice thing is, you're able to, as soon as it comes back into service, I mean, your tablet's getting updated right away. We can with our, with what we're using, we can track them. So, we know, you know, every few minutes we can take a look and say, okay, well they haven't responded. So, we know that they just probably went into that service area, that area that doesn't have service. And that's been great. And, you know, having that piece of security even to know that, you know, if, if something were to happen, we hope it never does, but that you could send help or different things as well. I mean, even that piece, when you stop and think about it, is an important piece of making sure your drivers feel like they're part of a bigger team. You know, it's fun. Sometimes they like to once in a while, you know, hear the other drivers and know that they're not the only one out there. It makes them really feel like they're a team.

Robin Phillips (32:57):

So we've been talking about sort of you walk into this job, but you start out with one vehicle, one driver, three years later, what is this, 10 vehicles and 14 drivers.

Christy Warner (33:12):

Yes.

Robin Phillips (33:14):

And then you talked about when you went from one to two vehicles, that's like, everyone kind of has a sense about how that might happen. But tell us how you got to 14 <laugh>.

Christy Warner (33:25):

Well,

Robin Phillips (33:26):

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14 drivers and 10 vehicles. That's for sure.

Christy Warner (33:29):

Okay. We had actually, so we went from one to three vehicles. So we just ordered two additional vehicles and got those in. And then we, I mean, the phones just kept ringing at the end of the day. That's what it is, the phones just keep ringing and keep ringing. And so, then we ordered two more. So, we were gonna go from three to five and all of a sudden - Chapel, we got a phone call from NDOT that said, "Hey, would you be willing to go down and help Chapel out?" And I said, sure, I'd love to go down and help them out. And when we got down there, they were just, they were, you know, they were having a hard time. It's a small community and it's just, like I said, when we're trying to do it by ourselves, it really is tough on the resources.

Christy Warner (34:15):

And so, Deuel County and Kimball County came together and said, let's partner. And so, when we partnered, we ended up taking over. They just merged with us and so we all became one. And so, that's where I ended up jumping from five to 10 vehicles, <laugh> and then getting to 14. But it was really a partnership. It was putting all those pieces together and getting, you know, counties we have and the city, and some of the local organizations to come together and sit at the table and figure out how to provide good service with the resources that we have.

Robin Phillips (34:56):

And so, most people say, oh, I need a new vehicle. But they've had to plan two years or four years even to get in line for that vehicle or find money for that vehicle. How did you guys get resources for the new vehicles?

Christy Warner (35:10):

So, thankfully the way that obviously our funding works is we can get a vehicle for, you know, about 10% of the cost. And so, when we went to our local organizations and said, you know, here's the way our funding works, and, you know, can we partner with you to provide, you know, we're providing this service to your community, to your local people. And, and so they were able to get board and were willing to absolutely help us out with that. We had obviously Dual County had some vehicles already, so some of them aren't new. They just are additions and we currently are waiting for a couple of other vehicles to come through, just like everyone else. It just takes time. I think that's a challenge actually that we've had is keeping up because as we expand so quickly, your resources are not always as fast to come through. And so that is probably one of the biggest challenges is how to keep up with the vehicles and because you, it does take time to get them, and the phones keep ringing whether you have vehicles or not.

Robin Phillips (36:20):

<laugh>, So Yeah. Yeah. And, and it's hard to say no and you really don't want to, and you have to track those and it's just not a good thing. But it is in some ways that you're being asked to do more than you're

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doing now because that sort of helps direct your future. So, when you talk about being able to get the vehicles for the 90/10 match, that's because you're working with the state of Nebraska?

Christy Warner (36:49):

Yes.

Robin Phillips (36:50):

Yeah.

Christy Warner (36:51):

Yeah, absolutely.

Robin Phillips (36:52):

That's great. Kari is wonderful and we've had a chance, she was on our board and, so we had a chance obviously when we had our conference in Omaha to spend quite a bit of time with her and spend some time in Nebraska. So, that is cool. And where have you found drivers to drive all these buses?

Christy Warner (37:12):

Right, so drivers are always a challenge with anyone, I'm sure. We really did work to explain not only to commissioners, but all of the partners that, how important the drivers really are in public transit. I think sometimes there are unsung heroes for sure, but I understand that they represent us, you know, and I tell my commissioners and, and the partners, I can sit here and I can do the best work in the office all day long, but it's truly those drivers that interact with our writers and interact with other businesses that do cause us to really get a good name or, or a bad one. And thankfully we've got a good one. But, so we really work hard to make sure they feel like a team. We've been able to pay competitive wages and with the understanding that, you know, they really are our representatives out there on the street and, you know, I can make a, you know, if our dispatcher makes a mistake, dispatching, as we all know, it isn't the dispatcher who has to listen to the rider. It's the driver. And so, we work really hard as a team to understand those differences. You know, office staff understand what the drivers are going through, drivers understand that when there's real phone lines ringing and not enough people to answer them, it, you know, either way it's, it's a team effort. We look really hard when we interview. I really look for, you know, that personality and willingness to serve because it is a service at the end of the day. It's really how they interact with our riders.

Robin Phillips (38:53):

Yeah, it's a very people to people thing. And, sometimes we get caught up in the, I have to go here to here A to B, but a lot of times that journey is really a big part of the trip, the purpose. I mean, especially, I did a trip one time in the gorge. I was running, I was taking a bike to meet a friend and go for a bike ride. And when I was coming back, there were I think five, six older women in the vehicle and they were on their way to Portland and they were going to the art museum and going shopping and having coffee, and they just spent the whole trip

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Christy Warner (39:32):

<laugh>

Robin Phillips (39:34):

And, they were all in a book club. And I thought, you know what, what if one of them had had to drive? Yeah. And, that the enjoyment and the safety just wouldn't have been there. And it, I just said, this is what community transportation is about, is giving people a chance to do the things that they love and share that as you age, or at whatever your ability is. So that is super. When we were getting ready for this phone call, we talked a little bit to your daughter,

Christy Warner (40:05):

<laugh>. Yes.

Robin Phillips (40:06):

And she sounds like she has been a very good hire.

Christy Warner (40:12):

She has. Well, it's an interesting story because she didn't think she would ever be in a little tiny town, you know, with the military. She was raised in, mostly in Tacoma, in the Tacoma, Seattle area. And so, she loves, you know, being close to the ocean and she loves lots of people and the diversity and just the conveniences that come with a big city. And she, but she was actually, the story is we were both, in a car wreck together and just a couple years back. And so, she's had some physical challenges and anytime that you're faced with those types of challenges, you reevaluate what's important. And so, I was really desperate at the time to get help. When we first kind of started it was, it was a harder challenge because we weren't well-known.

Christy Warner (41:09):

We weren't a well-known employer. People didn't know what to expect to work for us and that type of thing. And I had put out ads and put out ads, and we had gone through some drivers for sure at the, at that time in the beginning, looking for those right drivers. And, and so I went to my commissioners and I said, you know, I've, here's all these, here's the people I've have applications on, and, and here's an option to, to bring her on understanding that she's family and that we would be very careful with all that good stuff. But you know what the thing is, she's absolutely committed because she understands the need for people to get where they need to go. And a lot of times in a community, they think of disabilities as you have to be able to see the disability.

Christy Warner (42:00):

And I think for her, especially being through the things that she has, she understands that you can have disabilities and not see them and understands that. And I, so it makes it a passionate piece as well. And so, she's been a great help and I don't, I know I won't be able to keep her forever, but she's definitely

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helped us through the hump for sure. And has been a great asset along with all of my other staff and drivers, but it's been nice to have her at least for a little while. So, people have asked us what it's like to work with family <laugh>. I can tell you that it's definitely a unique opportunity for us. In particular,

Speaker (42:50):

We

Christy Warner (42:51):

We're a military family, so we moved around a lot

Speaker (42:53):

And

Christy Warner (42:54):

Always had to kind of rely on family when we got to a new place and with the transit, I started off with one driver, one bus and one office person. And when we got two additional vehicles and drivers were kind of hard to come by. And so, after trying to take applications for months to try to get drivers, I went to my commissioners and I said, asked him if it would be okay for my daughter who was working the sheriff's office as a 911 dispatcher to come help us drive. And so here we are. And, it was a little bit of a change. What do you think?

Speaker (43:36):

A little bit, you definitely see your family more than you thought you would. But for me, I am used to driving a lot of people around, you know, friends and different things. And so, when I got offered to start as a driver, I just seemed natural. I was like, oh, I know how to do this. Like, I'm pretty good at it, I feel like. Yeah.

Christy Warner (44:03):

And we got so busy.

Speaker 7 (44:04):

Yeah. Yeah. We just got

Christy Warner (44:05):

Busy and pretty soon we were busy enough that we had, we went from one phone line to three phone lines ringing off the hook and I needed that person in the office that I knew would be there anytime no matter what. And so,

Speaker 7 (44:23):

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Definitely the fill in person for like, you know, oh, I need you here. Nope, I need you here. Nope, you need to go do this. And I'm like, all right, go <laugh>. Like, you know, just going with the flow with it.

Christy Warner (44:35):

Yeah, it's been a fun opportunity. I think for the most part we get along pretty good. We're pretty good with boundaries as far as knowing the difference between at work and at home. We probably don't see each other as much after hours as we used to because we need that space. Right. But it's been good. I think the other thing is too, we were in a car accident back in 2013 to gather the two of us and we took a hundred foot nose dive off of a bridge on an icy road, and that ended up with us in the hospital. My injuries were not quite as bad as hers, but we know what it's like, we know what it's like to, to use walkers to try to get around to try to figure out how do I get my dinner from the microwave to the table And it was just a baby food jar. So all of those challenges that you realize happen with, and then you take that and you realize that there's people all over town or all over the nation that have those same challenges. Matter of fact, we had to get rid of her favorite car cause she couldn't lift your legs. And so not to be able to lift your legs or get into a vehicle easily was,

Speaker (45:52):

Or even just having a grip. I can still remember the first time after recovering enough that I can still remember holding a can of soda for the first time and it didn't fall out of my hand cause that's how weak my grip used to be after my accident. I know, you know what it's like just getting around in a wheelchair and the difficulties of that and just in making that step from being in a wheelchair to being in a walker and being able to stand up for the first time. You know, you go 18 years of just, you know, walking and talking and then all of a sudden you're not barely doing any either one, and so for a few of our writers who have gone through similar experiences, where I was, I've been able to really relate to them and they're we're taking 'em to physical therapy or taking them to doctor's appointments and,

Christy Warner (46:54):

Keeping them their independence.

Speaker (46:55):

Just, yeah. And just we know, like knowing like I, I really can relate with them and I, you know, it feels good to be able to encourage them on their journey of, you know, recovering because we do a lot of our transit is helping people who are in this place where they're just not able to get themselves around or they don't have somebody to help them. And so, we're able to fill that gap for them, while they're in that process of healing again. And it really feels good to be there for that.

Christy Warner (47:29):

Yeah. And we live in a rural area and so it, you have to drive to get to say, a bigger shopping area. We don't have McDonald's or Walmart or any of those things here. And so, we do have a grocery store. But if you want clothes, for example, you have to travel. Yeah. And that means a lot of home-bound people that just want basic items and giving them their independence, I think is important for us. And understanding how much that independence means to quality of life, I think that's a big piece as well. So,

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it's been a great journey and we have no idea how far we'll go, but we're gonna do the best we can along the way. So, thanks again for joining us and we hope that everybody out there does a great job as well. So, thank you. Thank you. I know <laugh>

Robin Phillips (48:34):

I know and it's, it, she just sounded like she was really engaging with this and really saw she's echoed a lot of the things that you're saying.

Narrator (48:44):

Thank you for joining us for part one of our conversation with Christy Warner, administrator of Kimball County Transit Service. I hope you enjoy meeting her in learning more about her small-town can-do approach in the Nebraska meeting paperless record keeping and technology data tools for commuting with drivers. Not only helped her track her vehicles but allowed her to make her system reliable and consistently building local trust in her surrounding communities. Be sure to check out National RTAP Transit Manager's Toolkit for a wealth of information and resources to help you to learn more about specific materials mentioned during this podcast. Visit the RTAP website. Christy has more stories to tell, so make sure you check out part two of this episode or a discussion about COVID-19 for new transit facility and the future Kimball County Transit. If you are enjoying our RTAPgo cross country adventures, follow us on social media and subscribe to our newsletter.