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VOLUNTARY ACTION CENTER PROVIDES KENDALL AREA TRANSIT’S 100,000th TRIP

In 2010 after almost a decade of planning, Kendall County partnered with the Voluntary Action Center (VAC) to operate the new community transportation service, Kendall Area Transit (KAT). Less than five years later, VAC has provided the 100,000th KAT trip!

KAT officially began service as the first ever county-wide community and public transit program in March 2010 after community leaders identified that accessible community and public transportation for seniors and persons with disabilities was a serious unmet need.

In 2010 – KAT’s first year of operation – 4,755 rides were provided, averaging 24 trips per day. Within a year service had more than doubled and continued to increase substantially as word spread about the new service. Today, VAC provides 150 KAT trips a day and is projected to provide over 38,000 trips in 2014.

Jeff Wilkins, Kendall County Administrator, who had been working on the KAT project since his arrival in 2002, said the growth has been significant, and Kendall County residents have been well served. “It took 845 days for the KAT program to reach its first 50,000 trips. It only took 317 for KAT to reach another 50,000 trips for 100,000. So, you can see the way the community has taken to the program is remarkable.”

Today KAT is a model for coordinated community transportation with many factors contributing to its success. Community transportation is a flexible and accessible kind of public transportation that emphasizes services to the transit dependent (senior citizens, persons with disabilities, children, working persons without access to an automobile, and persons unable to be licensed to operate a vehicle).

“What many people may not realize,” said Paul LaLonde, Assistant Director at VAC, who has oversaw KAT program operations since the beginning, “is that KAT is truly a community project. Kendall County takes the lead since they’re the body that’s eligible to receive the federal and state transportation grants. The VAC has the staff expertise as a nonprofit community transportation operator. However, KAT couldn’t happen at its current level of success without the participation and support of Yorkville, Oswego, Plano, Millbrook, Newark, Plattville, Lisbon, Joliet, Plainfield, our social service partners, businesses, individuals, and riders.”

VAC has also been successful in increasing and diversifying its revenues for its day-to-day operations of the KAT program. In addition to the County receiving Downstate Operating Funds from the State of Illinois, VAC has helped secure operating funding from the Regional Transportation Authority.

LaLonde stated the matching funds provided by community partners are crucial in helping VAC access critical matching funds required by the transportation grants.

“Matching funds are the lifeline to KAT. Without them, we couldn’t access the grants, which provide the most funding of the system.”
According to Tom Zucker, Executive Director of VAC, other factors have contributed to the tremendous growth of the KAT program. “Certainly VAC staff’s expertise in community transportation administration and operation has broadened our accomplishments.” However, he feels the greatest factor has been the willingness to provide innovative services, the determination to meet the growing need for services, and the extensive public/private that made the service possible.

“VAC was able to provide this milestone of 100,000 KAT rides because of the dedication of its staff, drivers, the Board of Directors, and because of its private-public partnerships, the generosity of the Kendall County community, and the vision of community leaders recognizing KAT was a needed program.”

The KAT program began by offering dial-a-ride services, which provides a flexible affordable alternative for many individuals seeking medical trips, employment or educational opportunities, necessary shopping trips, and much more. In January 2013, KAT expanded by adding park and ride service through a private-public partnership with VAC, the County, and the Village of Oswego.

While the face of KAT has certainly changed over the past several years, its mission continues to be to meet the essential mobility needs of the community. According to Zucker, “In many cases, KAT is literally a lifeline to our riders. It enables our riders to achieve personal independence and economic well-being. We are proud to provide the services we do.”

In early spring of 2015, the Voluntary Action Center will be hosting a celebration in recognition of Kendall Area Transit’s 5th Year Anniversary. As Kendall County’s first county-wide community and public transportation program, it’s an important milestone to recognize, and one LaLonde didn’t see coming so fast. “Five years went by very quickly! It certainly doesn’t seem like years – more like months!” Please be on the lookout for details early next year!

As the KAT program continues fulfilling the transit needs of residents, Kendall County and VAC look forward to meeting the challenges posed by rapidly expanding ridership. As KAT continues to grow and expand, the residents of Kendall County remain the chief benefactor of these services.

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