

Marcela Moreno:

Welcome to the seventh episode of the second season of Next Stop: Transit Tech with Marcela Moreno here and Andrew Carpenter.

Andrew Carpenter:

Hello.

Marcela Moreno:

Today we're interviewing Kelzye Bedwell, the director of financial stability at Horizons, which is a nonprofit in Cedar Rapids, Iowa that operates the Neighborhood Transportation Service or NTS. So if I use an acronym, that's why. NTS provides curbside to curbside van service for Cedar Rapids residents when fixed route service is unavailable. And prior to 2021 they used paper-based scheduling for their operations, but recently transitioned to a micro transit platform Via, and we're really excited to dive in on their service. So hello, and thank you for joining us today, Kelzye. Please introduce yourself and tell us about your journey into the transportation industry.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Thanks so much, Marcela. It is great to be here. I'm super excited to share about NTS in the overall transit plan in Iowa. I have really unique introduction to the transit industry. I am very, very new. I did not first work in transportation or transit at all until end of 2019. So much of my teeth cutting has been done in the pandemic which has been-

Andrew Carpenter:

Trial by fire.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yes, very, very much trial by fire for sure. So I started my career actually completely out of the nonprofits here in general, in retail operations and logistics. I got really kind of burnt out and really found myself enjoying my volunteer work much more than I did my actual job. So I was fortunate to find a position with Horizons. In the beginning, my focus of my position was financial stability programs related to financial capability, housing stability. And then it just made sense for a programmatic standpoint to take those services to the community along with the transportation and blend those together. So we made that decision in 2019 and that's when I first stepped foot into transportation. And since then I have experienced the entirety of the pandemic and just really learned a lot in a very short amount of time.

Andrew Carpenter:

And NTS also has an interesting origin story. So it's just a whole program of great origin stories, but could you dive into that as well?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Absolutely. NTS's origin is really unique and it's one of my favorite things about the program. Our entire existence has been to fill a community gap, a gap in service and ensure that transportation is not a barrier. That's our mission statement. And so in the 1990s, Cedar Rapids started to experience what's really common and kind of some urban sprawl. We had a lot of large manufacturing companies that

operate in Cedar Rapids, move location, spread out, brought in more manufacturing in different warehouses. And as these were being built, it was further and further and further from the city center. And after this happened, the individuals who heavily walked to or commuted or carpoled to work from a core neighborhood, all of a sudden found themselves without transportation to and from work. More importantly, that transportation not only didn't reach the outskirts of the city where these warehouses and opportunities were now located, but many of them work second and third shift because those shift differentials are the difference between paying the bills and not for some of the clients we serve.

Kelzye Bedwell:

So there was a publicized town hall in the 1990s, and it highlighted this gap in service and these individuals who needed access to their work, their livelihood, their jobs. And so a partnership started between United Way, the Harambee House, which is another local nonprofit and a few other key community partners. The first year, there was one full-time employee in one van and they did about 500 rides to and from work. It was a very impressive operation from one person. And really just this awesome starting point of something that is now much, much larger.

Marcela Moreno:

Kelzye, could you paint us a picture of NTS?

Marcela Moreno:

What is your fleet size? How big is your staff? What kinds of rides do you provide and what is the number of rides provided daily or yearly if you want to give that number?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. So we started, like I said, with that little one and then a very engaged board of directors. Now we have three administrative staff, not including myself, that just oversee operations into an occasional driving out. We have 15 dedicated drivers mixed of full and part-time. We do anywhere between 600 to 1,000 rides per week. We vary pretty heavy based on seasons because warehouse and manufacturing production varies. In a normal pre COVID year, we did about 40,000 rides. This year, we are on trend to do 42,000 with our current ridership numbers. So we've increased, which is incredible. And we have a 12 vehicle mixed fleet. So we have CDL required wheelchair lifts all the way down to three minivans, just like a minivan that you would drive. And so that mixed fleet allows us to really take advantage of shared ride and the mix and match of riders and kind of meet those demands in different spaces and at different volumes.

Marcela Moreno:

With your joining of the transit industry, when it happened, I feel like you have such a different perspective, especially on ridership and the people that you're serving just from the time you started. And also the people that NTS has aimed to serve like second and third or shift workers, because so many fixed route services are primarily focused on commuter service. It's like, how can we make sure that transportation is not a barrier for all of these people who don't work? I guess what some people would call a traditional work schedule.

Andrew Carpenter:

And the non-traditional work schedules is the traditional one in Cedar Rapids.

Kelzye Bedwell:

In many cases, yes. And more and more so just across the industries, we see a huge shift that traditional 9:00 to 5:00 isn't really the case for everyone anymore, especially more so with COVID and flexible work schedules.

Marcela Moreno:

For sure.

Andrew Carpenter:

I would say it's an element of them being essential workers because... My great grandparents, Marcel has heard this like 20 times now, but my great grandparents worked in the Quaker Oats Factory in Cedar Rapids. And so if the oats aren't packaged, then we don't eat.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Exactly. Yeah. I think it's incredible that your grandparents worked right here in Cedar Rapids at Quaker Oats. We still do. We do probably 40 rides a week to Quaker Oats and then quite a few more out to general mills. So we're really making sure that people are getting there to feed the country and in parts, the world with the products they produce.

Marcela Moreno:

That's awesome because all of food production work at warehouses, getting everyone's Amazon packages to them only increased during the pandemic, that at home stress shopping.

Kelzye Bedwell:

I'm guilty of that as well.

Andrew Carpenter:

Had to keep somehow.

Marcela Moreno:

Yeah.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yes. Yeah. It was really interesting because we already knew prior to COVID that the work we did and the individuals working that we served were so essential that was reiterated during COVID. And more importantly, when many individuals saw just an absolute decrease and kind of bottom dropout of the ridership they had, we definitely saw a decrease in the beginning of 2020. But in the 2021 and into 2022, we've seen a pretty significant growth and increase in ridership, which has been really interesting but I think goes to show that this model is kind of supporting the future and supporting the growth and the way the work force is moving.

Andrew Carpenter:

Agreed. And so with all the growth, you all traditionally scheduled your trips manually. And so you've since changed over to the micro transit model. So could you tell us more about that process?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Absolutely. I have never been someone to go into the shallow end and kind of work my way to the deep end. I tend to just dive right in with anything I do. And that was the same with transportation. When the CEO of Horizons, Mike, who had led NTS for 20 plus years came to me and asked me to run transit, the first thing I said is, okay, I'll do it. I need you to support me and help me learn and also we are getting an app. I knew from the beginning that I really needed that app and that platform, because I didn't have the knowledge of transport to make something softer work. And I also just saw how many barriers we were creating the clients with that model even before the pandemic, as far as the requirements to book a ride, to schedule a ride, to access that ride, it just was pretty clunky.

Andrew Carpenter:

And then I'm imagining with some other work that we've done has involved third shift workers and folks who end up doing overtime. And so if people had to schedule ahead of time and then their shift went over, did that affect their ability to then have a trip in the pre-app days?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Absolutely. In the pre-app days, individuals had to book 24 hours in advance and our office is only open Monday through Friday. So if they needed a ride Sunday night, they really had to book 48 hours in advance. And then if they were presented the opportunity to do overtime, they then had to make a decision, do I have a ride secured or do I make more money? And that was a dichotomy they were faced with. And one that just didn't settle well with me, didn't fit with the mission we wanted. But when it first started, that was kind of the only option. And so being able to allow that flexibility was huge because individuals can make changes right away and it's not a decision of, do I earn extra income or do I have a ride? They can now do both.

Andrew Carpenter:

So what does the new process look like to get a ride and how do people get around using your service?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Absolutely. To give some context, I'll cover a couple more details actually of the old way. So one of the things that used to happen is individuals would have to pay using a check or a money order, and they would be able to pay with card or cash only if they came into our office. So our office is centrally located. It's kind of near downtown Cedar Rapids, but again, we're open a traditional schedule Monday through Friday. These people are working second and third shift and they don't have access to reliable transportation on their own, which is why they're using NTS. So one of the things we were doing is requiring them to come in to purchase their tickets or sign up. So before they could access transportation, they had to find their own transportation to get into access that. So it was just really a big barrier and something that prevented people from accessing the service efficiently.

Kelzye Bedwell:

And so now individual roles can use a free app that's on the Google or Apple app store. They can use a web portal, or if they don't have access to the web at all, they can still call in, book rides that way. And what it does is it allows individuals to use their creditor debit card if they choose. If they're unbanked, it still allows them to use a ticket based system, but it's easier to access and purchase those tickets.

Kelzye Bedwell:

And they're able to utilize in the app or the web portal or calling, just put in the rides they need, choose where they're going, what time they're going and then just be able to keep track of that. It also, in the past, we gave them an hour window and we said, "Hey, your ride's supposed to be at 6:00 AM, be ready at 5:00 AM and be watching out the window." So we're taking away people's sleep. And now with the app, they get a text message and they know, "Hey, your bus is five minutes away, get outside." So that just works out really well and house people a lot of flexibility and autonomy, and kind of gives them that time back in their day, which is invaluable.

Andrew Carpenter:

Especially with shift work, that is tiring.

Marcela Moreno:

So I have a question about when you were saying you first and the director was like, "Hey, Kelzye, I need you to take transit," and you had that idea to go to an app to remove this barrier, to create more flexibility for folks, how did you determine what requirements you needed for an app? Like you had the idea that this is something that would make this process a lot easier, and I guess, how did you shop around for the different vendors?

Kelzye Bedwell:

There are. I took very much sort of... I started with where we were at and the biggest issues I saw. And I kind of backed into that to kind of come up with a list of here are the non-negotiables I have that I need for a new provider. So one was an integrated payment system that was super important to me to allow individuals to cover and pay for their rides without having to purchase tickets or spend money on money orders, purchase checks, if they didn't have them, just didn't want to create that barrier. So integrated payment system was huge. The mobile app was some really important to me because I utilize some ride share services when I travel or even locally. And I know the convenience and opportunity I'm afforded by using an app for those and our riders deserved that same opportunity. Also, I understand the limitations, 80% of the people we serve are below 80% AMLI, so not everyone has access to a smartphone or a computer.

Kelzye Bedwell:

And so I really also had this requirement that it would have web based, app based, and phone based because we really needed to make sure that this was accessible in whatever way an individual needed to book. Those were my non-negotiables. And so after I determined those, I did a lot of research. I called different agencies that used micro transit platforms. I did a lot of just Googling and diving in and reaching out directly to the sales individuals with these different platforms. And really the one I found that fit these needs as well as provided some key pieces that I didn't even realize would be so important, which was a dynamic reporting platform, the ability do prescheduled, or drivers being able to like pick up shifts, just a lot of flexibility and opportunity. And so those are the things I looked for and what I found in the Via platform.

Andrew Carpenter:

I have a quick question, are people now able to call outside of traditional office hours?

Kelzye Bedwell:

They can't call outside of traditional office hours, but they can leave messages outside of traditional office hours and we're able to adjust those and they can text. And the drivers can get the text messages or they can call through the app, but not every phone works with that. So kind of yes and no, is a very like money answer to that.

Andrew Carpenter:

Got you. Good to know.

Andrew Carpenter:

When someone requests a trip, does the dispatcher assign them to a vehicle based on their needs or does the whole platform do it in the background?

Kelzye Bedwell:

The whole platform does it in the background. So the platform will bulk together if people are all leaving general mills, because the shift out there ends at 10:00 PM. Many times it might put all seven people leaving or 10 people leaving on a same vehicle. But sometimes we serve all of Marion, Cedar Rapids and Iowa. So in the past we said, okay, all 10 general mill riders go on one vehicle because naturally that seems like the best idea. But what we actually found with the system is it's a lot more efficient to split those into two groups.

Kelzye Bedwell:

So people who go to the side of town closest to Marion and to Marion, and the people who go to the side of town closest to Iowa then the other parts of Cedar Rapids, we split them up and that keeps their ride times down and kind of increases that efficiency. But that was a pretty big change, but something that we would've never done this system does do though. So the dispatch is relatively minimal for what we have to do aside from a couple of bulking and moving some things around just based on specific needs. And that's the same with wheelchair accessible vehicles, getting a wheelchair accessible vehicle as simple as clicking a wheelchair accessible, that WAV button, and then it places them on the appropriate vehicle.

Andrew Carpenter:

Were there any unintended benefits you actually alluded to that as some items that you didn't even know would end up being super important? So were there any other unintended benefits and also some drawbacks that you didn't see coming?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Absolutely. One of the biggest drawbacks has actually been the rapid increase demand for the service at the same time that the supply of drivers has decreased. And so that has been kind of a trend across the entire transportation industry. It's been particularly interesting with us because we are increasing our ridership numbers just month over month. And so trying to keep up with that has been definitely a bit of a drawback, a good one. I prefer to be on this side of it than the other, but something that I would've never predicted having a difficult time bringing in drivers when we first saw the increase in supply. And then for the unintended benefits, one thing that I wasn't really aware of or prepared for was how impactful the communication platform of the app would be. So in Iowa, we have winter weather sometimes.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Unfortunately we have a lot of winter weather, like four months out of the year. And we're usually pretty good about operating the winter because we are winter people. We know how to drive in the winter and bundle up and all of those fun things that come with cold weather. But occasionally-

Kelzye Bedwell:

~~Yes.~~ Occasionally we can't be safely out there if the visibility is too low, if the snow is coming down too high, if there's blizzard conditions, we have to cancel service. In the past, there was always a large concern. And inevitably it happened that someone was nearly stranded at work or had no idea that their ride was going to be canceled. And we were manually calling hundreds of riders whenever a weather event would happen. And the app has allowed us to push a button and send out a push notification to everyone and say, "Hey, service is canceled because of the storm."

Kelzye Bedwell:

And so we had to do that twice this year, and it was incredible because it took this panic crisis scenario of making sure and wanting to ensure all of our riders were safe and not stranded and just made it very communicative and easy. And then we were able to put in contact info so if anyone was stuck, they could call us and we were able to work around and get them safe. So that's been a huge benefit. Along with that, we got a fair amount of data from our old rider platform. So we would input it and then kind of manually manipulate it. But the dynamic reporting platform of having a key performance indicators forward, being able to pull up data right away has been incredible because I feel like I'm so much more successful in leading the program by being able to proactively react to things, to improve or increase the driver experience and the rider experience as well. So that's been a really, really helpful tool and I could not have told you that I would be in that platform every single day when I first got it, but I am.

Marcela Moreno:

Those are all really good unintended benefits, especially around the driver shortage and just like inclement weather in general. It always is a bummer to cut service or to have to end early but the next best thing is good communication just so that people can plan. And also on planning, I think that's one of the coolest things about all of the technologies that are coming out is they tend to make data accessible. And a lot of it like almost too much of it, but if you can process it, then it helps you justify decisions and see patterns that can be partnered with driver experience. hey, I'm noticing that we have a lot of riders coming from this particular place, but you're getting that information from, let's say 10 different drivers at different times, so it's harder to piece it together.

Marcela Moreno:

But once you have something that's putting all of the riders that are request pickups or drop offs, like let's say at the Quaker Oats Factory, then you know that it's a hotspot and that you need to plan on maybe investing in infrastructure, if that's something that your agency does. And even understanding like, okay, we have a lot of users that have wheelchairs, so we need to make sure that people are able to access that. So that's really cool. ~~And~~ it actually segues into a question that I wanted to ask you about data ownership. It's something that often comes up when working with software vendors. So what kind of data do you have access to and how do you use that in your planning efforts?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Your point that sometimes too much data is almost true. There is so much that I can look at and make decisions on that. When I first started, I was just amazed and a little overwhelmed feeling, but since operating in the service for a while, I've kind of learned to hone in and pick out the specific data pieces that are really important. Realistically, I have not asked for, or requested a single piece of data that I wasn't able to get from the software team at all up to this point, which I feel really fortunate to be in that connection and contact with the vendor. Yes, very exciting. As far as how I use it and what all I access, some of the key pieces I focus on are because we're in the app store, we get star ratings. So I'm able to get immediate feedback on what individuals are feeling about their rides and I can drill down in that by hour.

Kelzye Bedwell:

So I can see if the rides are particularly lower rated between two and threes, is my coverage not there? Are the vehicles I have out there not at the right standard? Really driving into that. And that allows me to not just wait for a quarterly transportation survey, but just get that live feedback from riders right there. And I think alternatively, that gives the riders a feeling of satisfaction because they can give feedback immediately, which is super great. Another really big piece of data that I use and find really important is our average ride duration. One of the things that I think is so important as the director of a transportation agency and just a person is that I am so aware of how much more time someone who's using public transit specifically in our area, how much more time they're committing to their commute every single day. On average, they did a study a few years ago in Cedar Rapids and a mom who had to drop a child off at daycare and then get work would have to go through about three to four bus transfers just to make that happen.

Kelzye Bedwell:

And so they're expending three plus hours of their day just on transit. And so it's really important to me that people have a reasonable amount of time on transit and kind of get to protect that time. So they can read a book to their kids, have a meal at home, just really get that day and that autonomy. So I keep a really, really close eye on average ride duration. And right now we're sitting in like 17.5 minutes of average duration. So it feels really good to be able to know that we're making an impact, but also quantify that and say, here is the amount of time people are spending on a bus and how much of their day we're coming back to them. So those are two really key pieces. I, from my operations background, absolutely adore data. I could probably talk to you for two hours plus about all the data points I love and use, but those are two really important ones.

Marcela Moreno:

That's awesome and an excellent point on duration. Earlier when we were talking about like second and third shift workers, there's the pattern of women with children taking smaller trips because they're stopping at a daycare, they're picking up groceries and having that flexibility is so important I guess for transportation equity, to make sure that people without a car can still have the same quality of life using public transportation.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yes. I agree whole heartedly.

Andrew Carpenter:



And so similar to that, and the whole perspective of equity is you've managed to keep fares pretty low for your passengers, but how have you managed to do that while acquiring what's probably not the cheapest way of going about providing the rides at least on the software side?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Absolutely. We were really fortunate to access some funding that came from the CARES Act at the State level. We are specifically kind of tailored to that work transportation. So that puts us in a unique opportunity because we can access workforce development funds in certain aspects. So we actually received the entire startup cost of purchasing and developing the stock, the app specific to us from the Iowa Workforce Development and the Iowa Economic Development Authority. So those funds together through CARES Act infusions and just support for the history and the impact we've had on the economic development and workforce in the community is what allowed us to even start providing the service on a platform and advancing it. And by covering that cost, we were able to keep our operational cost relatively low and about the same as they were beforehand. So that allows us to keep those fares really affordable for our riders.

Marcela Moreno:

I'm excited to see that other organizations with missions that aren't explicitly transportation, they're able to connect the dots that transportation is a workforce development issue. Like transportation is a housing issue. And I think that goes kind of with the very nature of Horizons, is that all of these things that people face as challenges to quality of life are interconnected.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yes. Absolutely. We see those are largely interconnected and how my position even became a position. But yes, it's been really great to have that support. And one of the ways we were able to make that case to the Economic Development and Workforce Development, is we started asking in our surveys the income of individuals, when they first started riding NTS and then still keeping it anonymous with that same group, what was their income after a year and two years. And overall throughout time, we have consistently seen between 75 and 85% of our riders show an increase in income after utilizing NTS just surely having affordable, accessible, reliable transportation is increasing the amount of money that individuals are bringing home. And that more than anything sells that economic development and workforce development are directly tied to transportation.

Andrew Carpenter:

How did you roll out the new booking service to your passengers and how did they feel about it?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. That is a fantastic question. About three months out from starting with the passengers, we kind of rolled it out to staff, let everyone know about it, start getting them comfortable with the idea. And then starting at 60 days before launch, we kind of started having conversations one on one with the riders, really just kind of introducing this idea, did a press release on the infusion and the gift and award from the economic development. And then 30 days before, we did a lot of just hands on. We had individuals that we talked to everyday. So everyone we were talking to was like, okay, on this date, there's an app it's available in the app store already go download it, give it a try. We put QR codes on all of our buses. Everyone who walked into our building and even said the word NTS.

Kelzye Bedwell:

We were like, here's the QR code, download the app, give it a try. Just really kind of encouraging that comfort from the beginning. And then after we started the service, we did a one week overlap of the old way of scheduling and a new app. And that really allowed people to not fall through the cracks in that transition. And after that, it was really just kind of fortunate that they transitioned. So since they were calling or coming into book in the past, we were able to make sure they were booked, but then, okay, let's while on the phone, download the app, let's walk through what that looks like. And so there was a lot of hands on support with that, but we've been really fortunate about 75% of our ridership is using the web or the mobile app. So they all jumped on and transitioned to it very quickly. And many of our riders have shared that they really enjoy it. And it has made the workload of the increased demand much more manageable for our client services department.

Andrew Carpenter:

I bet. I was thinking, I don't know how this came up yesterday, but how there is the rodeo for bus drivers, there should also be a rodeo for dispatchers.

Marcela Moreno:

Oh, my gosh. Yes.

Kelzye Bedwell:

I agree. Our dispatcher is incredible.

Andrew Carpenter:

That would be a good. It would be a great show. Did anyone express skepticism about the app before you rolled it out?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Absolutely. Riders drivers, other staff, myself at points. It was a huge change. It was a huge change from a system that we had had for a decade. We had done things the exact same way and a lot of the commentary from drivers and even some riders was, it's not broken, don't fix it. And while it wasn't inherently broken, it still functioned. Once we were able to kind of reframe the conversation and put the focus on the improvements and the opportunities, that's where we really saw the shift and the buy-in.

Kelzye Bedwell:

And from the driver manager administration part, being able to proactively look into the system, fix things and not spending an entire admin shift manually moving routes around and printing off hundreds of pages of routes every single day, that was just really the cherry on top for the driver managing staff. And then riders, some express skepticism. Many of them felt more comfortable knowing that the phone booking was kind of there as a backup. So I think that helped us overcome that with many of them. But there was definitely skepticism as there is with any change. It was a bit of a rough transition at first, just to take something that had happened one way for 10 years and change it in a 90 day window.

Marcela Moreno:

Once you see what the streamlining of the system is, and you have your client services and your dispatchers realizing that they don't have to print off so much and they're like, okay, wow. And I think

it's great to have that overlap just because as we're seeing here in Washington, we're switching over fair cards, or I guess they've already switched, but they are discontinuing fair cards from before 2012. And I think they've done outreach since the summer.

Andrew Carpenter:

A very long time.

Marcela Moreno:

Yeah, a very long time. And the older cards are no longer in service as of like yesterday. Of course, there's some people who are like, I'm still surprised, but being prepared makes that transition a lot smoother.

Kelzye Bedwell:

It does. Absolutely having that kind of pre discussion and prep. And the other thing is specific to the fair card example you just mentioned, we still accept the paper tickets that people purchased in the past and they can still purchase them. So that was something too that clients were able to feel really easy about is I can still use these, but now I can also use a debit or credit card, wow, that's a step up. It was more of just an addition. And so I think if we had gotten rid of our ticketing system or done our fairs differently, it would've been a much, much harder transition.

Andrew Carpenter:

I think another key behind that is how, at least with the fare card example to go with that, or in your example, you kept the paper tickets, so there's still that backup or the fair cards is if you still have an old one that's deactivated, you can still transfer your balance. And so basically you just can't get through the fare gates and then you'll just have to go fix it right there. So it's not a huge loss for most people.

Marcela Moreno:

Yeah. Having that communication, I guess of like, what are your alternatives?

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. I'm sure the lines to replace that peer card have been pretty significant recently. And we definitely experienced that at first. When we first launched, we normally have one person answering the phones every day and there were five staff answering phones every day for two weeks just to answer questions and help that transition. Now, we're back down to one. It's fine. It was definitely chaotic in the beginning.

Andrew Carpenter:

Oh, yeah. And then there's always hiccups.

Marcela Moreno:

Yeah.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yes.

Andrew Carpenter:

Which I would say is both good to have that overlap week, but at the same time, that means you're running two systems. So you're like, it's even harder to do that.

Marcela Moreno:

That's awesome. You did mention Cedar Rapids, Hiawatha, then Marion. So I was curious about what coordination looks like between NTS and the public transportation providers in those communities.

Kelzye Bedwell:

So we actually only have one. Cedar Rapids transit does all of the public transit, which is fortunate because that means we only have one partner to coordinate with. So since we operate in the hours where a public transit isn't running, we don't do a ton of interface. We are fortunate that Cedar Rapids transit and the cities of Marion and Iowa are supporters. So they do give us an amount of funding each year to supplement the program and subsidize it so it remains affordable. Beyond that, a lot of our coordination and connection is just more based on an as needed basis. A great example is in 2020, Cedar Rapids was hit by a natural disaster known as a derecho, which is an inland hurricane. So our city was pretty hard hit. We lost over 50% of our tree canopy. So there was 50% some of the towns trees laying in our roads, which means that the large city buses couldn't run.

Kelzye Bedwell:

They couldn't safely go really anywhere and many bus stops and opportunities and shelters were obliterated. So NTS actually stepped up to be the only transportation provider in Cedar Rapids for a period of time and we did away with our requirement for work only. We did away with any of that. This was of course pre the app, which would've made things a little easier, but we also didn't have cell phone service. So it's a give and take. And we just gave rides to whoever called and needed them as much as could for the few weeks after that, to get people to and from where they needed to go. And that was just on a sheer coordination of Cedar Rapids calling and saying, "Hey, we can't run. Can you still make sure people can get around?" And we did. And so that's, I think just a great example of the relationship we have with them, which is just a very supportive connected relationship even though we don't directly feed it to the system.

Andrew Carpenter:

That's awesome.

Marcela Moreno:

I'm glad that you all were able to fill that need. That's incredible.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yes. It was a really great opportunity for us to be able to serve the community and fill a gap, which is the common theme. It's what we've done since we began and what we continue to do.

Andrew Carpenter:

Yeah. I have one last question.

Andrew Carpenter:

So to close out for us is what is next for NTS's growth in Cedar Rapids?

Kelzye Bedwell:

So we have a lot of growth opportunities available with being one of the few micro transits providers in all of Iowa. We are really well poised to be a part of and support and encourage growth in a lot of different areas. We don't have anything specific that's public and able to share, but we do have some coordination going on where there could potentially be full public micro transits available in our area, which would expand our service operation beyond just work rights to kind of overcome some of the barriers of traditional fixed route transit. So that's something very exciting that's upcoming and something that is only possible because we took the leap and increased our technology and made a big change. It's very exciting to be on that side of growth. It's a little nerve wracking to know that we potentially changing the transportation landscape of Cedar Rapids as a whole and kind of changing a market. It's a great place to be though and I'm excited to be able to share in the future that specific project.

Andrew Carpenter:

We're looking forward to it and we will retweet it when we see that happen.

Andrew Carpenter:

So thank you so much for your time today and sharing all of this awesome stuff that you're working on and we're excited to be able to share it with our audience and...

Kelzye Bedwell:

Yeah. Thank you.

Andrew Carpenter:

Right.

Marcela Moreno:

It's awesome to do an episode about micro transit, especially in this context because

Marcela Moreno:

We have a micro transit guidebook coming out in spring 2022. And part of the conversation or discussion in that guidebook is around the different use cases of micro transit. And I think that what NTS is doing is a really excellent example of when an area just can't support fixed route transit and there's still a need. So it's a possible solution. So I'm really excited that we got to chat with you and that we met you and get to tell this story through the podcast.

Kelzye Bedwell:

Great. Thanks so much. It's a pleasure to share about NTS and to encourage others to see that micro transit is big and new and sometimes scary, but it works and it serves our clients well.