

Cincinnati transit agency wins APTA innovation award for Everybody Rides Metro

Just two months have passed since the

American Public Transportation Association

(APTA) held its 2008 Annual Meeting and Expo

in San Diego, and the footprints of some great

achievements are still fresh.

Chief among the special events that APTA organised around the meeting was the 'Best of the Best' at the 2008 Awards Breakfast, held to honour leaders in the transit industry, including trailblazers who are pursuing innovation in the constantly changing environment of transit.

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This year, the 2008 APTA Innovation Award went to the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA) for its creation and establishment of the Everybody Rides Metro Foundation (ERM).

Collection Point asked **Ted Bergh**, executive director of ERM and Metro's chief financial officer, about this approach to equity in transit fare policies and how other transit agencies might apply it.



Q: Why was Everybody Rides Metro created?

A: Everybody Rides Metro was established to provide Metro fares for low-income individuals so that they can connect to jobs, education, healthcare and other vital human services that will help them achieve self-sufficiency. Although Metro has some of the lowest fares in the country, we recognised that our region has a significant low-income population that cannot afford the cost of bus fares on a sustained basis. 33% of Metro riders are below the federal poverty line and 58% don't own cars. 18% have lost jobs and 36% turn down jobs because they can't get a ride to work. We saw a critical need among our citizens living on the margins of society who were facing a lack of options.

Q: Were there no other resources for low-income riders to get this type of assistance?

A: There are many non-profit organisations and social service agencies in our area that work with the low-income population to provide essential services and assistance. Many of those agencies were using their own funds to help individuals achieve access to transit, leaving fewer funds for the other vital services they provide. So we saw an opportunity for leveraging transportation and existing partnerships with local not-for-profits that serve these low-income individuals.





Q: What is ERM's role?

A: Primarily, Everybody Rides Metro raises money through donations from individuals, organisations and other foundations, which enables the ERM foundation to buy tokens from Metro. We then distribute tokens to our partnering non-profits to provide to their clientele. The foundation enables these organisations to operate more collaboratively and more efficiently to serve the community in need. And it creates a mechanism for raising significantly larger sums of money than the other agencies could on their own because they also must focus on providing services. We reached out to corporate sponsors and individual donors to build on a strong community presence that could better serve the Cincinnati Tri-State area. It is a community partnership that has truly succeeded.

Q: What is Metro's role in this collaboration or community effort?

A: Metro operates transit. It did not want to duplicate the role of agencies that are already providing low-income assistance to residents. So we established a very simple model. Everybody Rides Metro raises funds; agencies determine need; and Metro provides rides.

Q: Everybody Rides Metro has some very prestigious companies that have or are providing financial support to the programme, such as Duke Energy, Cincinnati Bell, and others that are major employers in your city. Do you feel the foundation has increased visibility for Metro, and in what way has that shown itself?

A: Since its founding in 2006, ERM has helped thousands of people by partnering with local agencies to provide bus passes and tokens to their clients.

The foundation has increased visibility for Metro both locally and nationally. Receiving the 2008 APTA Innovation Award showed the nation and our city that Metro is a forward thinking world-class organisation that works to find solutions to today's and tomorrow's transportation challenges. Support from local companies, both large and small, has shed light on the Everybody Rides Metro locally, which in turn is leading to increasing community support. This is evidenced by the large number of tokens available to be distributed across the city by our growing number of partners.

Q: How do you feel that the foundation has supported you in terms of offsetting decisions concerning fare increases at Metro? Has it provided a 'relief valve' of sorts?

A: This concept has enabled us to adjust fares without unfairly affecting low-income riders.

Q: What has been the reception by the community?

A: We are so grateful to the funders of this programme, starting with the first public contributions that were donated in 2006 at the outset, by our mayor Mark Mallory and his father, former Ohio House Majority Leader William Mallory. I've been very impressed by the efforts of our own Metro employees who have done their own fundraising, having raised more than \$9,000 since the Foundation was launched, doing things like pancake breakfasts. Without the support of advocates like our mayor, our employees, and our partner organisations, this entire undertaking could not be accomplished. I think we all recognise, though, that this isn't about the money. It's about getting people to work. And it's about building a solid community through access to employment. To date, we've raised about \$1.4 million to buy Metro tokens.



Q: The Everybody Rides Metro website invites those wishing to start an 'Everybody Rides' in their community to contact you. Have you or the Foundation been active in outreach to other agencies?

A: Metro invites any agency interested in starting a similar programme to contact us for more information. The programme is working and we'd like to see it help people in other cities too. We have already heard from transportation organisations across the country in states like Texas, Oklahoma and Wisconsin.

We invite agencies to contact us by phone at:
(+1) 513 632-9610

or by email at:
info@everybodyridesmetro.org

and they can also visit our website at:
www.everybodyridesmetro.org



Q: For other agencies interested in doing this, what have been the lessons learned?

A: The main lesson is that thinking 'out-of-the-box' can work and innovation is our future. Solution oriented thinking created Everybody Rides Metro. Team work is what makes it succeed. The strong partnerships with agencies who understand the transportation needs of our community are what will keep it moving forward.

Q: Finally, would you recommend this undertaking to other agencies?

A: Absolutely. It's a model that can be duplicated by agencies everywhere, particularly in large metropolitan areas that have the broad business base with the will to support social equity.

Public transportation agencies constantly face fiscal challenges and look for strategies to help them increase revenues. Aging fleets, sky-rocketing fuel and healthcare costs are among the challenges that drive up fares. Foundations like Everybody Rides Metro allow agencies to make necessary adjustments to fares without unfairly affecting low-income riders.

Everybody Rides Metro Foundation (ERM)

At-a-glance

The purpose of this 501(c)(3) foundation – the first non-profit organisation of its kind in the nation – is to provide Cincinnati's economically disadvantaged the access to transit that they cannot afford for getting to and from work, school, healthcare, and other vital services, as they progress towards self-sufficiency.

Since its founding in 2006, ERM has helped thousands of people by partnering with local agencies to provide bus passes and tokens to their clients.

SORTA operates Metro, the regional bus service that provides about 23 million rides per year in Greater Cincinnati.