

The Wheel

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Feature story: OATS Transit Partners with Missouri Workshops to Provide Employment Opportunities.

The Wheel is published quarterly and mailed or emailed to riders, agencies, legislators and other interested parties.

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OATS, Inc. (dba OATS Transit) is a private, not-for-profit transportation provider serving 87 Missouri counties. Transportation is available to the general public in rural areas. In urban areas (Columbia, St. Louis, St. Joseph, Springfield, Kansas City) service is limited to contract service, and not available to the general public. Contact your local OATS Transit office for service available to you, or to enter into an agreement to pay for services.

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Cover photo: A group of riders and drivers from Lake Area Industries in Camdenton MO.

Childhood Friends Re

The Jeffco Express bus service has helped Jefferson County residents get to where they need to go for a dozen years. It also has become a place for residents to make friends, and recently a bus that runs the Arnold route reunited two former elementary schoolmates. Pat Boyer, who turned 68 this month, and Mary Ullman, 67, frequently ride the Jeffco Express bus to shop at Walmart in Arnold. In March, the two realized they were friends 54 years ago in south St. Louis.

“We hear so many wonderful rider stories, but never one quite like this,” said Jill Stedem, administrative and development director for OATS, which operates Jeffco Express. “It’s wonderful two people were able to reconnect after so many decades while riding on the bus together. I’m glad Jeffco Express and OATS Transit played a part in their reunion.”

OATS, which is based in Columbia and provides transportation services in 87 counties in Missouri, took over the Jeffco Express nonprofit bus service on Dec. 1, 2019. The Jefferson County Community Partnership (JCCP) previously owned Jeffco Express, which has three routes in the county. Two are cross-county routes, which mirror each other and do three loops a day. The blue route starts in De Soto and travels north to Arnold, and the green route starts in Arnold and travels south. Both routes have stops in Hillsboro, Pevely and Festus. The third is the Arnold route, which makes four trips around the city, with 30 stops. The cost for a one-way ticket to ride one of the buses is \$2 for adults or \$1 for those 60 or older or with a disability, a spokeswoman at Jeffco Express said. Riders who use the blue or green routes may travel to Arnold and get a transfer slip to use the buses dedicated to strictly the Arnold route without paying an additional fare. Boyer said the bus service is vital to her. “I haven’t been able to drive for 10 years because of my eyes and heart,” she said. “This bus is amazing. It takes you anywhere in Arnold. It has been such a blessing. What a wonderful thing that is available to people.”

Reuniting

On one March day, Boyer sat in a different row than usual on the Jeffco Express Arnold route bus. That simple shift led Boyer and Ullman to realize their past connection. “She usually sat in the first row,” said Ullman, 67, who moved to Arnold from Affton about nine years ago. “If she didn’t move back to the second row, we wouldn’t have connected as much.” Boyer and Ullman grew up in the Dutchtown area near the Bevo Mill in St. Louis. They attended grade school together at St. John the Baptist off Delor Street. The two

Reunite Thanks to Bus Service

childhood friends had no idea about their past connection when Boyer first started taking the bus to Walmart after moving to Arnold in November 2020 from south St. Louis County. Their conversations initially were limited to courteous hellos and inquiries about how each other's families were doing, until one day they talked about where they grew up. "We were almost to Walmart," Ullman said, "and she said, 'I grew up by Bevo Mill.' I said, 'So did I.' Then she said, 'I went to St. John the Baptist.' I said, 'So did I.' She told me her last name was Flaherty. I said, 'I had a grade school friend named Patty Flaherty.'" "I said, 'That is me,'" said Boyer, whose maiden name was Flaherty. "It was like, no way. You just ask the right questions and you get the right answers."

Memories

Boyer and Ullman attended St. John the Baptist through eighth grade, leaving the school in 1967. Since reconnection, the two often share stories about their teachers, especially the nuns who taught classes, Boyer said. "They were strict sometimes," she said. Boyer and Ullman also reminisce about classmates, and have revisited their first communion photo taken when they were in second grade. Both women still have the photo, which was taken in 1961. "We remember our first communion," said Ullman, whose family moved to Rochester, NY, and then Dayton, Ohio, after she completed grade school. "In third, fourth, fifth and sixth grade, (Boyer) was really just a classmate, but in seventh and eighth grade, I remember her more as a friend. If we hung out, it was at the playground during recess or after school." Boyer said connecting with Ullman has led her to think more about her old schoolmates and what it was like attending a neighborhood school. "We never had snow days," Boyer said. "There were no buses. That is why people moved into parishes so you could walk to school. I have started to think about people I haven't thought about in years, and now, I can look that person up on Facebook. We have looked up a couple of people."



More connections

Boyer and Ullman said they have realized other connections. Boyer's father and two brothers worked on the Admiral river boat, when it used to cruise the Mississippi. Ullman said her family knew one of the boat's captains and they often rode on the Admiral. They also realized they may have encountered each other on the Robert E. Lee, another old river boat people visited in St. Louis. Boyer was a hostess there, and Ullman's family often took rides on that boat as well. They also figured out that Ullman used to live on the same street in south St. Louis as Boyer's granddaughter's grandmother. "It was like we knew all these people who connected us," said Ullman, who never married and moved back to the St. Louis area in 1976. "The more we talked the more we were like, 'Oh my goodness, this is too spooky.' We found we had more connections as we talked about places and people." Boyer said it is exciting to reconnect with someone from her childhood. "When people move away, you think I will not see that person anymore," Boyer said. "You don't think about it, and then it happens; you reconnect with a part of your past." "That is what I like about the Jeffco Express," Ullman said. "You never know who you are going to meet. It is an amazing ride. We have fun. We talk to each other and care about each other like a family. Finding her is a true blessing."

Reprinted with permission from Jefferson County Leader Newspaper, written by Tony Krausz.

OATS Transit Partners with Workshops to Provide Employment Opportunities.

It's a warm Spring day and expected to be a busy one at Lake Area Industries (LAI) in Camdenton as several OATS Transit buses begin rolling into the parking lot. By 8:30 am, everyone is on the production floor and ready to start their work day fulfilling orders for local manufacturers. These days, the production floor is bustling with projects because manufacturing companies, just like thousands of others businesses, can't get enough employees to fill their job vacancies. Local businesses contract with the workshop to fill orders so they too can continue getting products in the hands of consumers. This is a positive thing for the workshop because that means they have plenty of projects to keep everyone busy.

Executive Director Natalie Couch recalls when she started at LAI in 2015 projects were slim, and in fact, they weren't sure if they could keep the doors open. "Luckily, a new opportunity from a long-term customer got us through those hard time, and business has steadily picked up since," said Couch. Today, LAI employs 55 consumers and a staff of 6. LAI has many projects going on at any one time. They provide packaging and/or assembly of things like tackle boxes, sleds, fishing poles/gear, food products for the prisons, and more than 70 other products. In addition to the workshop, they also operate a popular retail nursery and garden center in the Spring called Gifted Gardens. They also offer secure document destruction services and cardboard recycling.

Finding the perfect place to work can be a challenge, but is even more difficult for individuals with developmental disabilities. Today, there are many more employment options

than there were ten years ago, but finding the right place for individuals with cognitive or intellectual disabilities is still difficult. Sheltered Workshops provide a controlled, safe and highly supervised work environment that you can't find through most competitive employers. The work and pay is based on their abilities, and adaptive tools are often used to assist the employee in completing the task. The jobs help them build their skill set for when they are ready to work competitively if they choose. There is often time to bond with their peers. Some people say it is segregation, but individuals working there call it "working with my best friends". LAI employee Amanda said the best part of her day is "hanging out with her friends."

LAI depends on OATS Transit to transport nearly all 55 of its employees to work. "Working with OATS Transit takes a load off my shoulders so I can better focus on growing our business," said Couch. "Using OATS Transit is more cost-effective and efficient for us than trying to provide transportation ourselves," added Couch. The employees all echoed Couch's sentiments on the OATS Transit service. "OATS Transit is my only means of transportation and without them I would be homebound," said LAI employee Shelly Jackson. "I like to ride the OATS bus because I have people I can talk to, and I like to joke around with my driver Nicole," said LAI employee Shannon Macrossin. Jennifer the social butterfly at LAI, said she loves to ride the bus with Ron. Her bright smile and cheerful personality fills the room with happiness. OATS Transit brings in employees from a 30-mile radius of LAI each day. Each day drivers will drop off a group of workers, then go provide other rides in the area throughout the day, and return to pick up LAI employees



"I like my drivers, especially Nicole because I can joke around with her. They are all cool!" Shannon



"I like to ride the bus. The drivers are so nice to me." Jennifer



each afternoon at 4pm. LAI employee Randy had this to add: "I was disappointed when my route got shortened because I actually like being on the bus riding around for long periods of time." Everyone had good things to say about all the LAI drivers Nicole, Donna, Bruce, Ken, Ron, Dan and Steve, as well as staff at the OATS Transit Camdenton office who help ensure the buses run smoothly and on time.

Central Missouri Subcontracting Enterprises (CMSE) in Columbia is another workshop that depends on OATS Transit. CMSE opened in 1969, and now employs 130 individuals. "Our employees here at CMSE and CMSE Giving Gardens greatly depend on the reliable transportation provided by OATS Transit in order to get to and from work," said Bruce Young, CMSE Executive Director. "Our employees carry a great sense of pride in their jobs and need transportation that allows them to work," added Young.

In Missouri alone, there are 86 sheltered workshops in the state that employ 5,400 adults with disabilities. Since the early 1980's OATS Transit has provided transportation to many of these workshops. As a whole, OATS Transit provides thousands of trips each day to Missouri workshops, which equates to more than 50% of their daily service. Without these workshops in the state, OATS Transit would be greatly impacted. Together, the sheltered workshops and OATS Transit bring in millions of dollars to Missouri's economy, which can't be overlooked. As LAI employee Ann put it "I have a job I love with bus service that is safe and efficient."

See proposed changes on next page that concern workshops.



"My driver Donna is a real sweetheart! I have been at LAI for 26 years and I love it. Everyone here calls me mama." Lorie



"My driver Ken is the best!" Mike



"Ron is an awesome driver; he is funny. I like coming to work on the bus." Reggie



"I like riding the bus for long periods of time" Randy (Nick is looking on in the background)

Proposed Rule Changes Concern Sheltered Workshops

Missouri's Sheltered Workshop's were developed in 1965 as a way to provide employment opportunities to adults with developmental disabilities. Workshops around the nation were developed by parents who were looking for safe alternatives for their adult children to be contributing members of society and gainfully employed. Through these workshops training is offered, skills are developed, friendships are formed and business owners in the community have access to contract labor to perform a variety of tasks for them. These 86 Missouri workshops bring in over \$120 million dollars in contract revenue annually and employ more than 5,400 individuals.

In 1938, Congress enacted Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act to allow payment of special minimum wages commensurate with individual levels of productivity. The Act was intended "to prevent blocking opportunities for employment of persons with significant disabilities." Proposed changes to a federal rule could eliminate many workshops should the new legislation pass. A plan under the current administration is to do away with the 14c sub-minimum wage clause of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Right now, Section 14c allows sheltered workshops to pay commensurate wages that are based on an individual's ability. If new legislation passes, workshops will be forced to pay current minimum wage rates and change the way they operate. Workshops would be forced to close, pay higher wages, or change to day habilitation programs where no wages are given. Workshop employees can be at risk of losing their medical and other benefits, if they earn too much money, so there is a fine line between working and benefits.

According to the Missouri Association of Sheltered Workshop Managers, "Eliminating 14c could deny work opportunities for individuals with the most significant disabilities who cannot meet productivity standards established by the non-disabled workforce unless employer subsidies are provided to bridge the gap between wages paid and productive output generated. While such subsidies routinely occurred in the past, they rarely exist today."

At this time, it is unknown if the elimination of 14c is still attached to the federal minimum wage bill

currently being reviewed. Showing support to the sheltered workshops, Missouri Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler is working with the Workshop Association to try and get 14c removed from that federal bill. Congresswoman Hartzler appears in the video "Threats to 14c," which appears on the Workshop Association website at www.moworkshops.org if you are interested in learning more. Additionally, State Senator Karla Eslinger, District 33, has introduced a house bill aimed to protect Missouri's workshops from the actions proposed at the federal level. One of the biggest developments of the recently ended Missouri 2021 Legislative Session was passage of House Bill 432, which includes language supporting Missouri's Extended Employment Sheltered Workshop Programs, originally filed as Senate Bill 582.

No matter which side you support, these individuals should be able to work where they want to, with the right supports to make their wishes possible. It is up to family and social service agencies to help them do just that, and up to legislators to not destroy workshops, which have been a safe haven to thousands of people in this state. While some states have already done away with 14c, there are no statistics that show their efforts created long-term jobs in the community for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In addition to the affect these bills could have on the workshops, OATS Transit could also be affected. OATS Transit provides thousands of trips to the sheltered workshops in Missouri. These trips account for more than 50% of the service provided at this time.





"We feel safe riding the OATS bus to work." Dan & Daren



"OATS Transit is my only means of transportation and without them I would be homebound." Shelly

Foundations & Businesses Provide Support

OATS Transit is pleased and grateful to be the recipient of numerous donations given by Missouri businesses and foundations over the past few months.

- **Boone Electric Community Trust-** \$12,000 for two new Boone County vehicles.
- **Caesars Entertainment/Isle of Capri Boonville-** \$1,250 for Cooper County operating support.
- **Central Bank of Boone County-** \$2,500 for 50th Anniversary sponsor.
- **Cuivre River Electric Community Trust-** \$4,000 toward new Lincoln County vehicle.
- **Intercounty Electric Foundation-** \$1,000 operating support for Maries & Gasconade Counties.
- **Laclede Electric Trust-** \$7,700 for new Camden County vehicle.
- **MFA Oil Company-** \$500 for 50th Anniversary sponsor.
- **Missouri Auto Auction-** \$1,000 for 50th Anniversary sponsor.
- **Osage Valley Electric Community Trust-** \$1,000 toward new Cass County vehicle.
- **Southern Bus & Mobility-** \$500 for 50th Anniversary sponsor.
- **Sundvold Financial-** \$2,000 for 50th Anniversary sponsor.
- **White River Valley Electric Cooperative-** \$5,000 toward new Taney County vehicle.

To find out how you can support public transportation in your local community, call OATS Transit Development staff at 573-443-4516, or email jstedem@oatstransit.org. Your support is important so we can continue being there for individuals who need rides to medical appointments, work and so much more!

Employee Anniversaries

The employees listed below celebrated an anniversary April - June 2021. Thank you to each of these employees for your hard work and dedication to OATS Transit!



Linda King



Debra Taylor with Tracy Walkup

30 years:

Debra Taylor- Midwest Region Driver

20 years:

Linda King- Mideast Region Driver

15 years:

John Staton- Midwest Region Driver

10 years:

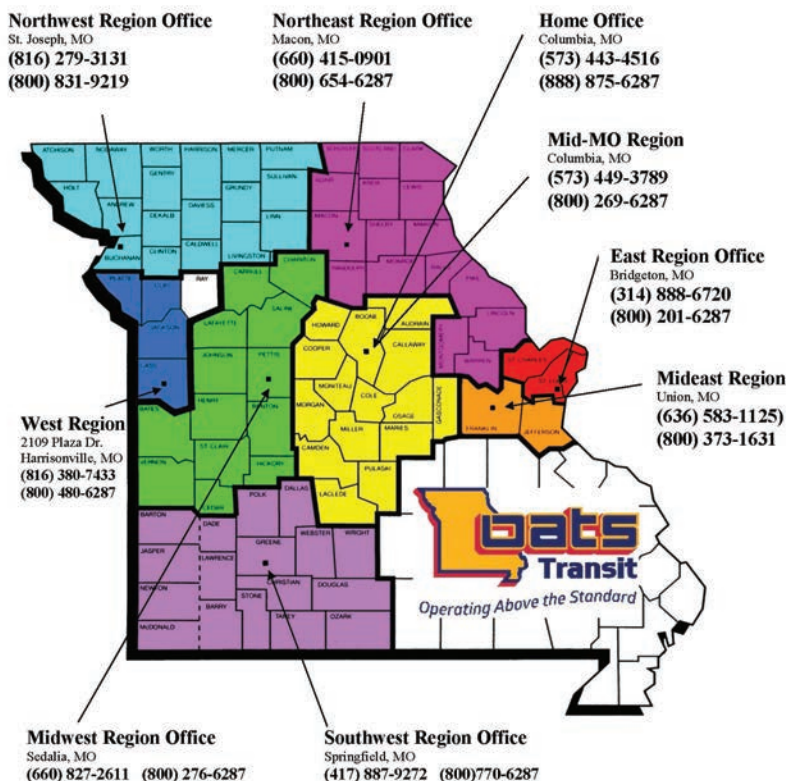
Bobby Colley- Mid-MO Region Driver
Mark Sloan- Northwest Region Driver
George Mruzik- East Region Driver
Dan Newton- Mideast Region Driver
Jim Scott- Northeast Region Driver

Congratulations to all!

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OATS Transit Service Area



OATS Transit offices will be closed & regular routes will not be running on Monday, July 5th due to the Independence Day Holiday, or on September 6th for the Labor Day Holiday.

LABOR DAY