

Community Health and Safety Award

POPULATIONS GREATER THAN 50,000

Olathe, Kansas

This year, ICMA presents two Community Health and Safety Awards in the 50,000-and-greater population category. The first goes to the city of Olathe, Kansas, and City Manager J. Michael Wilkes for the Work Taxi Coupon Program.



J. MICHAEL WILKES

Olathe, Kansas, with a population nearing 117,000, is one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. According to the U.S.

Census, however, approximately 37 percent of Olathe's households (or approximately 43,290 families, using the current population), earn less than 80 percent of the median income, and approximately 4 percent, or 4,680 families, live below the poverty level. Persons with disabilities, single-parent families with children under 18 years of age, and the elderly are those most likely to fall into these categories.

For many low-income working households, affordable and dependable transportation could be the determining factor between being employed and being homeless. Thus, to improve the quality of life for these citizens—to enable them to attend college classes, a trade school, or job preparation classes and to provide them with a reliable means of transportation to reach employment sites within the city itself—Olathe has sought to provide a low-cost and dependable transportation service.

In early 2004, with encouraging feedback from several local not-for-profit agencies that offered employment preparation workshops for disabled individuals, Olathe established a "Work Taxi Coupon Program" for its disadvantaged citizens. Because the cost to establish a public transportation bus system was prohibitive, the city applied for a Federal Transit

Administration Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) grant. It was awarded a matching start-up grant of \$135,750 to implement the Work Taxi Coupon Program for individuals earning less than 80 percent of the median income for the area; the city is matching the grant funds with general funds.

With the necessary funding secured, Olathe contracted with two local taxi companies, which agreed to the following policies and procedures:

- Service is to be offered from 6:00 AM to 7:00 PM six days a week.
- Service is to be door to door.
- The company will accept a coupon from a rider, entitling the rider to a one-way trip from home to work or a job preparation site, or from a work site to home. Coupons can be used only for work-related trips.
- The company will turn coupons into the city biweekly for reimbursement. Each one-way coupon will be redeemed for \$12.
- The city will lease to each company at no cost a wheelchair-accessible vehicle to accommodate persons with disabilities.

The city then notified the local agencies and advertised the program in the local paper, on the city's main Web page, and on the local city cable TV channel.

Program-eligible participants are issued an ID card to show when purchasing coupon books (10 coupons for \$25) and paying for rides. When used, each coupon must state the origination and destination, date, ID



Olathe citizen finds dependable, affordable transportation through city's work taxi program.

number, and signature of the program participant.

Between 2004 and 2005, program participation increased by 100 percent. In addition to low-income persons, 56 disabled individuals are currently working in the community in retail businesses for the first time in their lives. As their earnings increase, the amount they receive from the Social Security Administration Office decreases, which is a cost saving to society. Moreover, as they spend their earned income in the community on rent, utilities, groceries, personal items, and entertainment, the city's small investment (\$135,750) in this program is returned. An additional cost-saving measure is Olathe's initiative and success in obtaining a funding partner for the program.

The program has also resulted in partnerships between local businesses and local not-for-profit agencies that work with low-income or disabled citizens. The agencies provide employment training sites for their target population, enabling businesses to maintain an adequate number of entry-level employees. These partnerships have resulted in a win-win situation for businesses as well as for Olathe's disadvantaged citizens.

In spring of 2005, a survey of program participants showed that

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The city of Olathe's vision is "Setting the Standard for Excellence in Public Service." The Work Tax Coupon Program is an excellent example of how Olathe looked "outside the box" when trying to address the need for a low-cost transportation system. This highly replicable program fulfills one of the most basic needs that many Americans take for granted, and by providing the mobility needed to sustain employment, it has added immeasurably to the quality of life for Olathe's low-income and disadvantaged citizens.

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nearly 89 percent of respondents rated the service as good or very good. However, only 59 percent expressed satisfaction with the hours of transportation service, so the city is looking into expanding those hours beyond 7:00 PM. The city is also exploring alternative marketing methods to increase the level of participation in the program among low-income families.