

Lottery dollars improve Valley's transit system reach

Brian Sodoma, for Arizona Lottery 10:07 a.m. MT April 3, 2017



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

For the many Valley residents who use automobiles to get to work each day, transit services probably rarely, if ever, cross their minds. But for 250,000 Valley riders who rely on transit daily, the system is critical to their livelihood and well-being.

Each year, the Valley Metro Regional Public Transportation Agency (RPTA) receives about \$11.5 million from the Arizona Lottery. The funds support Valley bus routes, like the 685, which brings service from Ajo all the way to Gila Bend, Buckeye and Phoenix, Dial-A-Ride services in the East Valley where bus routes are limited, among other Valley para-transit and bus offerings. The contribution, brings important service extensions that help thousands in Maricopa County lead healthy, productive lives.

"It's easy to forget that for a lot of these people, this is their connection with their job, school, their opportunity in life, their future," said Scott Smith, Valley Metro CEO.

Life on the 685

Jose Garcia graduated with honors from Gila Bend High School. In 2008, when he committed to going to college, Garcia opted for Estrella Mountain Community College in the West Valley. He had a challenge, however. He is epileptic and unable to drive.

Garcia relied on Valley Metro's 685 rural route, which extends from the far West Valley to Gila Bend and Ajo. He took the hour-and-a-half ride every single day for three years between 2008 and 2011 when he matriculated at Estrella Mountain, at times not arriving home until 9 PM.

He graduated from Estrella Mountain Community College in 2011 and immediately transferred to ASU where he completed a degree in Spanish by 2013. While at ASU, he relied on numerous Valley Metro bus routes to get from ASU's west campus to downtown and Tempe campuses. Today, Garcia is pursuing a career as an interpreter for the justice court system.

"If I didn't have this (transit system) I would've been stuck at home working dead-end fast-food jobs. ... I would have still been searching for answers," he said.

Overcoming disability

In 2008, Susan Williams lost her eyesight. After years of living a seemingly normal life in the Valley suburbs, Williams' life now brought considerable emotional and physical challenges. She was encouraged to start a rehabilitation program at the Foundation for Blind Children in the central Valley, where she could acquire new, necessary, life skills.

Living in Gilbert where bus routes are sparse, Williams turned to Valley Metro's Dial-A-Ride program for her transportation needs. With the service she was able to regularly and successfully engage in her rehabilitation efforts.

"You have to give them (Dial-A-Ride) 24-hour notice. You have to plan ahead, but I'd hate to think of my life without it," Williams said.

Once she completed her rehabilitation program, she had the opportunity to attend ASU. Dial-A-Ride enabled her to do that as well. Then, she was approached by the Foundation for Blind Children to oversee a program that supports the state's visually impaired on their college journey – and, yes, Dial-A-Ride now allows her to enjoy the life of a working professional overseeing that program.

"Dial-A-Ride has helped me function and now I'm able to have a successful life," she added. "Without it, I would not have had the opportunity to go to college, the opportunity to be employed and start this program."

A widower keeps moving

Michael Kelley is 75 years old, but he's not slowing down. The retired tradesman relies on the lottery-supported Avondale ZOOM route six days a week to keep him connected to his friends and support system.

When Kelley's wife passed away, financial constraints took away his access to an automobile. A neighbor informed him of the ZOOM routes near his Avondale home. The service allows him to get to grocery stores and most importantly the gym, where he stays active and connects with friends.

"Without it, I wouldn't be able to do much. I couldn't afford to catch a cab to go to all these places and it's too far to walk," he said. "Without it, I'd just be stuck at home."

These few examples show how the Valley transit system connects members of society to their world, workplaces and so much more, adds Smith. As in Williams' case, the system can be critical to one's ability to be a productive working member of society, instead of feeling isolated at home, possibly creating reliance on social services and the healthcare system.

"Keep in mind, with cities, you're budgeting on the fringe. Once you pay for police and fire and all those things, you don't have a lot left over. Many communities, if they didn't have these lottery funds, wouldn't be able to provide the level of service they do," he said.

To learn more about how the Arizona Lottery supports valuable state agencies and contributes positively to the state's economy, visit the Arizona Lottery's website (<http://azlottery.gov/>).

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