

## **A Universal Need—Especially for Those in Need of Recovery**

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The ability to travel is essential. Not necessarily great distances, but the short ones we take for granted: just a few miles to buy groceries or to attend appointments--and especially when in need of medical treatment. In the modern world, one cannot do so easily without a form of transportation. Whether through public resources or by personal means, transportation is a necessity. Without it, people cannot meet their most basic needs.

Walker County has long recognized the lack of transportation options for those without personal vehicles, and leaders in the community have worked to make positive change. Specifically, three Walker County residents have made a difference: Diedre Tatum, who created and oversees the only public transportation in Walker County; Nikki Warren, a certified recovery support specialist, who personally transports individuals seeking substance use recovery to rehabilitation services, and Carl Carpenter, an investigator for the Sheriff's Department who transports inmates to treatment centers when a judge rules in favor of rehabilitation over detainment. These individuals saw a need in their community and knew that their individual efforts could make a positive difference.

### **Public Transportation**

The story of the first public transportation system in modern-day Walker County starts with Paul Kennedy, president of The Walker Area Community Foundation. His organization had

originally funded a route-based transportation system known as Class Tran, but it was overly expensive for how little the system was used.

“We were funding Class Tran. They were honest, but they were ineffective. And we needed another solution,” Kennedy said.

So, he sought out an organization that could create a more effective service, which led him to Diedre Tatum, Executive Director of The Walker County Community Action Agency. Kennedy knew that Tatum’s organization was already planning to create a smaller transportation service, making the organization a strong candidate to run a service available to the public. After meetings and slight convincing, Tatum agreed to take on the project.

“I knew transportation was a need,” Tatum said. “It’s always ‘What do you need in Jasper?’ And transportation is always in the top five. It was a no-brainer.”

The transportation service began in October of 2020 and is modeled after the demand-response system: transportation only when it is needed. To receive transportation, any individual may call the hotline and request a ride anywhere in Walker County. The call must be made 24-48 hours in advance, and the service costs \$2 for every five miles driven. Currently, about 700 one-way trips are made per month with this service, which mostly serves the elderly in the community.

But providing necessary services comes with complications to assure safety. Tatum explains all of the regulations and work required for public drivers:

“First we must do a background check and a drug screen, but they have to go through our training [as well as] the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) training... It's about a week worth of work.”

Aside from driver requirements, Tatum and her staff must continuously update logs and inform ALDOT of everything that occurs within their system, including insurance claims, accident reports and more.

This work, however, has paid off. Increasing the ease of transportation in Walker County has helped so many individuals meet their basic needs. From appointments to grocery runs, people can have access to these necessities for a very low price.

### **Rehabilitation Transportation**

Nikki Warren has worked for the Recovery Organization of Support Specialists (R.O.S.S.) for over a year now, and her position includes transporting Walker County residents in need of rehabilitation services to the first available center. This means that some days she only has to drive to a nearby city like Birmingham, AL (about 40 miles), but others it can mean driving as far as Mobile, AL (about 260 miles).

R.O.S.S assigns staff members like Warren to anyone who seeks out help with their recovery from their organization. The staff member becomes the client's recovery “peer,” and assists them throughout the entire journey, which always starts with rehabilitation. Often, before transporting an individual, the peer and client have met only a few times—a fact that underscores both the stakes and intimacy of these trips

Warren described her first experience ever driving someone:

“I can admit I was scared. Having anyone in your car while you drive is a vulnerable situation, but the more I did it, the more comfortable I became.” Warren said.

As someone who has gone through recovery herself, Warren knows how to make passengers comfortable and confident going into treatment. This includes making any stops along the way to assure the client has what they need going into rehabilitation.

Warren explains, “Before taking anyone, we make sure they have clean clothes and anything else they may need while at the center. We pick them up at their house and on the way, we can make any stops they want. I have stopped for food, smoke breaks and even a few urgent care stops.”

After a year of working, Warren now transports two to three people to rehabilitation centers each week. The organization itself served over 2,400 people in 2022 and remains the only organization in Walker County that provides transportation to rehabilitation services.

### **Inmate Transportation**

No matter the offense or reason for detainment, individuals dealing with substance use disorder often are greatly in need of rehabilitation. Court systems have recognized the benefits of allowing criminals with substance use challenges to enter into diversion programs rather than sending them directly to jail. Carl Carpenter works for the County Sheriff’s Department and has witnessed the difference this recognition has made in offenders’ lives.

To help inmates get into treatment, Carpenter personally drives them. When we spoke, he emphasized their need to be treated with respect before entering a very difficult process.

“I put them in an air-conditioned car. They ride in the front seat, and I let them listen to the radio. I’ll even stop at McDonald’s if they want.” Carpenter said. “I want them to get out of the car with a suitcase, like everyone else, and have them walk into their success.”

Carpenter has only been driving for about a month or so, but each person he takes to rehabilitation is another success story he can share. In our interview he explained the impact of distance on this process, explaining that he would prefer to drive his passengers miles away to assure they are in a place geographically separate from their memories of using.

“I hope that when I take them to other cities they get out of the [recovery center], move into sober living, and find a job away from the temptations they know here.” Carpenter said. “Maybe then they can have a better start.”

This statement led to a conversation about how without a means of transportation, people with substance use disorder are not able to remove themselves from the environment that led them to drugs in the first place.

Carpenter plans to continue driving anyone court ordered to rehabilitation throughout the rest of his career. His understanding of just how much of a barrier transportation is to success has already helped many people in the short time he has been transporting.

## Looking to the Future

Tatum, Warren and Carpenter have all made significant efforts to increase access to transportation in Walker County, but they all agree that further expansion is still needed.

For her part, Tatum hopes that in the next few years the public transportation service her organization offers will be able to serve areas beyond the county.

Warren is working with her organization to find funding for post-rehabilitation transportation. This would include rides to resources that promote successful recovery, including support groups, appointments, and more. Previously, R.O.S.S. had a grant for this service, but they were unable to renew it.

Carpenter plans to involve more employees of the Sheriff's department in rehabilitation transport. He hopes that they will see the benefits of treatment over criminal detention and join his work.

Transportation in Walker County is not fully accessible for vulnerable populations like the elderly, the financially insecure, or those battling substance use disorders; but, leaders in the community like Tatum, Warren, and Carpenter have made measurable progress in eliminating this obstacle. Hopefully, others in Walker County will see how much difference even one person can make, and in time, find ways they can contribute to the goal of making transportation available to anyone in need.

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