

Dan Wedge, creator of public transportation system, receives Ability Award

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Holland — A car crash 25 years ago left Dan Wedge paraplegic and using a wheelchair to get around.

So Wedge understands that catching a ride isn't always so easy for people with disabilities.

He kept that in mind when tasked with creating a public transportation system for Allegan County in 1999. He has been the county's transportation director ever since.

Wedge recently was honored with a new local recognition, the Ability Award, for the \$3.5-million transit station and 28-vehicle fleet he introduced to the county.

Wedge is the first recipient of the award, given by the Disability Network Lakeshore to a person who helps create communities where everyone can "participate, contribute and belong."

How did Allegan County's transportation program get its start?

I was hired 12 years ago to start the transportation system, and it took me about six months and we had vehicles on the road. What we've been able to do is provide transportation for a number of human service agencies (Michigan Works!, Community Mental Health, the Allegan County Health Department and more). It was much cheaper for them than doing it themselves. State and federal funds cover about 50 percent of our costs. Many counties have a transit millage, but we're not there yet. It's still a limited public transit program.

Which programs are designed to help groups who might have difficulties finding rides?

Specialized services grants allow us to provide transportation for people with crucial needs. We receive some funding for dialysis patients, some for seniors to go to and from meal sites. Of course, it's not just people with disabilities, but also low-income or anyone who has a barrier to owning their own transportation, too. Even if you own a vehicle, when it goes into the shop, you need a backup vehicle. In my case, I'm limited to driving my own vehicle. I can't just borrow a neighbor's. Where I see it being a big benefit is allowing seniors who can't drive to stay at home longer. Without a vehicle, you can't even get your own groceries.

How does it feel to be recognized for your work with this award?

I'm honored. I feel fortunate I got the opportunity to do the things I did. A point I like to get across to people with disabilities is that volunteering and being active in the community will open so many doors. If you can't find a job, get involved in volunteering. The networking opportunities are just tremendous. People will remember you for the involvement you had — not that you're a person with a disability.

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