



Commuter Co-Op Vermont

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Program Overview

Commuter Co-Op is a statewide vanpool program administered by the Vermont Agency on Transportation's (VTrans') Go! Vermont Program (<https://www.connectingcommuters.org/>). Go! Vermont provides residents with information and resources for travel options from public transit, to bicycling and walking, to vanpool.



The Commuter Co-Op vanpool program in Vermont has been providing commuters with an alternative to single occupancy commute trips for ten years. The program was originally implemented using V Ride, a third-party vanpool operation. V Ride was then acquired by Commute with Enterprise who has since been providing vanpool services for the program. The program goal was to fill in the gaps where public transportation does not travel or during times when public transportation does not operate (e.g. during second or third shift commutes).

Program Operations

Commute with Enterprise handles program operations for the Commuter Co-Op program and a representative from Commute with Enterprise works to recruit employers to the program. Commute with Enterprise explains the benefits of vanpool and how a vanpool could work for an employer's specific needs. They have found success reaching out to larger employers (200+ employees) and those that tend to work shifts (warehouses, distribution centers, manufacturing). When an employer decides to partner with Commute with Enterprise, they will look at anonymized employee data to form clusters of employees that live close together, generally those living within five miles of one another. These employee clusters could be used by the employer to help promote a vanpool program containing 4 to 15 people. Single vehicle households and those without a vehicle seem to be more receptive to a vanpool program. Once a potential vanpool has been identified, Commute with Enterprise will ask the employer to put them into contact with the relevant employees so that they can explain the benefits of vanpools; this may be done through an on-site meeting at the company. A key point used to entice employee participation is the financial savings from commuting via vanpool versus commuting in a single occupant vehicle.

Commute with Enterprise provides the right sized vehicle for each vanpool; however, in order to qualify as a vanpool vehicle, the vehicle must have seven seatbelts. In addition, full collision coverage, liability insurance, vehicle maintenance, and 24-hour roadside assistance are provided. Commute with Enterprise requires a vanpool sponsor; for the Commuter Co-Op program, the employer acts as the sponsor. In addition to the sponsor, the vanpool must have a vanpool coordinator who will track mileage, gas expenses, and collect fees and send them to Commute with Enterprise. Generally, the employer or a vanpool participant will facilitate this coordination.



Photo Credit: Vermont Commuter Co-Op

Each vanpool must designate at least one driver and a back-up driver. A vanpool member must be twenty-five years or older to apply to become a driver; however, anyone eighteen years or older may participate as a vanpool rider. A benefit provided to drivers is that they can utilize the van for personal use up to ten percent of the total monthly mileage. Vanpool members then determine their pick-up and drop off locations and their normal route, and any other day-to-day operations (e.g., stopping for coffee). Most vanpools are utilizing a central pick-up location like a big box retailer's parking lot, a park-n-ride, or a church parking lot instead of picking up individuals from their home.

Vanpool members are provided with a guaranteed ride home (GRH) program that can be leveraged for up to a \$70 reimbursement for an alternative ride to get the member home in case of an emergency (e.g., sudden illness, family emergency, unexpected overtime). If a taxi or the like cannot provide a ride, the GRH program will reimburse mileage at \$0.65 per mile in cases where a family member, a friend, or a co-worker provides the ride. Go! Vermont estimates there to be minimal usage of the GRH program: approximately one person per month.

Commute with Enterprise provides Go! Vermont with the required National Transit Database (NTD) reporting each month. These reports include information documenting all vanpools in operation including mileage and fares collected.

Current Ridership

The Commuter Co-Op program currently operates around seventeen vanpools across the state of Vermont. Only one van is traveling to the Burlington area (Vermont's largest city). Nearly 90% of the vans are operating in rural areas where there are fewer public transportation options. The total number of vanpools tends to fluctuate due to a large number of ski and snowboard resorts utilizing the program to provide transportation to employees during the winter season.

Commuter Co-Op has also found success partnering with staffing agencies, as they can quickly form vanpools. The staffing agencies may be aware that for an employer to attract a broader pool of employees, they may also need to provide transportation to those candidates. When a staffing agency puts together a vanpool, they serve as the sponsor.

Program Funding

Go! Vermont has used Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) formula funding to pay for the vanpool program. CMAQ funding can be used for administrative support for the vanpool program and FTA formula funds can help pay for operations.

Go! Vermont subsidizes up to 75% of the cost of the vanpool for the first three months, and then subsidizes 50% then after to help reduce the costs to vanpool members. The proportion subsidized by Go! Vermont was increased from 50% to 75% during the pandemic as an effort to retain the vanpools. Approximately \$600/month is the average subsidy provided.

Marketing

The vanpool program is promoted on the Go! Vermont website (<https://www.connectingcommuters.org/information-and-schedules/ridesharing/commuterco-opvt/>). The website provides basic information and short videos describing what a vanpool is, the benefits of vanpools, and how to get started. In addition, Go! Vermont promotes the program on their social media, local media campaigns, and during any business outreach. Go! Vermont works with Commute with Enterprise to ensure that all marketing is consistent. All marketing has the Go! Vermont, VTrans, and Commute with Enterprise logos.

Go! Vermont has developed several brochures and one-pagers on the program which are available on the Go! Vermont website. Promoting the savings to the commuter by utilizing taglines like “Give yourself a raise! Check out Go! Vermont, and we’ll show you how to save \$2,500 on transportation this year!” has proven to be effective.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Consider Additional Program Provisions When Developing Your RFP:

When developing their Request for Proposal (RFP) for the vanpool program, Vermont needed to consider winter driving conditions, as some of the most significant users are employees traveling to and from ski and snowboard resorts. Go! Vermont currently pays additional funds to include snow tires on vehicles in the winter. While it was not required in the existing RFP, Go! Vermont intends to include it in the future.

Engaging Employers Takes Time:

Commute with Enterprise noted that the most difficult part of a vanpool program is finding someone at a worksite to speak with in order to promote the benefits of vanpool. They have

found success in being persistent, highlighting program flexibility, and promoting the benefits that may be unique to that employer such as: Are you struggling to hire employees?, Are you struggling to keep good employees?, and Is there public transportation in the area? In addition, Commute with Enterprise leases vanpool vehicles on a month-to-month basis, allowing an employer to try out the program and if they do not find it successful, their sponsored vanpool can return the vehicle the next month.

Word of Mouth Is Your Best Marketing:

Commuter Co-Op has experienced program growth due to word of mouth, particularly for the ski and snowboard resorts across the state. Once one resort saw the benefits of providing vanpool for their employees, others wanted to try out the program.

Next Steps

The Commuter Co-Op program would like to see dynamic vanpooling in the future. This would allow for even more flexibility for both vanpools and vanpool members. It may also help to sustain vanpools that may otherwise have to sunset if they lose a member(s). The Commuter Co-Op program envisions trip planning software or transit planning applications that would allow for “seat discovery.” For example, if someone were to miss the bus to work, they could use a trip planning application and see if there is a vanpool nearby that is headed to the desired destination. This will allow for more on demand trips and flexibility for commuters, similar to microtransit.



Photo Credit: Vermont Commuter Co-Op

Learn More

To learn more about the Vermont Commuter Co-Op Vanpool Program, please visit the program website at: <https://www.connectingcommuters.org/information-and-schedules/ridesharing/commuterco-opvt/>

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