



# Go NEWhere Vanpool Program

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## Program Overview

Seeking a turnkey vanpool program, the Nebraska Department of Transportation (DOT) spent two years crafting a Request for Proposals (RFP) that they would ultimately release in 2017. Commute with Enterprise was chosen to implement the Go NEWhere vanpool program to serve the goal of, *“providing commuters with an alternative mode of transportation that is cost-effective, reliable and environmentally friendly.”*



The vanpool program helps to fill the gaps that public transportation does not currently address. When originally planning for the program, the Nebraska DOT assumed it would be popular for commuters traveling between Lincoln and Omaha, two of Nebraska’s largest cities. However, this program has been most successful in Nebraska’s rural areas, with most of the vanpools either operating in or traveling to a rural area.

## Program Operations

Commute with Enterprise handles the vanpool operations. The Nebraska DOT has a representative with Commute with Enterprise who helps line up vanpools for the entire state. It is up to Commute with Enterprise to procure vanpool vehicles, conduct training, and coordinate drivers. Generally, each vanpool has a designated driver and a back-up driver, and anyone within the pool can apply providing they have a valid driver’s license and pass a driver records check. A significant incentive for drivers is that they may use the vehicle for personal use, up to around 1,000 miles per month. Some vanpools, depending on what the participants agree upon, will allow drivers to participate for free; this choice is up to the participants within each vanpool. The driver is also responsible for the vehicle’s maintenance (e.g. oil changes). Commute with Enterprise typically replaces the vehicle annually. Vanpool participants also collectively determine where the vanpool will meet and drop off and hours for the vanpool. Most vanpools find a central meeting point or two, typically a location with underutilized parking during the week (e.g. big box retailers, a church, a park-n-ride). Commute with Enterprise assists the vanpools with identifying pick-up locations.

Commuters lease the vanpool vehicle from Commute with Enterprise. The cost per vehicle is around \$1,000 to \$1,200 per month. The Nebraska DOT provides a subsidy of \$400 per month for each vanpool to help reduce costs. The remaining cost is divided up amongst vanpool members, so more riders means cheaper monthly costs. Commute with Enterprise works to provide appropriately sized vehicles to meet the needs of the group; however, in order to be eligible for federal reimbursement, each vehicle must have seven seatbelts. Vanpools generally range from seven to fifteen people; however, the Go NEWhere program does allow for smaller vanpools as needed. If a vanpool starts small and gains additional members, Commute with Enterprise provides a larger vehicle.



*Photo Credit: N. Hetherington, WTI/MSU*

Commute with Enterprise submits an annual report to Nebraska DOT which includes the total miles driven, total number of vanpools and commuters, savings to the environment, and savings to the commuter. In addition, Commute with Enterprise completes all required National Transit Database (NTD) reporting including data on costs. As the program administrative oversight entity, Nebraska DOT collaborates with Commute with Enterprise on NTD reporting.

## Current Ridership

Go NEWhere vanpool is available statewide. Go NEWhere currently has around 50 active vanpools across the state, the majority of which are operating in proximity to Nebraska's two largest cities in the southeast. Vanpools traveling either to or from rural areas have remained strong even through the COVID-19 pandemic, as the vanpools were primarily transporting essential workers to food processing plants, manufacturing plants, and other industrial employers.

In Nebraska, particularly in more rural areas, employers often struggle to recruit employees due to transportation challenges. Consequently, some of these rural employers will provide an additional vanpool subsidy.

## Program Funding

The vanpool program is subsidized with Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5311 formula grant funding for rural pools. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds provide a pool of funding that can be used in more urbanized areas. None of the funding used for the program is state funding.

Some of the more rural employers may contribute to some or all of the remaining cost of the vanpool, as it assists them with attracting the employees that they need. Typically, the guaranteed ride home (GRH) is provided by the employer.

## Marketing

The Go NEWhere program has created a consistent brand logo used on all marketing materials along with the Nebraska DOT logo and the Commute with Enterprise logo. To advertise the program, all vehicles are wrapped with GoNEWhere branding which includes a phone number for more information. Branding the vehicles has been a very effective advertising strategy. The Go NEWhere website ([nebraskatransit.com](http://nebraskatransit.com)) is dedicated to the vanpool program which includes information on the program and contact information for people to reach out to if they have questions or would like to start a vanpool.

The Nebraska DOT has issued statewide press releases that have helped gather interest. Directly reaching out to employers and riders sharing information about the program with their colleagues, friends, and family have been the most effective form of marketing.

The Nebraska DOT has tried to reach out to rural public transportation providers to make them aware that the vanpool program can address service needs outside of when their systems run. However, to date, there has been limited coordination.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

### *Consider Additional Program Provisions When Developing Your RFP:*

When developing their vanpool program RFP, the Nebraska DOT included provisions for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In particular, if a vanpool requests an ADA accessible vehicle, then one must be provided. However, a recent review of the vanpool ADA accommodations recommended that potential candidates be made aware of these provisions. Therefore, the Nebraska DOT is working with their Commute with Enterprise representative to create a standardized presentation that includes information on ADA accessibility and how to go about requesting accommodations.

The Nebraska DOT did not include within their RFP a request for demographic information, which may have allowed them to better understand the vanpool user group. An agency should try to fully consider all information that they desire and include it to the best of their ability in the RFP and make note of any additional information they should obtain for inclusion in future RFPs.

The majority of existing vanpool users are presumed to be work-week users. However, opportunities exist to add employees to existing vanpools that may be only working a few days a week.

### *Vanpools Fluctuate and Take Time to Evolve:*

The Nebraska DOT began planning for the Go NEWhere program in 2014 and the system launched in 2017. Since 2017, the program has grown due to marketing efforts and word of mouth. The total number of vanpools and the total number of vanpool participants has fluctuated over time, which is very normal for vanpools. Vanpools are leased on a month-to-month basis from Commute with Enterprise. This allows for a lot of flexibility where participants can try out a vanpool and if it does not work out, they can return the vehicle. In another case, as a vanpool grows additional participants, Commute with Enterprise can accommodate these changes by providing a larger vehicle.

### *Turnkey Programs Mean Fewer Staff Resources:*

Because of its turnkey nature, it is up to Commute with Enterprise to ensure that the vanpool program is running smoothly on a day-to-day basis. The benefit of this is that it requires fewer Nebraska DOT staff resources (e.g., staff hours) to keep the vanpool program operational.

### *Urban Areas May Not Be Primary Users:*

The Nebraska DOT knows that there are a significant number of commuters between Lincoln and Omaha, the two largest cities in the state. Therefore, Nebraska DOT was surprised that only a few vanpools serve this corridor. However, this may potentially reflect the flexibility that a personal vehicle offers when compared with a vanpool. Consequently, higher income areas, which can more easily afford private vehicles, where congestion is not consistent, will likely not find vanpools to be of value.

### *Engaging Employers Take Time:*

The Nebraska DOT has noted that with some employers, especially larger employers who may have multiple levels of management, identifying the appropriate person to discuss the advantages of and the need for a vanpool program can take time.

## Next Steps

With COVID-19 restrictions lifting, both the Nebraska DOT and Commute with Enterprise are very positive about growth for the vanpool program, especially as fuel costs rise and more commuters seek to save money. In particular, the Nebraska DOT would like to look for opportunities to create vanpools in other regions of the state.

## Learn More

To learn more about the Go NEWhere Vanpool Program, please visit the program website at: <https://www.nebraskatransit.com/statewide-vanpool>

## Contact Information

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