

## Staff Profile

### An Interview of Don Strathman, Driver, Nemaha County Public Transit

*By Lisa Harris*

Note: We are starting a new series that will profile people who help provide transit service in Kansas. Our first interview is with Don Strathman, who drives for Nemaha

County Transit. Don was included in a video about rural public transit last year. You can see the video at <http://www.ksrtap.org> under RTAP Resources.



#### ***Don, how long have you been a driver?***

Going on eight years.

#### ***What got you interested in driving?***

I wanted a part-time job after retiring. I can't stand to sit still, so I needed to do something, and something with less manual labor than I had been doing. As a driver, I get to meet a lot of people -- a lot of older people, and people with disabilities, and other people who need our help.

#### ***What did you do in life before you were a driver?***

Oh, a lot of different things. I ran a spray rig for a co-op in town. I also ran a grain elevator for them. Before that I ran a locker business, where I butchered meat for 23 years. I did a few other things here and there, too.

#### ***How long have you lived in Nemaha County?***

Since I got married in 1967. I grew up in Marshall County, the next county over.

#### ***What are some of the things you like best about driving?***

The biggest thing is: I like helping people who need help. I like that we can take people to doctor's appointments, and to the hospital, and to the training center for people with disabilities. We take a lot

of people to the nutrition center for lunch, and back home again. We take them to all kinds of places. We give them rides so they can enjoy life too.

***What are some of the challenges you face as a driver?***

Making sure people are buckled in right, and getting them in and out of the van. Some of the newer and bigger wheelchairs can be hard to manage. We can always get it done. It just takes some time. So we allow an extra 10 minutes for when we have people with wheelchairs to transport. Another challenge is that sometimes you have a long walk to help people get where they need to be.

***What tips do you have for other drivers?***

Take your time and enjoy being with the riders. Enjoy doing what you are doing. You can't get in a hurry to get things done, because you don't want to have any injuries – for you or your riders.

Also, make sure you know where you are going if it is a place new to you. I have a Garmin with me all the time. Everything is set up on our phone too, using a Google app. If you have a dispatcher, they can help too.

One other thing - we use Bluetooth earpieces and they work great. That way I can be reached any time when I get a call for a pick up, not just when I am in the van. The earpieces take care of privacy issues, since you can't take some calls on a radio in a van. There are a lot of different kinds of earpieces. I have the lightest one I could find at Walmart and it fits outside my ear so I can wear my hearing aids.

***What tips do you have for people who might be interested in becoming drivers?***

If you are interested at all in helping people, it's one of the best jobs you can ask for. You can enjoy talking to the riders, and you can see the countryside along the way. We also go to places outside the county, like Topeka and Kansas City, for medical trips, so you get to see different places. You might have to wait awhile at those places, but you never know who you are going to meet while you wait.

***The favorite part of my work day is...***

My favorite part is just picking up the people... just the satisfaction of getting them where they need to go. We try to get them there a little early for appointments, at the beauty shop, dentist, doctor, wherever they are going. We don't schedule return trips ahead of time, so there is no pressure for a

rider to finish up an appointment at a particular time. The rider or someone at the location calls us when it is time to get picked up. Every place in town has our phone number – the grocery stores, everybody. They are set up to call us, and they like to see our riders come.

***Someone you particularly enjoy working with, and why...***

I enjoy ALL the people here... the dispatcher, administrator, the other drivers.

***Have you observed any changes in transit use or transit needs over the time you have been a driver?***

Oh yes. There are many more older people around now. People are using transit for more things, too, like Medicaid trips. We keep expanding. We had about 20 to 30 stops per day when I started, now we're up to 70-some per day. We had two part-time drivers to start, each 20 hours-a-week. That was before we started Medicaid trips. Now we have two full-time and three part-time drivers. I went from part-time to full-time. And we went from one to three office people, and we do dispatching. We have three vans and a bus now in Seneca, and a bus and a van in Sabetha. Another vehicle is on the way. We keep growing.

Here's an example of one of my days: Our town is one mile long. Recently I had 73 trips in a day, including driving six miles out of town twice. I drove a hundred miles that day. It adds up quick.

***If you were given the money to buy something that would improve transit service in your community, what would it be?***

I guess it would be bigger vans so it would be easier for people get on and off. Some of the newer wheelchair designs make boarding and buckling them in difficult. I prefer a ramp for a van rather than a lift. It's just simpler to use. But really, if I had some money to put toward something I would use it to just make sure we have enough money so we can keep going with our service. There is such a need. And it's not just older and disabled people we serve. There are children who we take to school. Their parents are working and there is no car. We will also take children home from school if there is bad weather and the parents call to request it.

***What do you like to do for fun, outside of driving?***

I enjoy bowling at the local four-lane alley, and I help do repairs on the lanes, too. My wife and I like to play cards with friends. And I really like playing with the grandkids. We have 28 grandchildren and a few

great-grands, and more on the way. We had five of them out to the house this past weekend and the oldest was 4 years old. We just play around and I really enjoy that.

***Where do you like to eat out in Nemaha County?***

I like to eat anything, anywhere, anytime. I grew up at a time when you ate whatever Mom put in front of you -- or you didn't get any! So you learned to like everything. But I'm a meat lover, especially after being a butcher all those years. I like a good steakhouse, and I like the new Mexican restaurant in town.

***What is your favorite community activity?***

In our area we have a basketball/ volleyball tournament that is a fundraiser. Two or three people in need are chosen to be helped each year. The tournament started in Baileyville, but they don't have an auditorium anymore so it moved to Seneca. It includes a silent auction. Last year \$200,000 was raised. [Yes, two hundred thousand dollars.] This is a community that helps people. One year a brother-in-law of mine who had cancer was a recipient. That event brings more people together than anything.

***Any parting thoughts?***

I am 74 years old this year, and I work with older people all the time. I can see what's coming, even in my own life. We need to keep Medicaid and Medicare going and do whatever it takes to not let them slip. My mother is in an assisted living place right now, she's going on 96. She has a brother who is turning 100. I see the need for these programs -- every single day.

Other than that, I just plain enjoy driving. I drive a truck for farmers sometimes, too. It doesn't matter what it is -- I'll drive it. And I enjoy being with people. So this job is a great fit, and I enjoy doing what I'm doing.

Nemaha County, population just over 10,000, is in Northeast Kansas, on the border with Nebraska. Nemaha County Public Transit provides on-demand general public transportation and non-emergency medical transportation. Nemaha Transit will go wherever a rider requests service, including outside the county to nearby counties and even Nebraska, or to medical centers in Topeka and Kansas City. Service is available on weekdays. For more information about services and fees, visit [nemahacountypublictransit.org](http://nemahacountypublictransit.org).