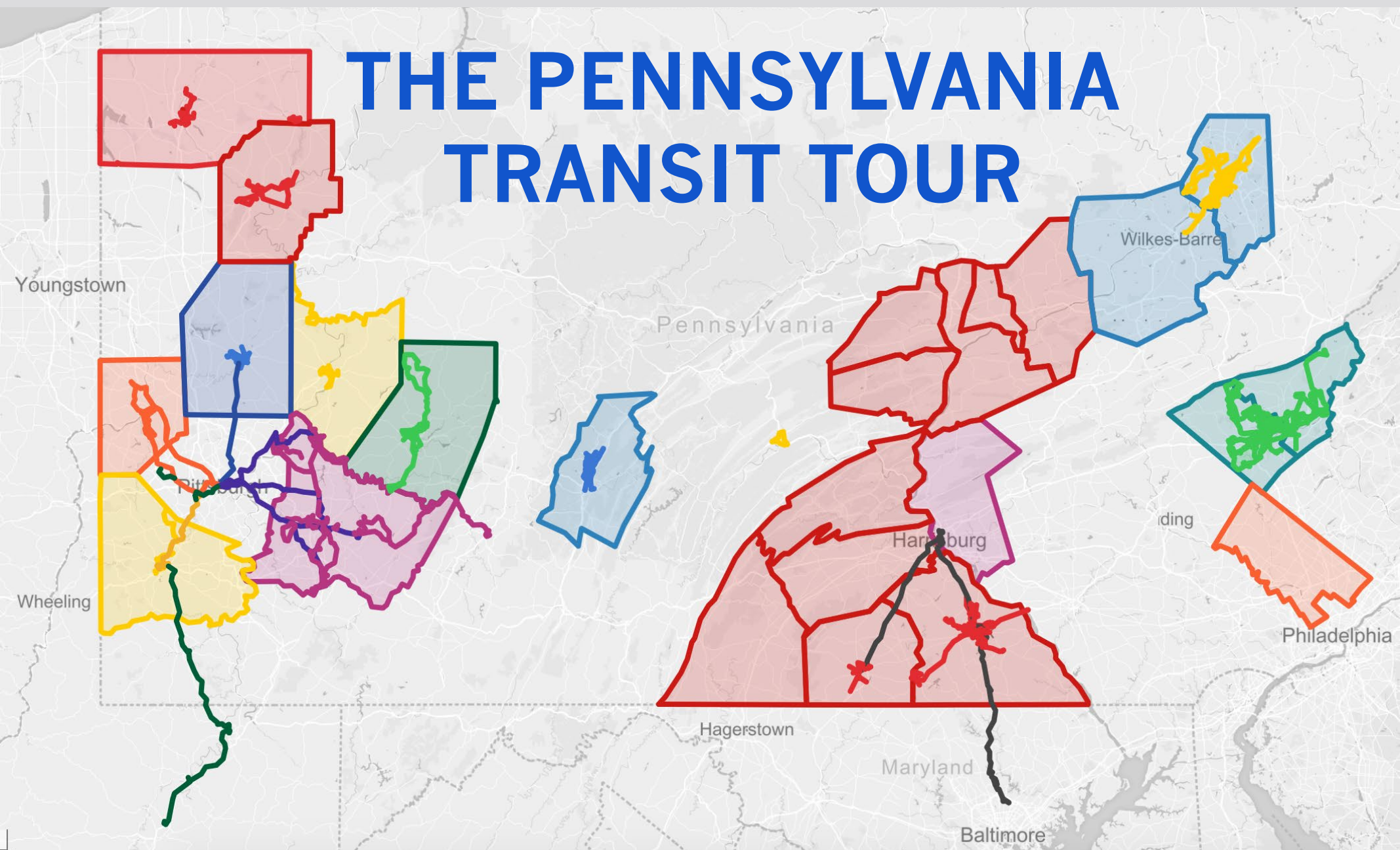


# THE PENNSYLVANIA TRANSIT TOUR



# Suburban Transit Network: Success Through Quality Standards

*CTAA Membership and Communications Director Rich Sampson visited Suburban Transit Network in April, 2018 as the final stop on the Pennsylvania Transit Tour, while Communications Specialist Taylor McGinley traveled up to Montgomery County, Pa., as her first visit to a CTAA member in August, 2018. They file this profile of Suburban Transit Network jointly – ed.*

Philadelphia has a rich historical and cultural tapestry, home to hundreds of attractions and locations for tourists and residents to explore. Beyond the Liberty Bell and a stop for cheesesteaks are well-established, dense communities. Although Philadelphia is consistently-ranked among the nation's top ten transit networks, many assume that amounts to the region's mammoth [Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority](#) (SEPTA) and not much else.

Nestled among Philadelphia's suburbs, Montgomery County is home to neighborhoods, businesses and communities not much younger than the city's historic areas. The area's quaint identity sits in contrast with the industrial zones surrounding the city.

As my first trip visiting a CTAA member, I exited SEPTA's Norristown Regional Rail station and was quickly aware of the dense-



TransNet shuttles line-up on campus at St. Joseph's University.

ly-populated city, which hosts two different rail options into Philadelphia. Revitalization projects have enhanced its downtown, where construction zones exist on just about every other block. In the heart of the rejuvenation exists the [Suburban Transit Network](#), more commonly known as TransNet. It's an organization with a passion of serving those needing more than just fixed-route bus service.

## Folding Tables to Frequent Service

The agency that's now known as TransNet – and provides more than 3,000 trips per day – started off in 1980 as little more than a pilot project by two dedicated employees at the [Montgomery County Office on Aging](#). Carol Sterling and a colleague were overseeing a small program to provide transportation to the county's seniors. They worked with local cab companies to provide trips to



The company has developed a bright and consistent brand identity across its vehicles and information platforms.

medical appointments, shopping, congregate meal sites and more. After the project's six-month trial period ended with promising results, the pair decided to continue their work in paratransit, starting a non-profit corporation – then known as Montgomery County Paratransit – and resigned their positions with the county.

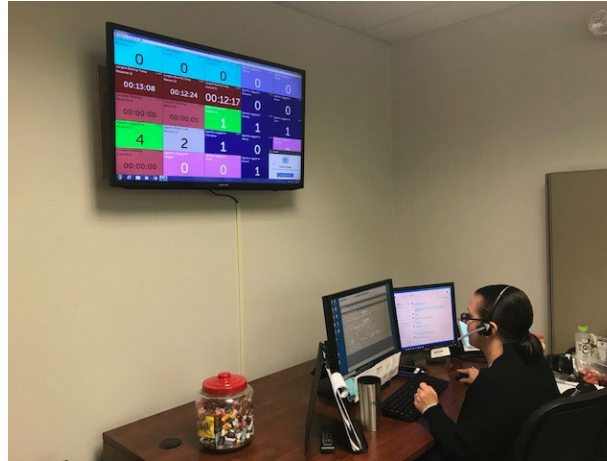
For the two, relatively-young entrepreneurs, it was a big risk, but one for which they were ultimately rewarded. Starting with a folding table and a single rotary phone, they wagered the concept they initiated through the pilot project could not only continue to serve seniors' unmet mobility needs, but could expand to other un- or under-served travel markets in the county. They created partnerships with developmental disabilities services to connect people with employment at sheltered workshops, then added contracts with senior



From left: TransNet Executive Director Susan Kopystiecki, Director of Operations Carol Sterling and Risk Management Director Maria Church at TransNet's offices in Blue Bell.

centers and meals on wheels programs. By 1986, they were looking at new work with private-sector companies in connecting employees with SEPTA bus and rail services and launching shuttle routes.

"It was exciting and scary at the same time," says Sterling, TransNet's Director of Operations. "Of course, we believed in what we were doing and its importance in helping people in their daily lives, but we decided to focus on two management approaches: running a tight ship in terms of operations and safety, and never assuming we'd be able to keep a given contract forever. We never got complacent."



TransNet's dispatching personnel have access to real-time info screens that display easy-to-read status updates on vehicles and trips.

### Personal Relationships are Key

Between then and now, TransNet has grown into the largest paratransit provider in the Philadelphia region. They work closely with six private-sector transit partners to provide quality service for their customers, with trips reaching into Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Lehigh, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties. Utilizing more than 300 vehicles and drivers, TransNet and its partners offer a variety of transportation options, including:

- Shuttle services for employers and college campuses;
- A Shared-Ride Program for those 65 years or older
- Pennsylvania's Statewide Medical Assistance Transportation Program (MATP); and

- Transportation for persons with disabilities, between the ages of 18 to 64.

Part of what makes TransNet unique are their skills to develop and maintain personal relationships. They work closely with transit partners, government agencies and their consumers to deliver high-quality service.

"When you do transit for 25 years, you just know it," says Maria Church, CSSO, Risk Management Director at TransNet, who also serves on CTAA's [National Community Transportation Roadeo Committee](#).

TransNet staff has developed close relationships with staff at each partner site. They know each other, their families and their habits as well as they know themselves. With colleagues working together for ten years or more, passengers feel comfortable knowing that their transit providers have dedicated their life to the industry.

Not only does staff maintain close, professional relationships, but so do the drivers with their riders. During a ride-a-long with James, a driver from TransNet's partner and CTAA member [Easton Coach](#), it was clear how knowledgeable he was with the roads, his riders and their destinations. He had been driving for years and it showed. As we pulled up to a customer's home, he immediately jumped out of the vehicle to help her board. The customer beat him to the punch and comfortably settled into her seat.

He double-checked her seatbelt, to ensure she was safe and secure, and then returned to his seat to set a course to her destination. After a few short minutes, and plenty of conversation, we had arrived at her destination and James provided assistance as she exited the vehicle.

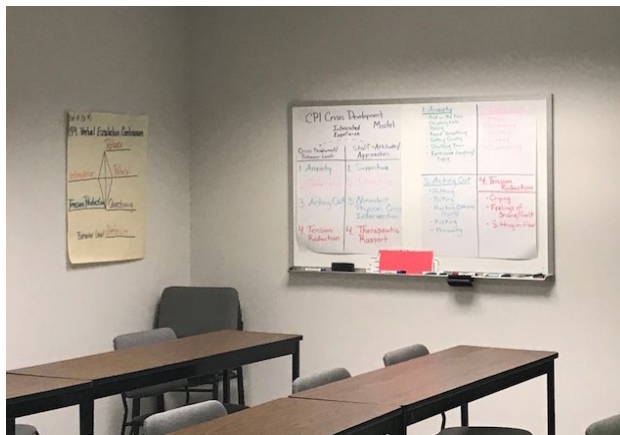
“If you’re going south or west, you know the odd number [addresses] will be on the right hand side. If you’re going north or east, it’ll be even on the right,” said James Downam, Easton Coach’s driver.

This passion and dedication to service is not an uncommon quality among TransNet’s drivers. Customers regularly feel satisfied and safe knowing their drivers are knowledgeable and skillful.

### Growing with a Vision

As the organization and neighborhoods around them continue to grow and change, TransNet has begun facing concerns that are common among demand-response providers. Individual trips are expensive, especially while maintaining low-cost fares. No-shows are a perpetual challenge, numbering about 150 a day at TransNet. How does an organization preserve high standards at a lower cost?

Thanks to innovative contracts with schools and private companies, TransNet is finding ways to improve efficiency. These contracts provide stable investments, ul-



TransNet’s training room is in regular use, as the company conducts training and assessments directly for its service providers.

timately allowing TransNet to facilitate the growth of their fleet and expand their premium services. Private company and school/college shuttle services provide roughly 43 percent of TransNet’s total budget. By seeking these new type of contracts, this paratransit provider can keep costs low.

“We’re always trying to be at the forefront of change, instead of following,” says Executive Director Susan Kopysteck, who came aboard in 1996 from one of TransNet’s service providers, as Sterling sought to continue in her role as Director of Operations. “We believe it’s our focus on responsiveness, quality control and professionalism that makes us an attractive service provider. We would rather not operate a service than operate it poorly.”



TransNet’s Maria Church demonstrates new safety equipment at Easton Coach’s maintenance facility.

### Innovation in Vehicle Safety

TransNet consistently strives to ensure their vehicles are up to date as technology advances. For example, TransNet is working to make wheelchair assistance easier. Using a mini-van, they have installed Incline, an easy-to-use ramp system.

The driver attaches retractable straps securely to the rider’s wheelchair, while an automated system retracts the straps, pulls the wheelchair up the ramp and into the van. From there, the driver adds an extra level of security by adjusting a seatbelt and a lap belt, to ensure the customer is safe throughout the drive. The loading process takes roughly five minutes.

When demonstrating this addition during our visit, many employees from TransNet and Easton Coach gathered around to see



New CNG-fuelled vehicles have entered TransNet's fleet.

how it worked. The energy and excitement in the room was palpable. It was uplifting to see a group of people excited to find new ways to serve their customers.

In addition to new rider securing tools, TransNet vehicles are becoming increasingly sustainable. In the past two years, TransNet has expanded its Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) fleet to 15 in Montgomery County.

"We introduce new technology and assets when they are required by regulations, make sense financially and improve the experience for our customers," says Kopys-tecki.

### Reducing Risks

TransNet and their partners are devoted to maintaining high safety standards. Every month, Church and an independent mechanic inspect half their fleet, alternating bi-monthly. Inspections are extremely detailed, examining everything from the head lights to the brake pads. If there are any deficien-

cies reported during the inspection, the service partner must make the repairs within a week and report back to TransNet. Each vehicle in the TransNet fleet complies with state and federal regulations.

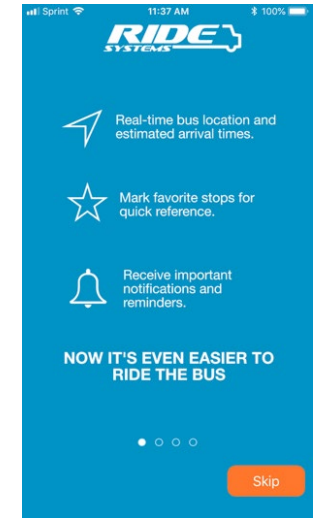
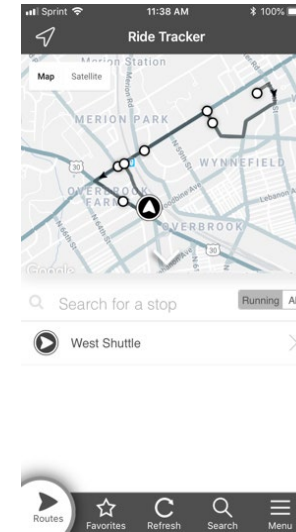
Drivers employed by TransNet's partner companies are held to similarly high standards. Their combined 319 drivers have passed a background check, motor vehicle record check, and a child abuse check. They also undergo multiple trainings and certifications to maintain standards once hired. Each contractor has at least 10 years of operational experience, with many in business much longer.

"We expect good service and our standards are very high," says Church. "Our partner companies provide quality service, and are the best of the best in this business."

### Reaching Out to Customers and Communities

TransNet and their partners have found new ways to keep their riders informed of transit arrival times and vehicle locations. One example of this is their new Ride Systems app for college students at Saint Joseph's University and Chestnut Hill College.

The app tracks the vehicle's location and reports real-time arrival in comparison to scheduled arrival times. User reviews demonstrate that students have been pleased



The Ride Systems app is being deployed first to TransNet's college audience, with potential to expand to other rider segments

with this innovative technology. TransNet is hoping to roll this out across all future college contracts.

Keeping riders safe is the top priority of TransNet. They offer clear and memorable safety cards to remind riders of important protocols, along with newly-marketed brochures updating passengers on policies, guidelines and information specific to their service program.

Along with the brochures, TransNet has instituted a new website, an extensive social media campaign, new bus wrap designs and helpful how-to videos. These videos have proved helpful in providing additional resources for driver training, boosting customer appreciation and presenting information to their partners.



## Your Link to the Community

[DISABILITY SERVICES](#)
[MEDICAL ASSISTANCE](#)
[SCHOOL/CAMP](#)
[SHARED RIDE](#)
[SHUTTLE SERVICES](#)

Very helpful!



Aug 7

21coolbeans21

This app makes going to class soooo much better! Especially when you don't want to sit outside waiting for the bus, you can just chill in your apartment and watch the bus from your phone. Seeing all the different routes and stops is also super great!

This App Is Amazing



Jul 31

ERICKIMEASTON

I use this app every day. I no longer have to wait in the snow for my bus to come. I just pull up my app and I know exactly where my bus is and how long will be until it gets to my stop. I love the favorite feature!!!

Through these innovative outreach tools, as well as fun products – such as adult coloring and activity books, TransNet maintains strong relationships with their consumers.

“We’ve created a good brand and deploy it consistently, but it doesn’t mean anything if it doesn’t convey important information that customers will pay attention to,” says Danielle Wiley, TransNet’s Marketing Manager, who’s been with the company for a little more than two years. “Our customers’ needs are so diverse – from seniors and people with disabilities to daily commuters and college students. Each audience requires an approach that connects with them.”

## Keeping Customers at the Forefront

After spending a day with TransNet employees, it was clear how they and their partners are committed to providing convenient, safe and low-cost transportation options. By continually improving their outreach programs, quality control and identifying new business opportunities, TransNet has developed authentic relationships with their customers and surrounding communities.

“We found an opportunity to participate in the process of providing better transportation options in Montgomery County, and we’ve earned the trust of those making decisions,” says Sterling, looking back on the journey of the company she co-founded

more than 38 years ago. “Our challenge is the same now as it was then: never become complacent and be sure you deliver your absolute best all the time.” **CT**

