

These Cleveland church vans will drive you to work

by [Henry Pan](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue

It's hard to get around without a car in Northeast Ohio. Decades of neglect by the federal and state governments have resulted in endless cuts to transit service, which in turn have led to years of ridership decline.

Amid this transit death spiral, the state continues to pursue initiatives that encourage sprawl. Cleveland has lost 6 percent of its population since 2010, according to the 2020 Census. The declining tax base and government neglect have stranded low-income people who cannot afford to move elsewhere and need transit the most.

Enter the Cleveland Clergy Coalition and pastor Aaron Phillips. Phillips's Sure House Baptist Church had four vans that were only being used on Sundays. Realizing that people can't get to a well-paying job if they don't have a way to get there, the coalition decided to put their vans to use by connecting Clevelanders with better-paying jobs in the suburbs.

The initiative, called Get2Work Now, was kickstarted in 2019 with a \$100,000 prize from the Fund for Our Economic Future.

"Too many people were facing this false choice that you either had to own or operate and maintain what is a really expensive individual car for each family in order to get to work," said Bethia Burke, president of the fund. The fund also provided free transit passes for hospital workers and a car sharing program for job seekers.

The church vans have connected 100 workers, who are mostly Black and live in Cleveland's mid-to-south side, to well-

paying manufacturing jobs in the suburbs. Two-way trips cost \$15—the rider pays \$5 and the employer pays \$10. Deacons from Sure House serve as both drivers and mentors.

“[The riders] have someone to listen to them, someone to guide them, and to help them understand different cultures, get off of the transition period, encourage them to stay on the job,” said Phillips.

The vans provide door-to-door service, which takes about an hour—twice as long as driving directly there. But public transit would take three hours and require an excursion to connect with a bus in Akron, which is 37 miles away.

Right now, the vans only take people to and from their homes to one employer, a die casting plant in the Cleveland suburb of Twinsburg. Phillips says they would like to work with more employers, but they have been struggling to find employers to partner with. Phillips blames employers’ desire to use temp agencies instead.

The church fills a gap for people who cannot afford to drive themselves to and from work. But it’s been hard to keep up. Since the grant the program received has been fully expended, it is now running a deficit. The church has also had to rely on donations to keep the vans maintained, and they recently secured a donation for tires.

Despite these challenges, they carry on—because it’s a part of Sure House’s mission to help people get to work and support them. “It’s a charity—it’s part of our mission plan,” Phillips said. “We’re better than a staffing agency.” —Next City. This story is part of the SoJo Exchange from the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.