

Military OneSource Podcast — Reimagining Transit for Military Life

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Today we're going to talk about food. Specifically, how you feed lots and lots of people. We have a guest joining us who is from Fort Cavazos in Texas, and it's Raymond Suarez. And Raymond is going to talk to us about something called the Cavazos Connector. So, we'll get into this, but what it is basically is one of the ways that they have figured out to get nutritious meals to lots and lots of soldiers. Raymond, welcome to the podcast.

Raymond Suarez:

Well, thank you. I'm very happy to be here and look forward to the conversation.

Bruce Moody:

Same here. First, tell us about yourself. What is it that you do?

Raymond Suarez:

Sure. I'm the general manager for the Hill Country Transit District. We serve four counties, about 650,000 people with public transportation. I'm actually an innovation and strategy leader for a company by the name of the Hendrickson Transportation Group, and we provide general management services to the HOP. So, think of the HOP or the Hill Country Transit District as a public transit agency that has been contracted to Fort Cavazos to provide mobility across the entire installation.

In addition to providing public transit on the installation, we also integrate with the public transit system. It has a commuter route service that runs on 30-minute

frequency, and it provides active-duty, families and general population on the base with access to the entire region. So, five cities all connected with micro transit. You'll hear me use the word micro transit throughout this conversation. It's an industry buzzword for something that is Uber-like. The difference between Uber and what we provide is we provide transit or public transit services on a van that picks up and drops off multiple people all going in relatively the same direction.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Alright. There's a lot to unpack there. You mentioned the population. I'm retired Navy, so I've been to a bunch of bases, some big, some small, but you guys I think are officially behemoth. Can you give us some numbers or just a sense of just how big your post is?

Raymond Suarez:

So, we're about 30 square miles, I would say. And these are general numbers.

Bruce Moody:

Sure.

Raymond Suarez:

We can range from 30,000 in population to well over 100,000. The lower numbers-

Bruce Moody:

Is that because of the deployment numbers?

Raymond Suarez:

Yes. Exactly right. About a year and a half ago, I would say, General Bernabe, the commanding officer — well-traveled, experienced on some of the best transit systems in the world — he had a vision and wanted to see if it was possible to create on the installation something similar that he has seen in transit systems around the world. And that is to improve the overall quality of life on the military installation.

Mobility is one of the fundamental resources that are needed. Without it, people feel isolated. They can't get to, not only food, but entertainment. The sense of community, the sense of having the ability to do what you need to do when you're off duty, really all culminates in the psychology or the well-being — the mental well-being. And it's not just getting food in people. Military is excellent at making sure that our active-duty

personnel are in great shape, but we also need them to be in top mental shape. And so, access to everything is critically important. And when you have a military base that is very sprawled, you have a lot of new soldiers coming in that may not even know how to drive a car or have a driver's license, and now they have to traverse a very large geography, and that's not easy. His idea was can we come up with an innovative idea to serve everybody and create ubiquitous mobility on the base? And we've achieved that.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, especially for those who are young and new to the military, new to the post, on top of the fact that they probably aren't earning a whole lot of money, they've got very, very busy and demanding schedules. So, I can definitely see the value of this. What sort of feedback are you getting so far?

Raymond Suarez:

It's been spectacular. I would say from a national perspective, these types of systems tend to carry between five and seven people per service hour, and we are four to five times that, so we're carrying well over 20 rides per passenger hour. We also have through the app that people use to request a ride ... they have the ability to also provide immediate feedback on the ride. And typically, we're at 95% or better customer satisfaction. And the information they leave is anything from the driver experience to were they courteous, to "Hey, I was late, and I missed an appointment or something." So, overall it's been an overwhelming success. We hear from active-duty personnel; we hear from the military leadership that everybody's just super happy with the system.

Bruce Moody:

And this could be a ride across post; it could be the ride to the commissary or to some other place. It doesn't necessarily have to be off the installation. Am I correct?

Raymond Suarez:

Correct.

Bruce Moody:

And do you have any numbers? I mean, generally speaking, how many rides you've offered so far?

Raymond Suarez:

Sure. So, we have roughly 13 vehicles on the installation, and we've performed 230,000 rides.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, my goodness.

Raymond Suarez:

Yes. It's extraordinary. We had asked the general and the leadership before we started just as an initial benchmark, what would success look like? And they said, "Wow, we've had our own transportation system. We've carried a few thousand annually on that. We think 30,000 would be a great target to hit. I don't know if that's possible, but yeah, 30,000 would be great." We're at 230,000 in the first year.

Bruce Moody:

And so, somebody, a soldier for example, has access to an app; they download the app, and then they can request a ride or they download schedules or is it a little bit of both? How does that work?

Raymond Suarez:

Great question. What they do is, they download the app, so when they get onto the installation, they go through their orientation. During the orientation, everybody learns how to use the app. You download it off the app store, iPhone or Android, you put in your identification information, and then it's literally like using Uber or Lyft. If you've never done that before you go in, you say, "Hey, I want to go to the following." You either put in an address or you specifically say, "I need to go to the exchange." And you just press a button, and it says there's a vehicle that's available, it's three minutes out. Do you want to accept the ride? You say "Yes," and the vehicle comes to you. You don't have to walk to a bus stop or shelter.

You can also pre-schedule the ride. So, if you know that you're going to get off duty or have a break and you're three miles from the commissary or wherever you want to get lunch, it could be a Popeyes or whatever on the installation, you can pre-schedule that ride to arrive at noon and you walk out and the vehicle. And you can track it on the app. So, within five minutes you'll start seeing the vehicle coming toward you and the vehicle identification, license plate, all that stuff, and it just literally picks you up right where you are.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, I can see that. That sounds very familiar to what we're already using. That's really amazing.

One of the things that I think that soldier service members, especially when you're young, you've got these schedules that are booked solid. I wonder what you think about being able to offer these timelines to people who know they have to be back at a certain place at a certain time because they have duty or training or they just have to be somewhere. Does having this app, do you get any feedback that says knowing how long a trip is going to take or knowing what time I'm going to be arriving back allows me to book with confidence?

Raymond Suarez:

Correct. That can be a bit of a challenge. So, we can't control the traffic.

Bruce Moody:

Of course.

Raymond Suarez:

What we have seen though is through these apps, it does allow human behavior to change very quickly. It's a fluid process. As an example, if someone has ever used Uber or Lyft, it says, hey, there's a vehicle three minutes out ... well, or it may be 10 minutes out. Well, you don't stand on the corner waiting for 10 minutes. You could, but most people just go on about their day and they keep watching the app, and when the vehicle is about ready to come outside, they walk out to the vehicle. So, it makes them more productive.

If at a certain time of day, let's say the lunch hour, the system tends to queue up your behavior changes to actually request the ride earlier in the day or schedule the trip so that you have more or less a guarantee that the vehicle will be there to pick you up.

We can't control Mother Nature; we can't control traffic. But what this does allow is it allows the end user to make decisions to either take the trip or not take the trip. And even if you select the trip, you still have the ability to cancel the trip. So, we've made a lot of flexibility inherent to the system so that people can use it the way they need to. But understand, we have only so many vehicles and at high peak the demand can be significant. So, you just have to plan that in your schedule.

And the app, again, does give you the ability to pre-schedule. It has you the ability to schedule on the fly. And the beauty of this is we're starting to see a lot more trip requests, doctor's appointments actually being fulfilled because they have a consistent

and reliable transit solution that can not only get them there but can get them back relatively on time.

Bruce Moody:

This is sort of a partner conversation. So, we did another interview with your colleagues at Fort Cavazos really looking at food, the delivery of food, the presentation of food to service members, and there was a big emphasis on really improving the experience at the dining hall. It's more than just putting out a tray of food. There's just a whole atmosphere that goes along with the dining hall that makes people want to go there. And I wonder if you are seeing more participation at the dining hall as a result of the Cavazos Connector?

Raymond Suarez:

We haven't specifically focused on that trip, but it is inherently evident in the data that we're seeing. The highest demands on our system are at the beginning of the day, during the lunch hour, and across a more spread-out timeframe over more of a three to four hour timeframe in the afternoon. As people roll off duty, you'll see the demand; it's still fairly high and then it drops off after 7 p.m. But usually, the 30 minutes before folks go on duty, we see a large peak because people are going from their domicile to their workplace, but lunch is probably the highest demand. So, we try to keep track of different types of trips. We look at origin and destination of the trips. But typically, the destinations, the exchange, some of the quick serve restaurants on the installation, they're frequently visited by the 230,000 trips that we see. That's a lot of meals.

Bruce Moody:

It is a lot of meals. And I wonder when you are briefing leadership, how are they reacting to the numbers or some of the trends that you're presenting them?

Raymond Suarez:

I think they're quite astonished. I can tell you just a lagging indicator of success is when you have the leadership of Fort Cav communicating to the Joint Chiefs, the Pentagon. We're starting to get a lot of traction. We're fielding a lot of interest from other military installations across the country. They want the same system. They obviously ask some of the same questions you're asking. Once we walk them through how the system works, then typically the next thing is, well, we need to figure out how to fund it.

But there's a lot of interest growing, not only in the U.S. Army, but in other branches of the armed forces, because everybody needs the same thing. They need to have access; they need to be able to get to places quickly and conveniently. And you would think

with the U.S. military being probably the best logistical organization on the planet, that transit would be easy to do, but it is not easy to do, to serve a lot of people in high volume in short periods of time, and they don't want to reinvent the wheel.

So, it's a little bit of a heavy lift. We have to identify the transit system that is close to another installation, but I would say there's high visibility. We're talking to folks in Washington D.C., with the Federal Transit Administration, different branches to figure out how to create a sustainable funding source. Because again, this was a brilliant idea from General Bernabe, and he did a lot of heavy lifting to get two years of funding set aside to do this out of a 10-year agreement. And we're now working on institutionalizing the funding and the process so this can continue well into the future.

Bruce Moody:

That's one of the things that's really interesting to me. I'm hoping that there's leadership listening to this podcast saying, "Hey, we should be doing something like that on our installation." Can you get back into that? What are some of the considerations or first steps or how might leadership or logistics people want to start thinking about something like this?

Raymond Suarez:

Well, I do believe that there's interest growing, and I do believe that there's been some different conferences, some keynote speakers coming out of the Fort Cav installation talking about the success. As far as having a IGSA agreement to leverage that already exists, so other installations can look at it: How they set up the contract; what actually are the building blocks of the agreements. But it really comes down to sustainable funding. This was funded, I believe, at a very high level, I want to say it was either at the Pentagon or Joint Chiefs. They had to create a special approval to allow Fort Cavazos to do this because there was interest, as you can imagine, to improve quality of life and access and mobility and all the things that we've talked about. But it costs money to do this.

And so typically a local installation doesn't have enough funding on their own. They don't have a line item dedicated to public transit. And so, we're going through that process of figuring out where in the hierarchy of the armed forces, not just the U.S. Army, but where is the right place to request funding and what needs to change. Simultaneously, we're working with the Federal Transit Administration because we are a public transit system, and we should be getting credit for the service that we provide on a U.S. military installation. But as various branches of the government, they don't always communicate, and their processes are not necessarily applicable across different branches of the government.

But I think what we're hearing and what we're seeing is a lot of interest, even U.S. senators reading in on this going, "Wow, that makes a lot of sense. We should be

making advancements in improving the quality of life for our soldiers and our family and veterans that are on and around the U.S. military installations.” So, in some cases it should be a no-brainer, but we're also fighting the conventional institutional processes that have been in place for decades.

Bruce Moody:

Well, like you said, logistics; it's all about the logistics. It's complex beyond belief, but it does sound like you've nailed down the process. Or how are you looking into the future with regard to the Cavazos Connector?

Raymond Suarez:

Well, we designed the system with maximum flexibility so we can, depending on federal funding, which changes every year, and depending on whether there's an active deployment, we can scale down and we can scale the system up to match the population and the demand. We've gone away from the idea of printed bus schedules and having to walk to a stop. That's a very costly way to deliver mobility because you're running that service whether somebody's waiting for it or not. And we've completely changed that to an on-demand service, which allows people to use it when they need it. And that helps us drive down cost.

So, the system can flex up and can flex down. And with regard to changes in the technology, there's always new ideas that somebody has on how to improve the efficiency of the app, and we continuously do that. But I think the system is fairly innovative, and I wouldn't call it bleeding edge, but I certainly would say it's leading edge, the best that public transit has available to it, both public and private sector for that matter. And we're going to leverage that for the next decade or more.

It really just comes down to how do we change the conventional institution — the actual federal code — to enable funding to be allocated to this type of initiative. And I do believe, we're not there yet, but I do believe there is a groundswell of support to take a hard look at it and figure out how to make this funding not only available long-term for Fort Cavazos, but for any military installation, not only in the U.S. but maybe worldwide. But we need to figure it out. We have great partners at Fort Cav, their leadership. They're working with EMCOM and FORSCOM and others, and we have not seen any significant pushback. But to your point, it's dealing with the institutional code, if you will, and policy that needs to be changed and that can take some time.

Bruce Moody:

It's funny, you mentioned the way you're going about doing this, and you sort of dismissed bleeding edge as not an approach, which if I understand bleeding edge is a concept that basically means you're trying something. But it does sound like instead of

just winging it, you really are going very methodically about this. You're gathering data; you're gathering reports; you're doing the analysis, and then you proceed forward and then you test it and then you take another step forward. It does sound very methodical as I listen to it.

Raymond Suarez:

Yes, thank you for that. We're very focused on ensuring that whatever we do adds maximum or optimized value. There is a difference between optimizing and maximizing. And the art of optimizing is trying to figure out how to bring out the best value that you can for the time and the money that we have available to us. And so, we spend a lot of time up front trying to understand what success should look like, not from a dollars and ridership perspective, but what impact is it making? Is it improving quality of life? Are people happy with the transit system? Not forcing it on them? Getting feedback from active-duty folks and their family to ensure that we don't fall in love with our own system, but we ensure that that value proposition is actually being realized.

And it's probably too late to say, to not be long-winded, but the worst thing you can do is oversell a solution. So, we are very much focused on, "Hey, let's get something out there. Let's try it. Let's validate the system. If we need to make changes, we make changes." But I would say we've hit our stride. We're on a steady state. The value proposition is extraordinary. We are starting to get, as I mentioned before, a lot of interest, and I do believe that the internal machine is trying to figure out how to match the meteoric success with the appropriate amount of governance and funding to make this a reality at other places beyond Fort Cavazos.

Bruce Moody:

Well, I want to thank you for sharing all this information, and it's really interesting. I'd love to have you back, and I'd love to bring you into another conversation to follow up on how this effort is coming along. So, I appreciate you being with us today. Thank you very much.

Raymond Suarez:

Thank you. It's been our honor to serve you. Thanks.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you. And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have any questions or comments about what you've heard today, we do have a link in the program notes. But you can send us your thoughts, tell us what you think. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever

you listen to your podcast, to include YouTube. Please do so, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.