

Open Doors

Season 1 Episode 6: Community on Wheels

Shannon Fagan 0:05

Welcome to Open Doors, a podcast from the Allegheny Intermediate Unit that explores the people, programs, and partnerships making a difference in students' lives. I'm your host, Shannon Fagan. Together, we're opening doors to learning, support, and connection, so every student can thrive. What if a van can change the way schools connect with families at Highland School District? The Ram Van is doing just that. Funded by Project Seeks SES, this mobile resource center brings books, supplies, and wellness checks directly to families, breaking down barriers of transportation, building trust, and strengthening the school community bond. Today, we're joined by Carmen Corner from Highland School District to share more about the Rams van. Well, Carmen, welcome to the AIU podcast of Open Doors. We're very excited to have you here talking about the Rams van at Highland School District, and I was wondering if you could start by introducing yourself and what you do at Highland School District.

Carmen Corna 1:10

So, thank you very much for having me. I am the attendance officer for Highland School District, but my title doesn't actually encompass everything that I do at the district, so I do work with our families who are experiencing homelessness or any housing instability to try and get them some resources, and working with them, as well as some of our other families who may have some needs in helping get resources, and so kind of bringing the community resources to our families and vice versa, so

Shannon Fagan 1:44

that is really a lot, so attendance, you probably see a lot of things, so this fan helps you reach out to families that might not be able to get to school for students,

Carmen Corna 1:55

since we know that that is a barrier at times, is getting to the school. Okay,

Shannon Fagan 2:00

so let me ask you, if you can recall the Rams band getting started, like what sparked that idea.

Carmen Corna 2:06

We were in a meeting talking about barriers and things that were we were seeing in the district with our families, and families not being able to get to meetings at the school, because they don't have transportation, families needing resources, and getting those resources to them, having opportunities to distribute items that they may need through the AIU. We have had previously, we were able to order clothing, so we would get large boxes, and so then getting those out to families who then may not have been able to get to us, so it's really breaking down the barriers, meeting our families where they are. So then we kind of started talking about somebody had mentioned, oh, well, we had a van, there was a van at such and such school district, and they did x, y, and z with that van, so then we kind of opened up, okay. So, if we had a van, what all could we do? So then that's when we started with, well, we could take meetings on the road, we could do meetings at families' homes, or we actually have the capability, we can do the meetings in the van, because we do have a desk and we have a chair registration if families were having trouble enrolling their children, we could go to them for enrollment, park maybe in a particular place where families could come to enroll their children, where they don't have to get to a building, everything is electronic, but sometimes having those resources are a struggle as well. So that's kind of where it was born in a meeting, talking about things that we noticed were barriers for families, and how can we break those barriers down?

Shannon Fagan 3:45

Okay, so you worked with a local company to purchase the van.

Carmen Corna 3:49

Yes,

Shannon Fagan 3:50

and what do they have to do to outfit the van? Did they bring in, like you said, it has a table and a chair?

Carmen Corna 3:59

Yes, there's a little desk in the corner, so there were things set up. We knew we wanted a shelving unit, so they put shelving unit inside the van. We knew we needed bungee cords, so that we worked in house on getting the bungee cords to hold the materials on the shelf. Yeah, but yeah, so we needed to have a chair, and we needed like basic things that you don't really think about, like a hook to hold the chair, so having that outfitted, so the van has a driver seat, a passenger seat, and then the back is completely empty, we do have even a ramp that we sometimes have to request to be put in the van if we're going to be moving maybe like bookshelves in and out like in the summertime, so yeah, that's that's how it was kind of developed, that there aren't any seats, all of that was taken out and it was kind of gutted and then shelving unit put in it, so like a little mobile. Whole meeting room. Yes, if

Shannon Fagan 5:01

you will. Okay, okay. So, you've been up and running with the van for three years, I believe. I think this is the third.

Carmen Corna 5:08

Believe you are correct. Yes, I'm trying to think in relationship. When I started, that's probably three years.

Shannon Fagan 5:13

Wow, so you've probably spent some time in that van.

Carmen Corna 5:16

I have.

Shannon Fagan 5:16

Okay. So, what do you normally do in the van?

Carmen Corna 5:19

Oh, my goodness, we have so many amazing things through the van. One of the fun things that our van is known for, we have summer fun runs, so it's actually an interactive mobile reading program, and that's cool. We have run this now for a couple summers. We have some amazing faculty who man the van, and they, we advertise where the van will be parked. So, for example, we'll go down to into nature on it to the spray park, and they know what time it will be there, and we have guest readers come. We do steam activities, they offer giveaways, kids take books home, so it's a great summer program. They have a regular rotation and schedule, where every week they're out and about. Some of the other things we do, we have done registrations at the van, where we have parked. Hey, we're going to be available if you want to come down and register your children for kindergarten, and that is all heavily advertised. Everything is advertised through our social media platforms, through Facebook, through Instagram, so that families in our community know. We also put it on our weekly - we have a weekly newsletter that is emailed out to families, so we try to get that information out where the van will be, but yes, and so we've also taken the van where I've gone in the van, and we've enrolled families in their home. If they come off the van, we do have the hot spot. I have used the van. We have an amazing group that collects coats every school year, and then they distribute the codes at our open houses in November. So last year I took the remainder coats. So the year prior, the school counselors like, we have all these codes, like, how can we get them out to folks that aren't able to get to the buildings, so I last year made arrangements and took the coats out into the community, so we could get those coats pushed out a little further to our families. So that is something we've done. We have amazing staff in our elementary school who gather donations for holiday gifts. So last year we used the van, we'll be using again this year to deliver those gifts for the families that could not come to the elementary school to pick up the gifts, so like we had bikes in the van, it was a lot of fun, that was great. I truly enjoyed that morning tremendously, delivering all of those things. I have delivered food for the holiday season to families. Again, we have wonderful families in our community who are collecting donations, so families have hams and turkeys and full dinner, everything you need for a full dinner, including desserts. So I took part in delivering those through the van. So trying to think what else we use the van for. We've used it for technology last year during the open houses. We advertised that the Ram van would be in front of some of the schools, so if you were having trouble logging on to Power School or needed to know how to do those things, you could stop by the van and we would help you do that.

Shannon Fagan 8:37

It's really become bringing the school into the community,

Carmen Corna 8:40

correct?

Shannon Fagan 8:40

Right,

Carmen Corna 8:41

got it.

Shannon Fagan 8:41

And that's what I remember when it was first getting started. As we need to be more present in our community, we need to bring our school out more, and it sounds like that's really been successful.

Carmen Corna 8:50

It really has been. We also have used it for home visits. If you know, we're, we need to go out and see somebody and kind of check on them. It's a little less threatening than the school resource officer vehicle, so that's been also helpful,

Shannon Fagan 9:07

right?

Carmen Corna 9:07

Right. Our district,

Shannon Fagan 9:08

and I think, if I remember correctly, in your area there are there's a newer homeless shelter and a transient population, so getting that population to school was an issue, and it sounds like you're able to go and park there as well, and engage with families in those situations, and help them register.

Carmen Corna 9:27

Yes, and we have,

Shannon Fagan 9:28

yeah, yeah, and bringing those resources again, like you said, that sometimes it's a coach, sometimes it's food, but it is really that kindergarten registration, it is going out and having meetings to families that just can't get in,

Carmen Corna 9:40

yes,

Shannon Fagan 9:40

yeah, so if a school were interested in learning more about your RAM van and how you guys utilize it, what would be some things that you would caution them on?

Carmen Corna 9:51

I think I don't know if it's really a caution, but definitely having a plan of having those discussions on. On how you will use it, I think, is very important, having you know, knowing what you want to do when you do have it. The other thing that we're still working on, where truly are the needs, where do we really need to park, like where should we be, and what should we have with us in those areas. So we're still working on some of that, but really

knowing your neighborhood and community, I feel like we all feel like we know it, but then there's some things that pop up that are nuances that we're like, oh, well, maybe that's really where the need is, it's not so much over there, if that makes sense, and making sure that we're, we're hitting everywhere we really need to be,

Shannon Fagan 10:46

right?

Carmen Corna 10:46

So, definitely, if somebody's interested in, they should really kind of sit down, you know. We had talked to all the building administrators and what they felt would be important. So, I think having that plan,

Shannon Fagan 10:59

okay? And how are the families responding?

Carmen Corna 11:02

Oh my goodness, so I actually just recently was at our back to school night at the Early Childhood Center, and the excitement that the kids were like, the Rams fan, and we were parked there because that's our those are our pre-K and our kindergarten families, so they may not be so familiar with the Ram van if they don't have older students, so but to see the excitement because they had seen it over the summer to have families provide that feedback of, thank you so much for having this. Thank you to everybody who mans the van, who takes it out into the community for your time, because they have found it valuable. They have been, you know, to get the thank you for the kits and the activities, just from the summer. Or, hey, I know that you were delivering food over. Thank you all for doing these things, like you really helped my family out, or you really helped my friend out doing that. So, the sheer excitement really was heartwarming. I immediately, when the evening was over, sent an email out to those who I know have been out in the community and really working the van of, hey, just thanks, and here's what people are saying about it, but

Shannon Fagan 12:17

yeah, so it's become a big tool for your district. It

Carmen Corna 12:19

has,

Shannon Fagan 12:20

yeah, and I know there's a lot of pride in the Ram van, so how do you guys decide who's going to drive the Ram van?

Carmen Corna 12:27

It's funny because can I drive the van? No, I'm doing it today. I don't know how we really came about who all was going to drive it. I think we kind of looked at it of those of us who were struggling with those barriers around meetings, you know, we have our Director of Student Services. She sometimes takes it if she needs to deliver paperwork, or that we're not able to get the paperwork back, or something is going on there, there's some kind of disconnect, you know. She's been in the van, she'll go out, explain what the paperwork is, have it signed. Like I said, myself, I've gone out, I've done registrations, I've taken, I've distributed things. We also want to start using it as not just distribution but also collection.

Shannon Fagan 13:16

Oh, okay,

Carmen Corna 13:16

yeah. So I am planning to do it was gonna originally be a book collection, but the more I think about it, maybe games and stuff, as people are cleaning up for the holidays around November, I want to do like a collection, kind of be in the middle of the district, where people can bring things to the van, and then we had teachers who were excited about the idea of going out in the community during the summer months. Our principal at ATCC, along with our director of student services, they were hitting areas for kindergarten

registration, since he knew that was a barrier for families in past years. So we had talked about, well, let's use the van, so that's kind of how that morphed, and who was going to be manning the van, of okay, well, these are the things we talked about using it for. So here's who it would make sense to take out the van for these various tasks.

Shannon Fagan 14:14

And do you partner with community events to take the van out, maybe capture some attention? I just didn't know if that was a possibility, or if you do do that,

Carmen Corna 14:21

so we did it with the opening of Harvest Moon Two, their second location, and

Shannon Fagan 14:28

Harvest Moon Two

Carmen Corna 14:29

is it's a coffee shop in our community, it's family owned, so they were opening in their second location up in the plaza, so we did part, and it was when it worked out perfectly, it was when the van was brand new as well, so we have parked it outside there, so families could see the van as they were coming into, in so that was really nice to be able to do that. We have talked about, you know, when there's parades and things of that nature, and trying to incorporate some of those things as well.

Shannon Fagan 14:58

That's fantastic, so you really.

Carmen Corna 15:00

Hoping to do some of this,

Shannon Fagan 15:01

yeah, building that community is what I thought was so cool about the Fran van, because you know, you think of the school as a building, you don't think of it as a mobile resource, and so you really created that there,

Carmen Corna 15:12

that's that's very hard to do, so in our van has everything, and I don't know, and that's why we like to park it and have it, the doors open, so families can actually see what all is in the van, because we do have some clothing items, we have laundry soap, we have hygiene kits, we have lights kits, we have activity count, the cow, the school calendar in there, we have books in there, so we do have a variety of items standard in our van, book bags, Play-Doh, pencils, markers, you know, basic school supplies. So

Shannon Fagan 15:46

that's amazing. That's amazing. So lessons learned using the van,

Carmen Corna 15:50

it's a lot of fun.

Shannon Fagan 15:54

Just your face. I wish our viewers could see your face, because you were just lighting up right now.

Carmen Corna 15:59

It is a lot of fun to take the van out. It's a lot of fun, you know, the positive, the positive interactions with our families. I think is also because sometimes you just have families that have had bad experiences in school themselves, you know. And if we can make those connections with with families, and they are like, oh my goodness, this is like amazing, or you know, people are interacting and meeting people who aren't, you know,

Shannon Fagan 16:26

yeah,

Carmen Corna 16:27

in a better light, you know, I think everybody is incredibly personable who's in the van, so I think it just bridges those, yeah, yeah, those relationships,

Shannon Fagan 16:38

and going back to your role as an attendance officer, I would imagine that a lot of the barriers to getting kids to school is really their transportation, so and teenagers like to sleep in. Teenagers don't necessarily want, so I could see that the Ram van could be helpful in communicating with them, reaching them, and hoping to get them back in.

Carmen Corna 16:57

Yes, yeah, it has been.

Shannon Fagan 16:58

That's fantastic. Any other lessons learned you'd like to share with us about the Rams fan?

Carmen Corna 17:08

I don't think. I just think that, you know, we have an opportunity to meet, like I said earlier, our families where they are, and in our mission of connecting with families and, you know, helping with resources. So,

Shannon Fagan 17:19

yeah, fantastic. So, if a school wanted to reach out and talk to you about the Rams van, can they reach out to you?

Carmen Corna 17:26

They sure can. Okay, I would be more than happy to talk to anybody about the van.

Shannon Fagan 17:31

Okay. All right. Well, I really appreciate you coming in today and talking about this really unique program, because I don't - I don't know anyone else that has one in our group of schools that we've been working with through our program, so I'm very excited to be able to share this, and the more we can get it out, and it's not a very expensive van,

Carmen Corna 17:49

no,

Shannon Fagan 17:50

it's

Carmen Corna 17:50

no,

Shannon Fagan 17:51

yeah, it's relatively inexpensive, and it does so much for you, and it gets people in the building, and gets you in the community, which is so important, so I encourage anyone to call Carmen and talk about talk about the Rams band with her. Thank you. All right. Well, have a wonderful day. And thank you. We'll be sharing your information as well after the podcast today, so people can reach out to you.

Carmen Corna 18:13

Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Shannon Fagan 18:14

Thank you. Bye. open doors is produced by Emily Wiley at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Thank you to the Center for Creativity at the University of Pittsburgh for use of their podcast studio. I'm your host, Shannon Fagan. Join us next time when we explore another inspiring program that's helping youth build resilience, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Until then, keep the doors open. The content shared in this podcast is for informational purposes only. The Allegheny Intermediate Unit does not endorse or promote any specific program or service mentioned in this episode.