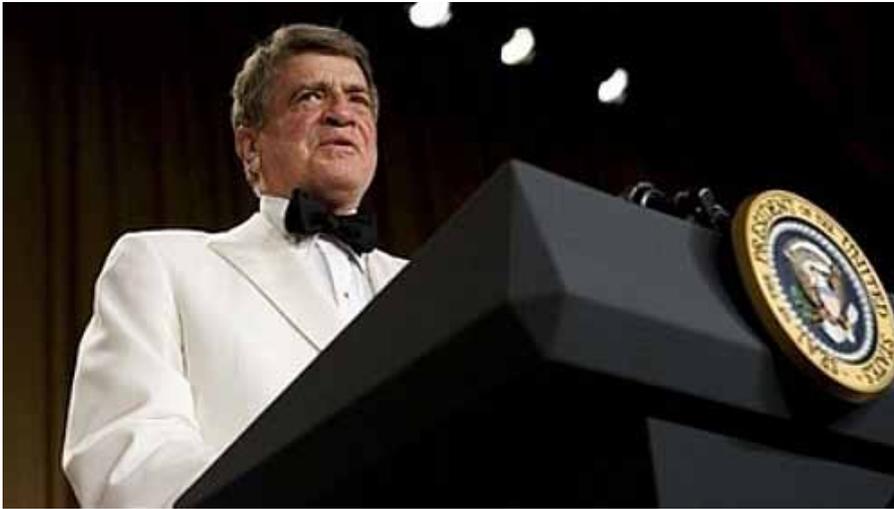


A Veteran Helping Veterans



Charlie Wilson wants to be sure that veterans in his old Congressional district have the access they deserve to the health care they need.

The exploits of former United States Congressman Charlie Wilson are well known to fans of the book and film, Charlie Wilson's War. Somewhat less well known is his tireless work on ensuring that veterans from Lufkin, Texas and its surrounding region have ready access to Houston's large Veteran's Administration Medical Center (see Summer/Fall 2008 CT, Charlie Wilson's Other War, pp. 38-39). The operation — managed by the Brazos Transit District which contracts with Coach America — is steadily gaining ridership and has become a national model.

Recently, Community Transportation Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren had the opportunity to interview Congressman Wilson, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and veteran himself, about veterans transportation issues. Congressman Wilson, who has been a long-time advocate for rural

transportation issues, asked only that he get the chance to praise the Lufkin veterans transportation system — in which he has played an invaluable role — and that this profile include a nice photo of the over-the-road coach the system utilizes. We are only too happy to oblige.

CT: Please tell us about the Lufkin veterans transportation system and your involvement with it?

Congressman Wilson: The trip from Lufkin down to Houston is about a two-and-a-half hour drive and we had been doing it with shuttle buses. A lot of times we just didn't have enough room for all the veterans needing to get to Houston. So we began to look for an alternative method and we had this foundation here in Angelina County, the TLL Temple Foundation, which had furnished the shuttle buses we were using. The people that sit on the foundation's board were all very sympathetic to veterans transportation needs and it just worked out. We purchased a large bus — we tried to call it a coach, but the veterans insist on calling it a bus — on a turnkey basis and it's

just worked marvelously. We carry about 35-40 veterans every day to Houston and back and it's making a big difference in these veterans' lives. It's important to note that the service also transports the veterans' wives and care-givers — which is really important. And we have volunteers who come down each morning and to serve the veterans coffee and donuts. There's nothing veterans like better than donuts. In terms of my involvement, I am a veteran and I want to be sure that my fellow veterans here are taken care of properly, as they well deserve.

CT: What would be your advice to community and public transportation managers and advocates who are trying to build the same type of system for veterans that you've been so instrumental in creating in East Texas.

Congressman Wilson: I think that services like ours work best when there's a long trip to a large VA Medical Center, like we have. That way, the transportation need is real obvious. You also have to take into account the veterans themselves. Scrunching up these guys — many of them pretty big guys — on these little shuttle vehicles is just extremely uncomfortable for them. The idea is to be able to provide both mobility and comfort, which our veterans are certainly entitled to. And the bus needs to go everyday, no matter what.

CT: What's the latest update in terms of the Lufkin veterans transportation service?

Congressman Wilson: We're working right now in the areas surrounding Lufkin. Lufkin pulls

in veterans from 30-40 miles away to its clinic (a Community Based Outpatient Clinic). We now have the investment in place — Senator Cornyn was able to get it for us — to connect veterans with a shuttle service from places like Nacogdoches and Crockett. The shuttle service picks people up in the morning and takes them to Lufkin where they get on the big bus. It's just really tough on these veterans. The WWII veterans are getting so old, many of their wives have passed away, they really don't have any other way to get there.

CT: The traditional model for veterans services of all many types — including transportation — is veterans helping veterans. But is this a problem as large numbers of WWII veterans age?

Congressman Wilson: We don't have that problem because we're so rural and rural people are always looking for ways to help veterans. Honestly, they just volunteer and help out in so many ways. Some of our volunteers go down to see the vets off in the morning at 7:00 a.m. I can see this

“The idea is to be able to provide both mobility and comfort, which our veterans are certainly entitled to. And the bus needs to go everyday, no matter what.”

being a problem more in the big cities than in areas like Lufkin.

CT: What about veterans from the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan? Do they ride the service too?

Congressman Wilson: Yes they do. The younger guys have some special needs that can't always be met in Lufkin, so this transportation option helps them access both places.

CT: With your experience in Congress, how would you advise community and public transportation managers and advocates to work with Congress to further go veterans transportation systems?

Congressman Wilson: I think Congress just sort of automatically pays attention when it comes to veterans. I know that here in Lufkin, whenever a member of Congress or the Senate comes through the area to have meetings, we try to make sure we have veterans there so they can discuss their transportation problems, particularly the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their stress-related concerns. Members of Congress are eager to help, and it's usually pretty easy to do through those things known as earmarks. I'm a great believer in good earmarks, like those assuring transportation for veterans.

CT: What's at stake for veterans?

Congressman Wilson: What's at stake for our veterans in this area is simply not dreading the drive to Houston. Our service provides them a comfortable trip and they can bring along their wives and caregivers. My wife and I have both ridden to Houston along with the veterans on more than one occasion. It's their health that's at stake when they either cannot or will not make that trip on their own to Houston.

Operated by the Brazos Transit District and contracted to Coach America, the Lufkin Veterans Transportation system has seen steady growth.

