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PREOCCUPATIONS

Microcosm of the Office but on Four Wheels

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I LIVE in Brick, N.J., a 50-mile drive from my office in Ewing Township. I am a lawyer who investigates and prosecutes New Jersey lawyers accused of unethical behavior.

About four years ago, I met a woman at work who commuted by van pool. She was looking for an alternate rider for those days when regular riders were absent. With what gasoline was costing me, I jumped at the chance to become one.

At the time, I was working at the justice complex in downtown Trenton. Two years ago, when I moved to a building in Ewing Township, I decided to start

my own van pool. First, I had to find enough people living on my route who were interested. V.P.S.I., a van-pool company that many New Jerseyans use, requires a minimum of six riders for each van. I knew about this company from my former van pool.

I found the last person I needed when my husband and I were having a drink at a nearby crowded bar and he gave a woman his seat. We started talking, and she was a perfect candidate.

I'm the coordinator for our van, which V.P.S.I. leases to us, insures and maintains. I determine what each person pays, collect the money, pay the lease, recruit alternates and resolve disputes. I also drive the van one or two days a week.

The lease is normally \$1,350 a month, but we receive a \$175 subsidy from [New Jersey Transit](#) as an incentive because there is no mass transit available from our area to Trenton. I divide the remaining \$1,175 by the 12 regular riders, which works out to \$97.92 a rider a month. We all contribute for gas, the cost of which varies monthly. The amount depends on how much we received from the alternates who rode in the previous month.

In August, I raised the daily rate to \$9 from \$8 because of the higher price of gas. I felt bad, but the van is still a good deal. I've heard that on vans with only one driver, that person usually rides free. After all, that driver has all the responsibility and never gets to relax. Three people drive our van besides me, and we get a reduced rate.

There's one regular who is like an annuity for us. He hardly ever manages to make the van, so we get his monthly fee as well as the daily fee from the alternates who take his seat. We also have personality conflicts on the van, just like in an office.

Once when I was driving, a woman arrived late to her pickup point. I saw her and started backing up to let her board. Several members started yelling, so I slammed on the brakes but it was too late. I had hit a car behind us. Half the members got out and drove their own cars to work and half stayed with me. The officer who showed up was annoyed that everyone hadn't stayed.

Recently, we saw a car on the other side of the highway being chased by at least two state troopers who were soon joined by others. As the car tried to make a quick U-turn on the grass median, it flipped three times and landed 30 feet in front of us. I quickly pulled onto the shoulder and braked not 10 feet from the guardrail. About five troopers surrounded the woman's car. By the time they had questioned all the witnesses, we were delayed two hours. I got lots of compliments on my driving.

The van pool has been a godsend in this economy. When gas hit \$3.50 a gallon earlier this year, my phone was ringing off the hook. Our waiting list for alternates became so long that some of the callers didn't wait. They started their own van pools.

I'm still friends with people I rode with on the first van, and I've made some good friends on this van, too. Last summer, a member got a new job in another part of the state. One evening we all met at a restaurant for a going-away party.

Recently someone suggested we interview potential alternates to make sure they're a good fit. Their first month of ridership would be a trial period, and we could vote them off the van just as people vote contestants off the island on "Survivor." It is absolutely the way to go.