

Access to Food and Care may take a Village

By Maureen McGarry

A1AA's Volunteer Driver program has been successfully providing rides for local seniors to medical appointments since January 2011. These riders frequently request a stop at the store to buy groceries. Thanks to a St. Joseph Health Care for the Poor Community Grant, A1AA has been exploring the feasibility of adding grocery delivery to services provided.

Food security is a serious issue for low and moderate income seniors. Seniors are generally less likely to sign up for CalFresh and many low-income seniors are found to be ineligible for CalFresh because of Supplemental Security Income. Food insecurity is also an issue for seniors of other economic levels who, due to illness, lack of transportation, or mobility issues, do not access or prepare healthy foods. Food security goes beyond just affording food: it is also about access, preparation and food safety.

"Right now, we have volunteers who can drive during regular medical office hours. Adding grocery delivery could attract volunteers who can only help out in the evening or on weekends," says Peggy Wallace, a part time Volunteer Services Specialist with the program.

While the grant was primarily to look at food delivery and explore other funding options for the program, it soon became clear that the program could become the basis for so much more. And it may need to in order to survive.

"The Volunteer Driver Program is moving toward sustainability by starting to charge a small fee for rides," reports Sabrina De Lashmutt, the consultant hired through the grant. "However, this won't cover all the costs of the program." Mileage reimbursement to the drivers can cost \$10,000 a year.

25% of the program's clients are traveling to and from the Eel River Valley. De Lashmutt will be approaching service clubs, hoping to secure more funds and volunteers to help serve the demand from this area. Additionally, she has been approaching Murphy's Market to talk about food delivery.

"Transportation is the key service provided in most models of community based services for seniors around the country, but it is just the start of what is needed to make aging in place a reality for local seniors," says Maggie Kraft of the Area 1 Agency on Aging. Kraft is looking ahead to the growing senior demand to "age in place" and she is not alone.

Locally, a group has been talking about the Village for a number of years. Members of Arcata Elder Village, an ad-hoc group of seniors, have been looking to ensure seniors are able to age in community and have put time and energy into researching the Village model. The Senior Action Coalition has also taken interest in the concept.

“We surveyed people involved in both Arcata Elder Village and the Senior Action Coalition and overwhelmingly older adults want to stay in their own homes. They like the virtual “Village” because it would help them stay independent.” said JoAnn Schuch who has worked in both groups.

The “Village” model is getting increasing attention locally. The Times-Standard ran a piece about it recently on this page.

“As people read about it, it gains more traction,” says Kraft. “At first people think it is a place they move to and live, but when they realize it is a way to stay in their homes and join a network of community and service minded people who help each other out, it begins to make more sense,” she added.

Villages are membership-driven, grass-roots organizations run by volunteers and sometimes paid staff to coordinate access to services. These services can include transportation to care, health and wellness programs, home repairs, and social and educational activities. Services are provided by volunteers or through contracts with local businesses.

A1AA has joined the Village-to-Village Network, a national peer to peer network to help establish and continuously improve management of senior villages. Kraft hopes to get a group to attend the Network’s annual Village Gathering in Washington DC in September and spend the next year helping determine what it could look like locally.

“There is a solid group of people locally who are already very interested in this. We hope that bringing A1AA to the mix as well as people from other communities and organizations can move if forward. What a Village here looks like will depend on what the community decides.”

Meanwhile, De Lashmutt has developed a driver recruitment handout for current drivers to help bring more into the volunteer driver fold. She will be surveying Boomers who have been taking care of parents either locally or from a distance. These younger seniors understand the issues are looking for solutions.

People interested in learning more about the concept and the wide range of Village offerings should log on to vtvnetwork.org. OLLI is offering a free brown bag lunch course this fall with the Senior Action Coalition and A1AA teaming up to talk about the Village and what it could mean locally.

If you want to help the Volunteer Driver Program as a driver or by donating tickets for the low income riders, call 442-3763.

Maureen McGarry is the Project Director for RSVP/VCOR and Area 1 Agency on Aging.



"Senior Action Coalition is a non-partisan Grassroots Group". Photo Credit JoAnn Schuch