

Lifesavers Wanted

By Maureen McGarry

When a Humboldt senior calls the Volunteer Driver Program at the Area 1 Agency on Aging and secures a ride to an important medical appointment, the program and its volunteers are often referred to as a “lifesavers”.

Although staff members who make those connections, and the volunteers who drive, do not perceive themselves as such, the metaphor makes them feel like systems are working and seniors are being well-served in our community. Unfortunately when the program is unable to secure a ride it can be a gloomy day in the office. Undoubtedly, it’s an even more difficult day for the senior who can’t be served.

One of the definitions of a “lifesaver” is “someone who is at once timely and effective in a time of distress or need.” That is one of the basic goals of the A1AA Volunteer Driver Program and access to healthcare is a primary focus. Unfortunately, when it comes to finding a ride to the doctor for a senior who no longer drives or is too ill to drive or use the public bus systems, options are often limited.

Peggy Wallace, an Experience Works staffer who schedules rides three days a week, says it’s hard to hear the stories of those who call that she cannot help.

“So many have told us how we have helped them and that they don’t know what they would do without the rides. Some have given small donations to help. We are grateful to be a part of their love for the program. When we are unable to assist them because we don’t have drivers available, we worry about what will happen to them if they can’t make their appointment.” Wallace said.

The Volunteer Driver Program hopes to change this by recruiting more community volunteers. Volunteers are subject to an extensive background check and their vehicles are also “screened” to make sure they are in working order. The volunteer must have adequate insurance and a good driving record. Volunteers receive orientation and training before being scheduled to take seniors to their appointments.

Transportation options and funding to pay for it remains limited, especially in rural areas like Humboldt County where distance can be an enemy. This gap between need and resources will continue to widen as the senior population grows. At a time when an average of 10,000 people in the U.S. are turning 65 every day, government funding doesn’t come close to what is needed and foundations

generally like to fund one time only projects or those that will become self-sustaining.

Effective July 1, the Volunteer Driver Program has implemented a user fee to help, although this will not cover the full cost of the program. Riders must buy tickets in advance. Tickets can be purchased at A1AA (and through the mail) in increments of five (5) at a time. Each ticket will cost \$3.00, which pays for a round trip ride within one town. To go from town to town, and back again, it will cost \$6.00 – two tickets. Riders who want to go from Fortuna to Arcata will pay \$9.00 – three tickets. Again, round trip.

The actual cost of the rides is higher, but this is what staff felt was a reasonable start to a user fee. Staff is looking for other funding sources as well.

The fees help pay for program costs including mileage reimbursement for volunteers, ride matching software, postage, printing costs, phones, computers (all the typical office stuff) and most importantly, staff time spent recruiting, screening, orienting, training and supporting volunteers and screening and orienting riders.

“I remember telling someone we needed money to help support our volunteer driver program. She said, ‘why if they are all volunteers?’ Well, we have to make sure they are the right people to work with a frail and vulnerable group of seniors. Our drivers go to a person’s home and help them to and from their appointments. We want our riders to feel safe,” says Maggie Kraft, Executive Director at A1AA.

Volunteer drivers are needed, but so is funding. Community members who would like to help can purchase ride tickets for those in need or make a donation to help with the costs of the program by contacting the Area 1 Agency on Aging. The Volunteer Driver Program is on the lookout for lifesaving options. Throw them a line by calling 442-3763, ext. 218. Be a lifesaver.

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