

GRAY MATTERS: Volunteer drivers in high demand as program grows

Carol Harrison/For the Times-Standard

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The busiest quarter in the three-year history of the volunteer driver program has coordinator Valorie Lovelace scrambling for drivers, particularly those who reside in the Eel River Valley.

"If I could get five more drivers from the Fortuna or Rio Dell areas, I think we could meet most of our requests," Lovelace said.

From Oct. 1 though Dec. 31, Lovelace's 27 eligible drivers rolled up 8,820 miles and 513 hours by escorting 80 people age 50 and older to 230 health care appointments in Humboldt County.

"They're the best numbers we've had so far, and about 15 drivers have done the bulk of it," Lovelace said.

Riders must live in the region between the Eel River Valley to the south and Trinidad to the north. They call at least a week ahead of time to seek a ride. Lovelace then matches drivers to their local communities. Currently, there is no cost for a ride, but securing a driver is not guaranteed. Last summer, Lovelace went through a stretch of several ride requests she was unable to fill.

"Some of our Eureka drivers take one person a month to an appointment, but our four Fortuna drivers are doing two per week," she said.

Jim Pedrotti has been a Fortuna driver since 2011.

"I'm not burning out, but sometimes it irritates my wife," the 80-year-old Pedrotti chuckled. "I give anywhere from 200 to 300 miles a month in rides from Rio Dell to Eureka, a lot in Fortuna, and sometimes up to Mad River."

Pedrotti said he has no problem waiting an hour to three hours for the return trip.

"I bring a book. When I'm in Eureka, I go visit a friend," he said. "A lot of people don't have the patience, but I think patience is a virtue. I'm retired. I have time, and I've met some very nice people who are very appreciative of the program."

Last quarter, demand jumped 20 percent from the 193 rides provided in the previous quarter.

Lovelace said the program is on track to smash the record of 749 rides in the fiscal year ending June 2013.

"Demand for rides has been going up every month," she said. "More people are hearing about the program."

The program counts 180 active clients who have read the guidelines and agreed to abide by them.

"Basically, that means be pleasant and courteous and if you have to cancel, let us know," she said.

Lovelace said another 200 have received rides in the last three years but not recently, or have requested information and not yet returned the signed guidelines.

"Our riders are not physically able to ride a bus, and (they) appreciate the one-on-one rides and the lack of waiting associated with para-transit or dial-a-ride," said Maggie Kraft, A1AA's executive director. "Many can't afford a taxi, especially when traveling from south of Fortuna or Trinidad."

The RSVP program reimburses volunteer drivers for the cost of gas, which can run as much as \$40 for a trip from southern Humboldt to Mad River Community Hospital.

The volunteer driver program is housed at Area 1 Agency on Aging and funded through local grants and Cy Pres funds from a legal settlement.

Kraft said the Cy Pres funding expires June 30 and the local grants are not automatically renewed. A1AA is exploring options and partnerships to maintain or expand the service.

"There comes a time when seniors of all income levels are often no longer able to drive or shop because of the medical and physical challenges they face," Kraft said. "A volunteer driver program gives people a way to pay it forward by helping neighbors stay in their homes as long as possible."

Pedrotti said Lovelace usually calls him on Monday or Wednesday of the week preceding the needed ride.

"If I can't do it, I let her know," he said. "It's something I can do to give back to the community, and it's better than sitting here watching TV."

Pedrotti also spends one week a month working as an RSVP volunteer for the St. Joseph Church Pantry Shelf and still attends the Monday meetings of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce. He's been retired for 16 years, but refuses to retire from community involvement.

"Ninety percent of the people I drive are younger than me," he said. "It makes me thank God every day for my health."

"You never know what life holds," said Mitsuko Akinaga, an 87-year-old McKinleyville resident who was "amazed" to discover a volunteer driver program existed locally. Strokes had left her and her husband, Kenji, unable to drive.

"One of our drivers told us her mother lived alone in San Francisco and had received so much help from neighbors and strangers that this was her way of paying it back," Mitsuko Akinaga said.

"All the people we've met have been very nice and helpful. They aren't allowed to take gifts, but we can donate to the agency, which I did last year. We're determined not to go into a home. This helps. It's a wonderful program."

To volunteer or for more information, call RSVP at 442-3763.

Area 1 Agency on Aging commissioned Carol Harrison to write this article.