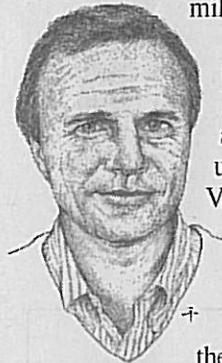


JIM KENYON

LICENSE TO VOLUNTEER

Modern medicine can do wonderful things. And the new health care law that Congress passed earlier this year promises to expand access to millions of uninsured Americans.



None of it really means much, though, unless the basics are covered. For example: On Monday, I was told about a Cornish man who is currently undergoing cancer treatments at Valley Regional Hospital in Claremont, but he doesn't always have a way to travel the 10 miles or so.

As in many parts of the county, there's no bus service between Cornish and Claremont. So what's he supposed to do?

That's where the Newport-based nonprofit Community Alliance of Human Services comes in. Community Alliance, which assists Sullivan County residents in need of transportation, housing and home health care, is preparing to launch a volunteer driver program. It's the first countywide program of its kind in New Hampshire, said Barbara Brill, the organization's executive director.

Residents who need a ride to medical appointments, grocery shopping or occasionally even to work can call toll-free (877-418-0118) to arrange transportation. Rich Leute, the program's coordinator, who came on board at Community Alliance in August, has already discovered there's no shortage of people in need of a lift. His list of ride seekers has grown to 35, and the program won't even be up and running for at least a few weeks.

"This is not something that is frivolous," said Brill. "We have people in the county right now who have no way to get to their doctor, the pharmacy or the grocery store. Our mission is for people to continue living independently. If we don't provide this service, there are different costs to society."

She's got that right.

For instance, it's a lot less costly — not to mention just better medicine — to make sure an elderly shut-in with an upper respiratory infection gets to her doctor for early treatment, rather than waiting until her illness develops into pneumonia and she needs to be taken to the hospital by ambulance.

There are a couple of ride programs that serve parts of southern Sullivan County. And Community Alliance runs a weekday bus service that provides about 30,000 rides a year between Charlestown, Claremont and Newport.

"For the rest of Sullivan County, there has been a hole," said Brill. "We're trying to fill the gap."

In 2008, the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission conducted a study that identified 10 Sullivan communities that could be classified as "unserved or underserved by existing transportation services."

It's taken two years for Community Alliance to come up with \$60,000 to start the program. "Funding for transportation in New Hampshire is almost shameful," said Brill.

Case in point: This year, the state's contribution to Community Alliance's bus service between Charlestown, Claremont and Newport dropped from \$8,000 to \$2,300. That's barely enough to buy two weeks worth of fuel for Community Alliance's fleet of eight buses.

Indirectly, the state has helped get the new ride program off the ground. The New Hampshire Department of Transportation arranged for \$48,000 in federal dollars. Private foundations are covering the remaining \$12,000 and Community Alliance continues chasing private dollars, including small contributions from riders, to secure the program's future.

Rather than rely entirely on the generosity of its volunteer drivers, the regional planning commission's 2008 study recommended that Community Alliance take a slightly different road. "Being that many volunteer drivers in Sullivan County are elderly citizens with limited incomes, a program that would reimburse those drivers for their vehicle mileage would be a key aspect of maintaining the existing pool of drivers," the planners advised.

Community Alliance is crunching the numbers to figure out what it can afford to pay, but Leute is hoping it will be "in the vicinity" of the federal rate of 50 cents per mile.

Leute's challenge is to "match drivers to people who don't have access to transportation." He expects a high demand for drivers willing to make trips to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon.

Drivers will undergo motor vehicle and criminal background checks. "If somebody has a speeding ticket from 15 years ago, it's not going to disqualify them from the program," said Leute.

Volunteers will be offered a driver's education "refresher course," but Leute, a driving instructor for the National Safety Council since 1998, jokes that there will be "no tests."

Drivers must have reliable cars and liability insurance. Community Alliance has its own liability coverage that will serve as a "safety net" for volunteer drivers, said Brill.

A few drivers have already been lined up, including a woman, whose husband recently died. "I was looking for something to do," she told Community Alliance, "this sounds perfect."

Volunteers can call Community Alliance's toll-free number to sign up. Starting next month, Leute will make the rounds at community meetings to recruit drivers.

I wish him luck. For Sullivan County residents who have no access to regular transportation, there's a lot riding on it.

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