

Kindness on wheels

This Olmsted County medical transport program aims to fill access gaps for seniors

By Dené K. Dryden - Post Bulletin

ROCHESTER

About once a week, Pat Harlan grabs her purse and corrals her blonde poodle, Banjo, in anticipation of a knock at her door.

On one September Friday afternoon, that knock came from Tom Byrne. Meeting Harlan at the door, Byrne helped Harlan down the front steps of her house and to his car.

“He’s such a nice man,” Harlan said of Byrne. “I’m blind, so I never get to see his face. Kindness usually shows in your face, but I never get to see that.”

Byrne is a volunteer driver with the Elder Network’s Medical Transportation Program, a service that 175 seniors in Olmsted County have used this year. Last year, volunteers like Byrne completed more than 2,000 rides in and around Rochester.

Without the service, Harlan said, “I would have to not live in my house. I’d probably have to go to senior living.”

The program aims to fill gaps in transportation access for seniors who cannot drive, said Donna Proeschel, who oversees the program at Elder Network, a nonprofit that serves seniors in Olmsted, Wabasha and Winona counties.

“Appointments often happen when traditional, other services,” such as city buses, “aren’t running at the time,” Proeschel said. “People need a 7 a.m. appointment or ... later in the afternoons. Sometimes chemotherapy’s done on a weekend these days.”

Additional barriers could include mobility issues that make getting on and off a bus difficult, living too far away from a bus stop and fixed incomes that make the cost of taxis or rideshares untenable, said Kathy Scheid, Elder Network’s executive director.

“And I think one of the important factors of our program is we’re not just a ride service,” Scheid said. “We really care about the individual.”

When a senior signs up for the program, they go through an intake process so that Proeschel and her volunteers know if anyone else lives with them, who their emergency contacts are, the state of their mental and physical health and so on.

With this information, volunteers can provide another service beyond the rides: keeping an eye out for any health declines or other troubling changes.

“We may talk to their emergency contact, ‘So-and-so seems to be forgetting a lot more often; we’re a little bit concerned,’” Scheid said. “If someone doesn’t come to the door when their ride arrives, the driver will try to ascertain what happened.”

Each week, after clients schedule their rides, the group of about 35 volunteers select the rides that work for them, whether it’s one ride per month or one ride every day, Proeschel said. For Byrne, he said he averages three rides per week.

“Some rides are quicker, some rides take a little longer,” Byrne said. “Just really depends on where they’re going.”

And while the majority of rides are for doctor’s appointments and similar medical visits — which are given priority on the schedule — some rides are for non-medical appointments, like haircuts and social events.

“Getting your hair done is an important part of your emotional well-being and feeling good about yourself,” Proeschel said.

While clients pay a small fee for each ride, some of the program’s financial backing, as of 2023, comes from the United Way of Southeast Minnesota.

“Access to health care rose to the top as one of the community health needs assessment priorities” that year, said Grace Pesch, vice president of community impact at the local United Way. “Transportation has consistently come up in the community as one of the biggest reasons why people are not able to access health care.”

“We’ve got the best in the nation,” added Proeschel. “But if you can’t get to it or you can’t afford to get to your medical services, what’s the purpose?”

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Photos by Joe Ahlquist / Post Bulletin

Tom Byrne, a volunteer driver with Elder Network, picks up client Pat Harlan at her home on Sept. 26, in southwest Rochester. Harlan said she relies on the Elder Network for transportation about once a week. Harlan said, "I would have to not live in my house," if transportation through Elder Network wasn't an option for her.