

Need a Ride? You Have Options

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Half of non-drivers who are 65 and older stay home because they lack transportation options, according to www.seniorliving.org.

This means that they may become more and more isolated, not buy fresh groceries as often as they need them and miss medical appointments.

But groups in the Rochester area are working to change this, especially in outlying areas without public transportation and for people who struggle to afford paying for transportation.

Lifespan's Mary Rose McBride said that lack of transportation is a top issue for older adults. "Women outlive their ability to drive by about 10 years," she said. "Many older adults live in areas not served by public transportation."

A decade ago, Lifespan started Give a Lift, a program that recruits, screens and trains drivers who volunteer at local organizations that offer free or low-cost transportation to seniors who need to get to medical appointments. The demand for rides is so large that some ride services don't take seniors on shopping trips or other errands to ensure that riders can make it to medical appointments.

Lifespan also provides information about transportation options in an area. McBride said about 350 to 400 volunteer drivers provide rides through various organizations after Lifespan's screening. But as these drivers age out or move away, the organizations in the area constantly need more drivers.

The cost for a taxi ride round trip in Rochester can be around \$30 or \$40 — money that is needed to purchase medication or fill up a gro-

cery cart for many seniors. Services such as Uber or Lyft may cost less; however McBride said that "a lot of older adults don't have smartphones. There's also a trust issue there. Would you want to get in a car with someone you don't know?"

Volunteer drivers can sign up for a federal program that offers supplemental auto insurance if their own policy won't cover passengers sufficiently. Most organizations offer volunteer drivers a small stipend to help with gas costs if they need it.

Medical transportation also provides "a social outlet for the volunteer and the person getting picked up," McBride said. "They can have some conversation and may even become friends."

She encourages social groups such as churches or clubs to consider non-emergency medical driving for a local program as a volunteer initiative.

FISH

Project Friends In Service Here (FISH) in Rush/Henrietta serves people 65-plus who live in that school district and lack transportation to and from non-emergency medical appointments. Coordinator Audrey Buck said that FISH is "always looking for more volunteers. It's a vital service that means a lot to the people who receive help."

FISH cannot provide rides to people who live outside the Rush-Henrietta School District, but can transport those residing within the district to medical appointments within Monroe County. Like most similar organizations, volunteers drive their own vehicles and riders must be capable of walking, yet without transportation of their own.

Last year, FISH provided round-



A senior getting a ride with a volunteer at Lifespan. Photo courtesy of Gelfand-Piper Photography.

trip rides to more than 1,600 appointments among 35 volunteers who drove nearly 40,000 miles.

"When we formed FISH, our intention is that we wanted people to be healthier and give them some sense of being independent," Buck said. "Many people do have family in the area; however, they're working. It's hard for them to take them to the appointments."

Some older adults need rides to see multiple specialists for chronic conditions. Or they may need multiple rides to address an acute issue, such as the up to 10 rides for cataract treatment, including pre-op visits, lens fitting, surgeries and post-op care.

Volunteer drivers list times and days they're available and any limitations about going into the city.

"Our drivers all find it very satisfying and rewarding helping someone else," Buck said.

For those who need to get to a grocery store, Buck recommends checking with a local senior center. The Henrietta Senior Center, for example, offers scheduled rides to shopping venues and can arrange for transportation to and from the center.

Episcopal Senior Life

Episcopal SeniorLife Communities in Rochester also partners with Give a Lift to offer free rides to ESLC neighborhood program members, though donations are appreciated for those able to give.

"Our vision is to help connect

seniors with their neighborhood by providing transportation to community functions, social events and medical and other personal appointments, providing more options for seniors to age in their place of choice," said Jennifer Rougeux, volunteer coordinator at Episcopal SeniorLife.

The program is currently being offered in Gates, Chili, Greece and Rochester's South Wedge.

Rougeux views volunteer drivers as essential to maintaining independence for those who can no longer drive.

"They are connecting with and helping neighbors live healthier lives," she added. "Volunteers also gain a sense of purpose by providing this ever important service, meet interesting people, and oftentimes develop friendships."

Getting a Free Ride

- For more information on ride services for older adults in the Rochester area, call TRAC at 585-244-8400.
- Henrietta Senior Center: 585-334-4030.
- Visit www.eldersource.org for a list of ride resources or contact your county's Department of Aging and Youth:
 - Wayne County: 315-946-5624
 - Ontario County: 585-396-4040 or 315-781-1321
 - Monroe County: 585-753-6280

How Pets Can Benefit Senior Health

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Perhaps you always had pets as a kid but haven't for years. Or maybe your cat or dog died a while ago and you haven't sought out another pet. If you don't have a pet as an older adult, you have many good reasons to consider one.

Physician Az Tahir, who practices holistic integrative medicine at Internal Medicine Internal Care in Henrietta, said that pet ownership can prolong healthy longevity.

"Particularly, the dog gets people out walking," Tahir said. "They keep you busy and physically active."

But lower-energy dogs and cats can also increase activity and maintain range of movement. Think of the work of feeding, watering, grooming and cleaning up after a pet.

"It brings the stress levels down and blood pressure, too," Tahir said. "They can help reduce the risk heart attack and stroke and cancer."

Animals need a gentle touch and a patient approach, so a petting ses-

sion requires owners to slow down and remain calm.

Pets also increase social interaction, from dog walking, to vet visits to shopping for pet food. Simply having something to talk about — "Do you know what Muffin did yesterday?" — can make conversation more interesting.

For those living alone, a pet can offer someone to talk to and look forward to.

"The fact that they are part of a daily routine, it helps," Tahir said. "The effect on the psyche are profound. This brings them comfort and company."

St. Ann's Home in Rochester has tapped into the power of pets to benefit their senior residents.

Mark Simpelaar, St. Ann's recreational therapist/life enrichment advocate, said that the presence of pets "provides [seniors] with reassurance and they have less loneliness. It's something to take care of. It's

something to look forward to every day and something to love."

Some residents who have dementia sometimes experience agitation. Simpelaar said that pet therapy can help provide diversion and comfort for people who like animals. Instead of aimlessly walking, some take a break to sit and enjoy petting the animals.

St. Ann's also encourages visits from volunteers with dogs and family members who want to bring in pets.

"Some residents really respond," Simpelaar said. "It changes their whole facial expression."

Non-therapy animals are permitted if their owners have pre-registered and receive a Pet Card.

"It improves contentment, relaxation and mood," Simpelaar said. "It's an emotionally nice, positive thing that helps people."

Of course, not everyone loves animals. For those who enjoy the com-

pany of pets, "it's really important, because it gives people a purpose."

Though at St. Ann's staff take care of any resident pet (the home has kept cats and birds), independent adults can feel a sense of responsibility that they need. Simpelaar said that his father dwells in an assisted living community, but is able to keep a dog.

"It keeps him active and social," Simpelaar said.

He said that his father isn't very outgoing, but the dog is, so that helps him interact with more people.

"A pet can give some people a reason to live, if the animal is that close to the person," Simpelaar said.

It's inadvisable to surprise anyone with a pet as a gift. Older adults may have additional considerations, including the physical and financial ability to care for a pet. For the former, some assistance and accommodation can enable keeping a pet. A helper can aid in dog walking or changing cat litter, or instance. Installing a dog run can reduce the need for dog walking. Placing a covered litter box on a flat-topped kitty condo could make scooping litter easier.