

Free Rides Provide Valuable Service to Those in Need



To the cities and state, it is yet another line expenditure they can afford to cut, but to the seniors who wouldn't get to their doctors, the grocery store or to the senior center any other way, it is a new lease on life.

For more than two decades, SCM Community Transportation has been providing friendly and valuable service to seniors and disabled citizen for free. You've seen the blue-striped white vans around Somerville, Cambridge and Medford but did you know about the vital link they provide between home and community for a large part of the population?

After struggling to survive for the past two years and almost closing in 2005 due to a lack of funds, SCM currently has 27 vans, 3,000 customers in Greater Boston and provides 8,000 rides per month. Their heaviest demand is medical transportation.

Dolores Covino, 72, of Medford has been using the service for one and half years and uses the van about once in two months.

"I go to the doctor's. It's critical. I have to go. So I don't know what I would do without them," she said.

She found out about the service when her family picked up a flier at a seminar for seniors and she decided to call them.

"I asked if they'd take me to the Lahey Clinic in Burlington and they said they would," she said. "They have been my lifeline where my doctor's appointments go. They are wonderful, caring and I can't say enough about them."

Executive Director Reed Cochran, who has been heading the turnaround process, said it wouldn't have been possible for them to continue if it wasn't for the community support and good name that the service enjoys.

"A lot of people really care about this and we want to be the natural solution for anyone who has to give up their car keys," she said. "If one doesn't drive, or is too frail for public transportation and has no other options, SCM is here for them."

But running and restructuring the company hasn't been easy.

Past executive director and current board member Ulla Hester has been involved with SCM for two years because she works in the transportation sector and believes that SCM provides an invaluable service for seniors and disabled folks.

"We know from the research we have done that the senior population will continue to grow so there will be an increase in need for this kind of service," she said. "We've come a long way. It's hopefully just a matter of months before we stabilize. Then, ideally, we will look at adding some services and serving more seniors in the future."

Fito Miranda has been driving SCM vans for 11 years and said he gets to meet a lot of nice people in this job.

“I feel good about my job and I feel good about helping these people,” he said. “I think it’s important because we have a lot of people who wouldn’t be able to go places unless we were there.”

Penny Cole has been a driver with SCM for 13 years and believes it’s a very rewarding job.

“If I wasn’t enjoying it I wouldn’t be doing it for so long. It’s nice to know I can bring some sunshine into someone’s life.”

While clients rave about the service and the company is poised for change, the demand is hardly being met. Service is limited on weekends, stops at 4 p.m. on weekdays, and SCM turns away one in five calls because they don’t have the money and resources to serve everyone. But thanks to community grants and donor contributions, most of the rides are still free of charge. With the restructuring, Cochran hopes to offer gift certificates and private accounts to people who can afford it in the future.

“We want to be more available and want to do more,” she said.

While The Ride provided by the MBTA is another option, it needs clients to prove mobility impairments and has age restrictions while SCM will take anyone above 60 who needs the service.

“We’re really there to catch the people who fall through the cracks,” Cochran said.

She is also hoping they can soon better manage their finances in order to be more independent. Until recently, the company was completely dependent on government funds. Starting this year, they hope to change that with their first community fundraiser scheduled for Tuesday, May 29 at Johnny D’s, 17 Holland St. The Spring Benefit, with a \$15 donation, will include food, networking and a silent auction from 6:30-8:30 p.m. followed by live music next week.

For details email springbenefit@scmtransportation.org or call 617-625-1191 Ext. 3.

