

ABSTRACT

When the Senior Services Board Committee of Ruth Rales Jewish Family Service convened for the first time in October, 1988, it was decided that the mission should be goal-oriented, focusing on only one issue to accomplish by year's end. The project should be (a) attainable by May, 1999 and (b) not cost the Agency any new dollars. After discussion about the many unmet needs of our elderly, it seemed feasible to focus on setting up a supplemental transportation service, to be staffed by volunteer drivers and to be used for helping meet "quality of life" rather than essential needs. "Kibbitz and Ride" was launched by March, 1999. This article focuses on the steps which needed to be taken to actualize the Committee's vision.

"Kibbitz and Ride": A Grassroots Volunteer Effort to Address Transportation Needs of the Frail Elderly in South Florida

Marcy Bezark and Joan Ensink

INTRODUCTION

The need for an alternative to driving a car to meet the mobility needs of an aging population is apparent everywhere, and particularly in South Florida with its special appeal for retirees. According to a report in the New York Times five years ago, there were 13 million American drivers aged 65 and over facing the dilemma of no longer being able to drive. These numbers are expected to reach 30 million by 2020.

Imagine you are someone who can't see anymore because your macular degeneration has progressed too far. Imagine you don't drive and your spouse has to move to a nursing home, but existing transportation programs will only take you to medical appointments. These are not uncommon situations. Without a car, many older people become isolated and depressed.

Although there are some alternative transportation services available, these are mainly for life-sustaining needs.

"Quality of life" activities are sacrificed. For taxi service, there are fees involved that are prohibitive for some seniors. Para-transit services may run on set schedules and only in certain locations. For many of the frail elderly, getting into a van or bus may be difficult without assistance. Often the bus stop has no overhead protection from the rain or beating sun. Some bus stops may be a mile away from their house or apartment. In addition, all of these means of transportation lack the personal touch.

Our agency's response to this growing concern was the development of "Kibbitz and Ride": a transportation program run by volunteer drivers who use their own cars to provide door-to-door service for "quality of life" activities not normally available through existing transportation programs.

BACKGROUND

In June of 1994, the Board of Ruth Rales Jewish Family Service established a series

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of committees focusing on the programs offered by the agency and on ways of enhancing our service provision in an ever-changing community. One of them was the Senior Service Committee, which began to explore a variety of unmet needs of our seniors: transportation, respite, chore worker and other home care needs, serving isolated "second story residents" in communities where there are no elevators, personal affairs assistance (bill paying, budgeting), etc.

When the Senior Services Board Committee initially met in October, 1998 to continue the previous group's work, it was decided that its mission should be goal-oriented, focusing on only one project, to be accomplished by May, 1999. The Transportation Project evolved out of the first meeting.

In early discussion, the Committee focused on discrete, but inter-related tasks necessary in reaching its goal of establishing a pilot volunteer driver program called "Kibbitz and Ride":

- Researching the need in our community
- Exploring what programs already exist
- Exploring the feasibility of recruiting volunteer drivers

Committee members volunteered to gather information regarding the above topics and organized their research around the following questions:

- Who is eligible?
- What will be provided?
- What is the cost, if any?
- How often may a person utilize the service in a week/month?
- How much advance notice is needed?
- How many people are picked up in a single run?
- What are the geographical boundaries, if any?

Incorporating ideas from other successful Jewish Family Service and Federation programs around the country, the committee decided to form a pilot program as a way of "testing the waters". A pilot program would (a) cost the agency little, if

anything, (b) identify problem areas, (c) create interest amongst prospective volunteer drivers and (d) act as a "model" to generate funding for a larger program later on.

In subsequent Committee meetings, "ground rules" were worked out:

- It was decided that the pilot program would be open initially to existing counseling and care management clients of the Agency.
- Clients had to be ambulatory, i.e. walk independently or with a cane/walker.
- No fees would be charged, but donations to the Agency, if offered, would be accepted.
- Although clients would not be means-tested, it was hoped that only those who could not afford to pay for a private carrier would be referred.
- Clients would be referred by their care manager/therapist to the Coordinator of Volunteer Services, who would contact an available driver. The driver would then call the client and make arrangements for the ride.

After the ground rules were established, the Committee presented the program to the Board and it was approved. The pilot program would commence on March 1, 1999.

RECRUITMENT

The "Kibbitz and Ride" volunteer driver program initially attracted five prospective volunteers without the necessity of "hard core" recruitment efforts on our part. One driver had served on the Senior Services Board Committee and welcomed the hands-on opportunity. Two other volunteers had heard about the program from friends already volunteering in our agency. A fourth driver was an employee of the agency who wanted to volunteer for the program after work hours. And, finally, the last volunteer had been involved with a similar driver program in North Carolina and wanted to help during the winter months while vacationing here.

Prior to beginning, all volunteers completed an application which included three reference checks. In addition, a motor vehicle driving history is recorded, and a Florida Department of Law Enforcement clearance is completed. Volunteers must have a valid drivers license and carry at least \$100,000/\$300,000 bodily injury limits of insurance covering the driver and vehicle being used.

TRAINING

All volunteers participated in a two-hour training meeting prior to beginning their assignment. The topics included "Challenges in Our Interactions with Seniors", "Do's and Don'ts for Client Contact", "Listening and Communication Skills" and "Emergency Procedures". The Director of Senior Services and the Coordinator of Volunteer Services co-facilitated the meeting. Volunteers were also provided with a list of "tips" when scheduling rides: (see list of "tips")

Staff members were given guidelines for making ride referrals. It was emphasized that the rides were to be for "quality of life" activities not normally available through existing transportation programs. Staff requests were to be made to the Coordinator of Volunteer Services, who also acted as dispatcher, one week in advance. A Driver Request Form must be completed for each ride request. (see sample)

MORE THAN A RIDE

"I want people to know how special this program is, enabling these people to go to things to enrich their lives", stated one driver. The program began on schedule in March, 1999. Volunteer drivers have transported clients to discussion groups, bridge clubs, bereavement groups, congregate lunch programs, shopping, Motor Vehicle Bureaus, art museums, religious services and holiday parties. On several occasions, volunteers have taken bereaved clients to the cemetery and stayed with them while they visited loved ones.

The most touching part of the "Kibbitz and Ride" program is the relationship that often develops between driver and client. One client who attends a weekly current events discussion group began making reading recommendations to the driver and providing her with news articles to read. The volunteer commented, "The funny thing is, I'm actually reading more now since she started doing this." Another driver spent a holiday with a client whom she knew would be alone. When the driver's husband died several months later, the client asked our agency for a ride to attend the memorial service.

Although most drivers provide rides on a one-time basis, one driver has been transporting three clients each week to and from an agency bereavement group. One of the clients has already invited the other clients and the driver to her home for coffee after one of the meetings.

By fall of 2000, over 475 one-way rides had been completed, serving over 48 clients.

CHALLENGES

The recruitment of drivers remains a major challenge for the successful expansion of the "Kibbitz and Ride" program. At the present time, there are eight drivers in the program. However, with volunteer vacation schedules and the increasing growth of our client base, it is not always possible to fill requests immediately. Recruitment efforts will be a high priority for us as more and more people depend on their mobility for the quality of their lives. Hopefully, other agencies such as ours will take on the challenge of developing a volunteer driver program as a transportation solution.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thanks to Minneapolis Jewish Family Service for allowing us to borrow the name "Kibbitz and Ride" from their driver program.

DRIVER REQUEST FORM
RUTH RALES JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE

Today's Date _____

Client's Name _____

Client's Telephone Number _____

Client's Address (including subdivision)

Date of appointment _____ Day _____

Time of appointment _____

Time client would like to be picked up _____

Where is appointment? _____

Length of appointment _____

Date of appointment _____ Day _____

Client information: Ambulatory _____ Vision Impaired _____

Other assistance _____

Other relevant information for driver _____

For office use only

Client's Name _____ Client's Telephone Number _____

Date of Appointment _____ Time of Appointment _____

Driver Assigned _____ Driver's Telephone Number _____

SOME TIPS FOR VOLUNTEER DRIVERS

1. Be punctual and predictable. Let the client know if you cannot come at appointed time. Some are quite anxious, and a delay of even 10 minutes can seem like hours.
2. After receiving your assignment, call the client to confirm the service. It is a good idea to call again the morning you are scheduled to drive to reconfirm. If the passenger lives in an apartment building, ask if he or she can wait for you in the lobby.
3. Remind the client to bring anything necessary for the appointment (i.e., glasses, medication, hearing aids).
4. If the client cancels the scheduled ride, please contact our office. If you arrive to pick up the client and he/she does not answer, call the office at once.
5. Drivers should escort the client to the car and provide any necessary assistance. Keep in mind that not all clients need or want assistance in getting in or out of a car, but they may appreciate your asking.
6. Ask the client to fasten the seat belt. You may refuse to transport any client who refuses to wear a seat belt.
7. Drive the client to the scheduled destination. Escort him/her into the building. Depending on the type and anticipated length of the appointment, you may wait for the client or return for him/her at a scheduled time.
8. When you arrive at a physician's office with a client, it may facilitate the appointment to tell the receptionist (with the client's permission) that you are a volunteer, and ask how long the appointment will take. Be persistent!
9. If a client asks you to drop him/her somewhere other than home after the appointment, that's o.k. If the client asks you to take him/her to the supermarket or pharmacy on the way home, it is up to you, if you have the time.
- 10. If a client wants to schedule a ride for another date, tell the client to call his therapist/care manager to arrange this.**
11. Be an attentive listener. Leave your personal troubles at home.
12. Do not accept gifts or money from a client. If he/she insists, you may suggest making a donation to the Agency.
13. It is recommended that Drivers do not disclose their telephone numbers to clients.
14. Drivers should contact the Agency with any concerns regarding the clients or the program.
- 15. In the event of a medical emergency call 911. It is essential to also contact the Agency immediately (852-3333) in order that family members can be notified.**
16. Try to stay neutral and non-judgmental. It is never advisable to give specific financial, medical or legal advice.
17. Volunteer Drivers will be invited to periodic training meetings to share successes and concerns.
- 18. Be relaxed. Enjoy yourself.**