

Volunteer drivers get folks where they need to go

SARA KURTZ, A volunteer for Tri-Valley Transit's Dial-A-Ride program, drops off passenger Elaine McLaren to Project Independence on Friday. Kurtz likes to have riders sit in the front seat with her so it doesn't feel so much like a taxi service. Independent photo/Steve James



April 21, 2022

By John S. McCright

ADDISON COUNTY — Dave Andrews doesn't have a regular workweek, but he still likes to get out and see people.

"I've been retired quite a while and I really enjoy the contact this gives me with people not part of my normal social circle," the 77-year-old Middlebury resident said.

"This" is Dial-A-Ride, a service for which he serves as a volunteer driver.

Dial-A-Ride offers a lift to people who need to get places that either aren't served by typical bus schedules or who need a little more one-on-one care than a bus can provide. Dial-A-Ride depends on volunteer drivers to pick up passengers and give them life-changing access to medical appointments, food shopping and other necessities.

It is managed by Tri-Valley Transit, the bus service that formed from the merger of Middlebury-based Addison County Transit Resources and Randolph-based Stagecoach,

Volunteers use their own cars and get a reimbursement for the miles they drive.

Andrews welcomes the chance to help people get to critical services like dialysis or methadone treatments. But he also just likes to talk with people.

"I've been in Middlebury since 1982, so quite a few of these people I know somewhat," he said.

This service is available to eligible residents of Addison, Orange and Northern Windsor counties and provides support for elderly, disabled and Medicaid-eligible neighbors who can't drive themselves or access buses.

Rides to doctor's appointments can take volunteer drivers to Burlington or even to New Hampshire to see a physician at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. TVT asks for Dial-a-Ride clients to give at least 48 hours notice before they need a ride, because it can take many phone calls to match a volunteer driver to the time that is needed.

Like a lot of other volunteer drivers, Sarah Katz found herself with some extra time on her hands. She had an extremely stressful job and was getting kind of burned out, so she moved to part-time. She was casting about and saw a call out from TVT and she thought, "I do love to drive, it's something I've always loved to do," Kurtz recalled.

So she tried it, and she fell in love with it.

"Every passenger I've had has been great," the Addison resident said.

VOLUNTEER DRIVER DAVE Andrews has lived in Addison County 40 years and is happy to know quite a few people for whom he provides trips through Dial-A-Ride.

Independent photo/John S. McCright

Beginning in 2020, Kurtz had to have passengers sit in the back seat because of COVID-19 restrictions. But since that requirement was lifted she has them sit in the front with her.

"If they're in the back I felt like more of a taxi driver," she said. "I want to talk to people."

Rick Collins has been volunteering as a driver since December. The reason he started doing this is pretty common. The 65-year-old Bridport resident was wrapping up a job as a quality manager at Collins Aerospace in Vergennes in which he was working 60 hours per week. He didn't want that kind of intensity.

"I was retiring kind of," Collins said. "I didn't want right back into a full-time job."



So he created some side jobs and he decided to do volunteer driving to fill in around those other activities. He said TVT works around his schedule.

"They are very accommodating," he said. "I seem to be at a good place because it gives me enough time to do other things on the side."

He drives three days a week.

"I get a trip sheet," Collins describes. "I go from point A to Point B, drop them and go back for another client or wait for them and take them home. It's pretty low key."

Collins does like driving, but not so much that he would want to do a whole lot more of it.

"I don't think I'd like to be a long-haul trucker," he said. "I like being out and about, I love nature and the different seasons.

"The trips go by pretty quickly because I get into the conversations."

He sees a variety of clients. Some don't have a vehicle and need to get somewhere; some can't drive for health or other reasons. Some are elderly, but not all of them. There is one thing that many have in common.

"Most of them are pretty talkative," Collins said. "For the most part I have some pretty good conversations."

One unanticipated side benefit Kurtz has found is that riders often have a store of personal knowledge about Addison County and most are happy to share it. So she feeds that sometimes by taking people through different routes to their destinations.

"I do like to go back roads; someone's always got the history for somewhere that they share," said Kurtz, 54. "I enjoy learning history of the county and the state."

Kurtz knows that she is a quiet person, so the amount of conversation is determined by the passenger.

"Some people don't talk the whole trip, others talk your ear off," she said. "If they want to talk I'll talk, or not talk, that's fine."

PROJECT INDEPENDENCE PATRON Elaine McLaren gets a hand from Rick Beers outside Elderly Services in Middlebury as Dial-A-Ride volunteer driver Sara Kurtz drops her off. The program gives a lift to people who need to get to critical services but aren't served by typical bus schedules or who need more assistance than a bus can provide.

Independent photo/Steve James



Do volunteer drivers put in a lot of miles? It depends on the individual and the demand.

"My all time high was 280 miles in one day," Andrews said.

That day he drove a person to the VA hospital in White River Junction, waited for two hours and then brought them home. And that was followed by a trip to Burlington, plus a second round trip the Queen City.

"They were kind of shorthanded that day," Andrews speculated.

Providing a safe experience for volunteers and customers is important to TVT, said Mary-Claire Crogan, community relations manager for Tri-Valley Transit. The organization matches up drivers who want it with an AARP safety training course if they want it.

"We never call a volunteer while they are driving," she added.

Still, accidents do happen. Last summer Andrews was driving a passenger south on Court Street in Middlebury when a driver "tried to sneak out on Creek Road," and a fender-bender resulted. The other driver's insurance paid for repairs, but Andrews's car was out of service for months.

"It was a little inconvenient," he said.

MONEY FOR MILES

In addition to the good feeling one gets when they help out another, Dial-a-Ride volunteers are reimbursed for miles they drive — from their own home and back — at the federal government mileage reimbursement rate, which is currently 58.5 cents per mile. Also, County Tire gives a discounted rate on service they provide to a Dial-a-Ride volunteer's car.

Because the monetary benefits are "reimbursement" — not pay — they do not affect the volunteer's Social Security, Medicare or many other social services benefits they already receive.

Drivers recognize the need for the reimbursement

"You've got to think about it," Kurtz said. "It does take wear and tear on your car. You put on a lot of miles on your vehicle. Last year I had almost 20,000 miles."

Driver David Andrews's feeling about the reimbursement seems to be typical.

"It doesn't cost anywhere near that much to buy gas," he said. "I don't do it for the money."

Kurtz said that even when she considers the extra maintenance she does for the car she dedicates to Dial-a-Ride, "I'm still ahead. (And) I do take good care of my car."

Collins said the impact of his driving on his vehicle is "negligible."

You might think that anyone who volunteers to drive their own car must have a high-efficiency electric car, but that's not the case. Andrews drives a Subaru Forester, which he said gets 30 miles per gallon. "It sits high enough off ground that it is easy to get people in and out of," Andrews said. If a passenger has a walker or some other mobility aid, the Forester is roomy enough for him to put it in the back end.

Collins drives a Toyota Tacoma pickup, which does limit his services only to clients who can get in and out of the high-sitting chassis. But usually it is not a deal breaker.

“Even folks who are a little bit older, they grab on to the handles and can get in,” Collins said.

SHOPPING BUDDIES

Dial-A-Ride doesn't have enough volunteers to fulfill every request, so TVT has to prioritize rides. Doctor's appointments generally take precedence.

But that means that requests to get a ride to do grocery shopping, for instance, might go unfulfilled. To make up for that, Crogan has started a spin-off volunteer opportunity that she is calling “Shopping Buddies.” These volunteers agree to take a person who needs a ride with them when they themselves go to the supermarket.

“It is less daunting,” Crogan pointed out. “A potential volunteer says, ‘Ya, I can spare an hour out of my trip to help this person.’ And it makes a huge impact.”

VOLUNTEER DRIVER SARA Kurtz sometimes takes less-traveled

roads when she is transporting Dial-A-Ride passengers and is tickled to find out bits of history and trivia about local spots from her passengers.

Independent photo/Steve James

Of course, if the volunteer discovered that they liked the camaraderie of offering rides and the good feeling it imparts, Crogan said they could become more active Dial-a-Ride volunteers.

As volunteers the drivers can decide how much or how little they want to make themselves available; if they don't want to drive after dark or outside the county they can stipulate that.

“I don't put limits on when I drive,” Kurtz said. “Some days I'm going from 5 in morning to 7:30 at night.

“Even though it is a volunteer job, to me I treat it like a job.”

And making herself available has meant that there are some busy days.

“I've gone from Middlebury to Burlington four or five times in a day,” Kurtz said. “You definitely have to like to drive.”

Crogan said there is a lot of demand for volunteer drivers — more than TVT can meet right now. Typically TVT has 70 volunteers that serve both the Addison County region formerly served by ACTR and the Orange County and Northern Windsor County regions formerly served by Stagecoach. Since COVID struck, the service has only about half that number — 35 — to serve the same huge swath of Vermont.

The agency is putting out a call for anyone who can to give it a try.

“Many of our volunteers could qualify for services themselves,” she said. “We need more young people to get the work done.”

Volunteers must have 5 years of driving experience, a reliable/insured vehicle and be able to pass background checks. Volunteers set their own parameters on how frequently they would like to drive, and who they are comfortable transporting.

How to volunteer: Application on the website, call TVT at 802-388-2287, or stop by the office at 297 Creek Road in Middlebury. Crogan pointed out that her organization recently streamlined the application process; it went from a 16-page application to just two pages plus two pages of information for background checks.

All of the drivers contacted by the *Independent* noted that their passengers are thankful for the ride and some become regular clients of a particular driver. Kurtz welcomes the repeat business.

“Every night, I'd always take ‘my ladies’ from Project Independence,” she says. “I take them home ... and we just chit chat and catch up. It's nice.”

It's that kind of relationship-building that makes volunteering for Tri-Valley Transit enjoyable and fulfilling.

“If this was something I could've done years ago I would have done it, I just didn't know about it,” Kurtz said.

“I highly recommend it, even if it is just one day of the week.”

