

Volunteer Driver Programs

General Information

VOLUNTEER DRIVER PROGRAMS

Although volunteer driver programs are often thought of as a new transportation phenomena, the first documented volunteer driver programs were organized in 1904 in Chisago, Wisconsin, to take older adults to church and the train station in sleighs and wagons.

Volunteer driver programs often serve as the “go to” option for older adults who need assistance and support, socialization, and low-cost or no-cost transportation. Today, there are possibly thousands of volunteer driver programs in the United States and more than 800 in the volunteer driver program data set. Some are small with one or two paid staff and a few volunteer drivers who provide rides to a small number of passengers. Others have a large staff and hundreds of volunteer drivers and passengers. The programs provide transportation to passengers by involving volunteers as drivers and often involving the vehicles of the volunteer drivers. Some even contract with Uber and Lyft or community transportation services “to fill the gaps” when a volunteer driver is not available.

VOLUNTEER DRIVERS

A volunteer driver is a person who drives a passenger, quite often, in association with a volunteer driver program. Volunteer drivers are said to be the life blood of a volunteer driver program. Not only do they volunteer their time, but quite often, they also volunteer their vehicles. Drivers volunteer for the same reasons they volunteer to do other activities: in response to a need, to help others, to give back, and in some instances simply to stay active. Many volunteer drivers are asked to provide their passengers with assistance to the door, to the vehicle, through the door, and even to stay with the passenger at the destination. For the most part, volunteer drivers drive in the daytime and on weekdays. However, some programs support volunteer drivers who provide rides in the evenings and on weekends, and even 24/7.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit the numerous fact sheets and exercises in addition to the planning, implementation, and evaluation sections of the TurnKey Kit.

PASSENGERS OF VOLUNTEER DRIVER PROGRAMS

In many instances, the same physical, cognitive, and financial challenges that make it difficult and/or impossible for people to drive make it difficult or impossible to locate, accept, and use traditional transportation services. Although the passengers may present a variety of challenges (to the programs and the volunteers), the assistance and support they are provided can be essential not only in meeting their transportation needs but also in enabling them to age in place. Some passengers even say that while getting to and from the destination is important, the physical support and socialization provided by the volunteer often means that the ride is more than just a ride.

VEHICLES AND REIMBURSEMENT

Although vehicles may not know they are volunteering to provide rides to people who need them, quite often volunteer drivers use (and contribute) their own vehicles for the purpose of providing rides to passengers of volunteer driver programs. In most instances, the vehicles are not able to transport people with disabling conditions that require the use of wheelchairs, so many programs purchase lift-equipped vehicles or contract with transportation services that can make lift-equipped vehicles available to their passengers. Although many programs reimburse volunteers for the mileage incurred in providing transportation, it appears that the majority of volunteer drivers do not accept mileage reimbursement. Many who do accept mileage reimbursement give it back to the volunteer driver program as a donation.

TRANSPORTATION ASSISTANCE

Volunteer driver programs (and their volunteer drivers and often volunteer transportation escorts) may offer several levels of assistance to passengers. Some provide curb-to-curb assistance, which is provided when a driver picks up and drops off passengers at the curb side. Although such assistance may be provided to help passengers in and out of the vehicle, the passenger is required to get to the vehicle. Some programs provide door-to-door assistance in which a volunteer driver meets a passenger at the entryway of pick-up and drop-off addresses. Some volunteer driver programs also provide door-through-door assistance in which a volunteer driver goes through the door of the residence and/or destination of the passenger. Some volunteer driver programs even offer stay-at-the-destination assistance to their passengers. Some volunteer driver programs provide each of these four levels of assistance.

DESTINATIONS

A destination is the place to which a passenger travels. Three types of destinations are: life sustaining (doctor's offices, nutrition sites, grocery stores); life maintaining (banks, shopping centers, social services); and life enriching (volunteer centers, friends' homes, beauty shops). Although volunteer driver programs often emphasize life sustaining destinations, many also take passengers to all three destinations, and quite often the beauty shop is one of most important destinations. As one passenger once commented:

*“When I have a doctor’s appointment on Monday,
I go to the beauty shop on Friday, because
if I get bad news, I want to look my best.”*

Volunteer driver programs say the most frequent destinations are related to health services. While some only provide transportation to non-emergency medical services, others take their passengers grocery shopping, to the pharmacy, to the library, to the bank, to visit a friend, to volunteer activities, to church, and even to the barber shop and hairdresser. In rural areas, volunteer drivers are especially dedicated, as each trip may require many miles of driving and many hours of waiting. What is important is that volunteer driver programs often make it possible for older adults to travel to a variety of life-sustaining, life-maintaining, life-enriching destinations. Quite often such destination travel is only possible because of the assistance and support the programs provide.



TRIP CHAINING

A ride is identified as travel from one point to another point. Trip chaining occurs when the trip includes stops at several points. Many volunteer driver programs that provide one-way rides include making incidental stops on the way to or from a destination. For example, a volunteer driver takes Ms. Jones to a doctor's appointment and on the way back to her home she asks the volunteer driver to make a quick stop at the post office, or the bank, or the grocery (or perhaps all three), then the volunteer driver takes her back home. This is not a single trip, but rather five trips (the doctor, the post office, the bank, the grocery, and home). Some are life-sustaining locations, others may be life maintaining or life enriching, yet each stop is counted as a single ride.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEER TIME

There is a saying...

*"Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're worthless,
but because they're priceless."*

Although volunteers are not paid, contributions of volunteers (and that of their volunteer vehicles) are indeed priceless and are often acknowledged with recognition programs, gas cards, news releases. Many volunteer driver programs calculate volunteer hours by using the Independent Sector's value of volunteer time. In 2020, it calculated the value of a volunteer hour as \$28.54. Thus, a volunteer driver program whose volunteers contributed 20,000 hours would estimate the dollar contribution of its volunteers as \$570,800. The dollar value of volunteer time is important because it can be used by programs as match for grants and/or as information to publicize the value of the programs, the volunteer drivers, and the transportation they provide.

TECHNOLOGY

In days gone by, volunteer driver programs used a telephone to schedule rides and a pad and pencil to manage data. Through the years, most volunteer driver programs have embraced technology with respect to their daily operations, data management, and communication with the outside world. Today, an increasing number of volunteer driver programs use software to both schedule rides and manage data. Additionally there are several software programs dedicated primarily to scheduling rides and managing data for volunteer driver programs. In a recent survey, programs described the impact of software on their program management as key to improved efficiency and effectiveness on the part of program management and volunteer drivers. Examples are as follows:

Program Management

- to capture detailed information about volunteers and clients/passengers to track needs for rides, passengers served, mileage, trips, hours
- to create trip itineraries, schedule rides, and track miles, hours, and services to easily capture detailed information for volunteers and passengers
- to better manage the business by maintaining electronic records and easily analyzing data
- to provide detailed information for fund development
- to provide information to all stakeholders

Driver Reporting

- to easily report mileage and number of rides
- to log time electronically
- to efficiently share in completing the daily manifest of one-way rides to login and signup for upcoming transports for maximum flexibility

VOLUNTEER DRIVER RECRUITMENT

Recruiting someone to drive a passenger is not always simple. Prospective volunteer drivers are known to offer a variety of excuses for not volunteering: a reluctance to use their own car or to drive people they do not know, concerns about the cost of gas, and fears related to liability (the possibility of a crash, cancellation of insurance, and an increase in insurance premiums). These and other concerns must be addressed when recruiting volunteer drivers.

Managers of volunteer driver programs have a saying, "once you've got them, you've got them!" High volunteer retention rates appear to be related to activities that focus on the volunteer or what programs do so their volunteers will have a good experience. Included are recognition, training and professional development, screening, and matching. Perhaps most important is enabling volunteer drivers to support and socialize with their passengers.

In other words, a climate that welcomes and encourages volunteers and promotes a positive experience is more likely to retain volunteers. Finally, programs that use volunteers to recruit other volunteers and enlist them as "spokespersons" appear to be better able to retain volunteers.