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Ride Home program growing TIRED OF DRIVING? EMERGENCY RIDE HOME

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By KELLY HANNON

Larry Box was working at NASA headquarters in downtown D.C. when he learned his wife was having a medical emergency back in Fredericksburg.

It was just past lunchtime, after the midday Virginia Railway Express train had departed, and two hours before another would leave.

So Box, a VRE rider, picked up his phone and called Guaranteed Ride Home, the government-sponsored program that provides free rides home to ride-sharing and transit commuters in an emergency, or when they work unscheduled overtime.

Ten minutes after he called, a taxi pulled up outside his building. The driver took him to Fredericksburg, and dropped him at his car in the VRE parking lot. "It went off without a hitch," Box said.

Now, the popular commuter program is expanding.

King George County and Dahlgren will be added to the Guaranteed Ride Home program, with an expected starting date in July.

That means anyone working in King George County who lives in Caroline, Fredericksburg, King George, Spotsylvania or Stafford can get a free ride home, four times a year, if they use one of the required commuting methods.

Today, Box encourages eligible commuters to register for Guaranteed Ride Home.

"It's a really great program," Box said. Plus, "you don't have to pay anything."

Workers who carpool, vanpool, slug, bike or walk to work in Northern Virginia and the D.C. area at least twice a week are eligible. So are people who hop a train or bus twice a week.

"It's like a little insurance policy," said Diana Utz, director of GWRideConnect in Fredericksburg. "So if I'm a rider in a carpool and I get to work and I become ill or someone in my family is sick, I can get home."

Stafford County workplaces are already covered under Guaranteed Ride Home for people living in the immediate Fredericksburg area, Utz said.

The addition of Guaranteed Ride Home could encourage more workers at the Naval Support Facility at Dahlgren and surrounding private contractors to carpool or vanpool.

Currently, there are 30 vanpools headed to the Dahlgren area on week days.

"I'm just glad it's coming here because it's needed," said Leslie Jordan, transportation incentive program manager at the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Dahlgren Division, a tenant command. "It's hard to be here without your vehicle and an emergency comes up and you have no way home," she said.

With gas prices well above \$3 a gallon, more area residents are considering ride sharing and transit.

Nicholas Ramfos, director of Commuter Connections, the group that organizes Guaranteed Ride Home in the Washington area, said he's seen a 15 to 20 percent increase in Ride Home registrations in the past month.

"When the gas prices go up, we definitely see an uptick in applications," Ramfos said.

Guaranteed Ride Home has limitations.

It will not give you a free ride home for a scheduled doctor's appointment. You can get a ride if you are suddenly sick, and need to see a doctor immediately.

Ramfos recommends that commuters visit commuterconnections.com to read the specifics.

Also, Guaranteed Ride Home cannot provide commuters with a ride home in the event of a terrorist attack similar to Sept. 11, 2001, or mass building evacuations.

"The cab companies we have contracted would not have the capacity to handle that many commuters," Ramfos said.

Mike Gillenwater of Fredericksburg has used Guaranteed Ride Home twice in the past three years, both for family emergencies.

Gillenwater, a strategic planner at the Department of Homeland Security, alternates between riding VRE and carpooling.

Once, the service arranged for a rental car to be dropped at his office. Another time, a taxi picked him up.

He encourages eligible commuters to register with Guaranteed Ride Home.

"It's a no-brainer," Gillenwater said.

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GWRideConnect is a free regional service that provides information on carpools, vanpools, slugging, buses, trains and all forms of transit headed to a number of work destinations.

For more information, call 540/373-POOL or go to the Web site: gwregion.org.

After you contact GWRideConnect, you will receive a packet of information that provides all the ride sharing and transit options for your destination.

To register for Guaranteed Ride Home online, visit: com.muterconnections.com. Commuters may also call 800/745-RIDE.

Anyone who car pools, vanpools or slugs to work at least twice a week is eligible. Transit riders and people who bike or walk to work at least twice a week are also eligible for the program.

The program pays for four free rides home per year, either by taxi or rental car.

Emergencies, personal or family illness, and unscheduled overtime are acceptable reasons to use Guaranteed Ride Home.

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