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Disabled get one-call assistance

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By KELLY HANNON

Penny Weaver visits the Wilmer Eye Institute at Johns Hopkins every three months for follow-up appointments after a recent eye surgery.

But the 61-year-old Culpeper woman can't drive long distances, so she needs someone to take her to Baltimore, wait for her during the appointment, and drive another two hours home.

Weaver said she hated inconveniencing others. Her friends and family missed work, and had to expend their vacation time.

"I literally wore my sisters out," she said.

Then, a few weeks ago, a friend mentioned a new program in the Fredericksburg area, Mobility Options, which helps line up transportation for people with disabilities.

When Weaver called, the staff helped her navigate commuter train schedules for Virginia Railway Express and MARC. She can drive short distances, so she drove to VRE's train station in Fredericksburg, rode to Union Station in Washington, then transferred to the MARC train, which carried her to Johns Hopkins.

Mobility Options paid for her train tickets.

Weaver said she knew Amtrak schedules wouldn't work for her trips to Baltimore, but she did not know about VRE or MARC.

Her trip unfolded seamlessly, she said, and she can now get back and forth to appointments on her own.

"I am grateful beyond words," Weaver said.

Funded by a government grant, Mobility Options is a phone service that connects people with disabilities to all existing public and private transportation options in the Fredericksburg area. If necessary, Mobility Options pays for the trip.

Now, people who once were often forced to contact several agencies before lining up transportation can get a ride with one call to 800/627-2892.

"This is just huge," said Diana Utz, director of the George Washington Regional Commission's program for commuters, GWRideConnect.



Quintin Hardy (left) says goodbye to Samuel Young after taking him to the regional library in Fredericksburg.



Quintin Hardy operates his van for transportation service for people with disabilities.



Quintin Hardy drives his Wisdom Ride van through Spotsylvania after picking up Samuel Young for a ride.

Over the years, her program has fielded calls seeking local transportation for people with disabilities. That was one of the reasons the regional commission started the Mobility Options program.

Funded by a \$238,500 grant from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, Mobility Options is part of the New Freedom program. New Freedom encourages communities to find ways to provide transportation for people with disabilities.

The regional commission in Fredericksburg received the grant in 2009, with letters of support from numerous social service agencies in the area. Many were already providing some form of transportation for the disabled, but people "were falling through the cracks," said Lloyd Robinson, Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization administrator.

The grant let the commission hire a coordinator, Jane Wills, to run Mobility Options and pay for rider trip expenses.

When faced with a request, Wills will first turn to existing services and schedules. Options include the FREDericksburg Regional Transit bus service, a van operated by the Rappahannock Area Agency on Aging and the Rappahannock Area Community Services Board, or other agencies with transportation programs.

If there is no match between where a caller needs to go and existing services, Wills will hire commercial providers.

Anyone who thinks he may qualify as a person with a disability should call Mobility Options, Wills said.

"It's a very broad definition," Wills said. "Disabilities are things that interfere with people's abilities to do daily activities."

In the New Freedom grant application, the commission estimated there could be 80,000 people in the Fredericksburg area eligible to use Mobility Options.

Debe Fults, executive director of disAbility Resource Center in Fredericksburg, wrote a letter in support of the New Freedom grant for Mobility Options. She said the region is fortunate to have the FRED bus system.

But people living in counties far away from the city center often cannot get to the FRED routes, or the Monday-Friday schedule doesn't meet their needs.

"So the Mobility Options will allow people to have transportation paid for, for activities they typically wouldn't have any other way to get to," Fults said.

"That could be shopping, civic activities, church or employment," she said.

Many area residents with disabilities can get transportation funded by Medicaid only to doctor's appointments, making that the only time they can leave their home, Fults said.

"Having this pot of funding to purchase transportation for people individually is really important," she said. "I think we've designed a program here that meets the needs of our community."

Wills hopes the program grows with the population of the Fredericksburg area.

Also, Wills has her eye on government agency vans that sit empty on evenings and weekends. She's hoping to use the New Freedom grant funding for weekend and evening shopping and errand trips, especially for disabled residents living in rural portions of the region.

Weaver encouraged anyone who needs help traveling to call Mobility Options.

"I cannot thank her enough," Weaver said of Wills.

Kelly Hannon: 540/374-5436

Email: khannon@freelancestar.com

WHAT IT IS: The program provides people with disabilities in the Fredericksburg area with transportation options to medical appointments, employment, civic events and shopping. **OUT-OF-TOWN DOC?** The program can connect people with two free van routes for patients with disabilities who need to see a doctor in Richmond or Charlottesville. The first goes to Richmond on the first and fifth Wednesdays of each month. The other runs to Charlottesville on the second, third and fourth Wednesdays. Another day of the week may be added soon. **MAKING CONTACT:** Call 800/627-2892, or fill out a trip request form online at mobilityoptions.org. **PLAN AHEAD:** Callers are advised to allow a week's notice when requesting transportation assistance.

Mobility Options coordinator Jane Wills hopes to recruit a corps of volunteer drivers willing to use their personal vehicles.

Interested volunteers can contact Wills at 800/627-2892, or fill out an application at mobilityoptions.org. Volunteer drivers must undergo a short training session, provide proof of vehicle insurance and give permission for Wills to obtain a copy of the volunteer's driving record.

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