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Is Fuel A Problem for Volunteer Drivers?

Survey finds seniors who rely on programs for vital transport may be affected by rising gas costs

PASADENA, CA, Jul. 7 – As fuel costs continue to climb, volunteer driver programs around the country may face a financial challenge when it comes to transporting the senior citizens they serve.

To gauge the impact of rising fuel costs on volunteer driver programs that serve a vital purpose by transporting vulnerable older Americans who no longer drive, many of whom are living alone, often in isolation, The Beverly Foundation recently surveyed more than 100 volunteer driver programs and found there is cause for concern.

The survey asked: “We have heard rumblings that volunteer drivers are expressing concerns about the rising costs of fuel. We are interested to hear from you if this is presenting problems for your program with respect to the participation of volunteer drivers and the provision of rides for older adults.” Within 5 days, 35 programs with more than 3,600 volunteer drivers in 20 states responded.

“Our survey reinforced the concern that rising gas prices could prove disastrous for volunteer driver programs, if not today, then tomorrow,” said Helen Kerschner, PhD, president and CEO of the Beverly Foundation. “The reality is that current volunteer drivers are incredibly committed, but there is worry for the future. In today’s environment, out-of-pocket costs can be a deterrent to recruiting new volunteers.”

According to the survey, the majority of transportation programs for seniors have not experienced any significant departures of volunteer drivers due to the gas crisis — yet. But programs are definitely worried about the potential of volunteer drivers reducing their driving activities or dropping out of the program. If that happens, the threat of senior isolation may increase significantly.

Worries about how fuel costs will affect recruitment and retention of volunteer drivers were expressed by many respondents, especially by programs that involve a large number of older adults on limited incomes and ones located in rural areas who require long distance transportation. While many programs do not provide mileage reimbursement, it appears that those that do cover the costs have an advantage in both recruiting and retaining volunteer drivers.

Examples of what survey respondents said:

“Our major medical hospitals are 90 and 150 miles away. Since last year, we have paid a stipend of \$0.375 to our drivers who drive over 20 miles a month. It does not take long to add up on the gas bill when transporting that far. The stipend has helped somewhat, but we already need to look at raising the amount with the ever-increasing price of fuel.”

“We are hearing from volunteers that they are concerned about how much longer they will be able to drive because of fuel costs.”

“Prospective volunteers often indicate they cannot afford to drive since the program doesn’t reimburse for gas.”

“Many of our volunteer drivers are on fixed incomes. It is one thing to ask volunteers to donate their time and effort. It’s another to ask them to dig into their pockets.”

“Today, some drivers ask, ‘how far is it?’ before committing to provide a ride.”

The results of the survey indicate that while volunteer driver programs aren’t yet seeing large shifts in volunteering, they believe they are coming. Some programs have already begun stepping up efforts to help offset the high prices at the pump. Many changes relate to reimbursement for mileage. The new IRS mileage reimbursement rate <<http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-drop/a-08-63.pdf>> of 58.5 cents per mile creates an opportunity for programs to give extra financial support to volunteer drivers but at the same time creates a financial burden on program budgets to cover unanticipated costs. The rate went into effect July 1, 2008.

On the national level, the federal government and forward thinking organizations across the public and private sectors can and are playing an important role in supporting the ability of volunteer driver programs to continue to serve older adults. It is the Beverly Foundation’s hope that the Federal Transit Administration through its New Freedom grants, the National Center on Senior Transportation, and granting organizations such as the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, AARP, and Grantmakers in Aging members and their colleagues will continue to bring their considerable energy and financial resources to bear on this major societal problem.

About the Beverly Foundation

The Beverly Foundation, headquartered in Pasadena California, is a non-profit operating foundation that undertakes research, demonstration, and assistance to encourage and facilitate senior mobility and transportation for older adults. The Foundation is a co-sponsor of STP Exchange, a Web-based resource for peer-to-peer communication and networking among organizations and programs that provide transportation for older adults. The membership is free and open to professionals, providers, and community groups.

For more results of the Driver Fuel Cost Survey or to learn about supplemental transportation programs, please visit www.beverlyfoundation.org or www.stpexchange.org.

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