

The Impact of Fuel on Volunteer Driver Programs

A Report By The Beverly Foundation

June 25, 2008

Media reports about the difficulties faced by programs that involve volunteers as drivers prompted the Beverly Foundation to undertake an inquiry of volunteer driver programs that provide transportation to older adults in the United States. On June 13, the e-mail inquiry was sent to more than 100 volunteer driver programs across the country. The message was:

"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 five days, 35 volunteer driver programs responded to our inquiry. Respondents were located in 20 states and represent more than 3,600 volunteer drivers. What follows is a summary of what we heard from the field.

The Cost of Fuel Has Not Caused A Stampede

While a few programs indicated that some drivers had left, almost all that responded to the inquiry said that they had not experienced any significant departures of volunteer drivers from their programs... yet.

"We have seen a substantial reduction in the number of volunteer drivers in our home delivered meals program, however, to date we have not had volunteer drivers leave our program and have not had to reduce our services."

"Volunteers drive 1 to 2 hours to regional medical facilities but there is no decrease in the number of assignments they are accepting."

"No volunteer has actually stated that the price of gas is a deterrent to driving... yet."

"I am surprised that we are not experiencing a lack of participation of our volunteer drivers, and feel blessed that we are able to continue providing services for our passengers."

"Some drivers who have left volunteer driver programs only mention fuel costs as one of the reasons."

"It has not affected our current drivers."

"I do not know of any volunteers who are considering quitting due to the cost of gas, but our mileage reimbursement rate is very generous."

However, Some Drivers Are Starting To Worry

Many respondents said they have "heard rumblings" or had talked with volunteer drivers who expressed concern about fuel costs and said that it may impact on their ability to continue driving.

"I suspect it is becoming a problem for some volunteer drivers."

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

"It is absolutely a concern for some of my drivers. All but a handful are senior citizens themselves, and many have a limited income."

"My drivers are beginning to comment on the rising cost of gas. They are getting quite nervous about it, and several have said they will have to make a decision whether they can continue to drive if the process do not 'settle down' soon."

"We have had one volunteer say that she might have to resign."

And, Most Programs Are Very Worried

Volunteer driver programs have many reasons to be concerned about the costs of fuel. Some volunteer drivers are older and are on fixed income, drivers for programs located in rural areas drive long distances, and staff costs for recruitment and training also can be affected.

"None of our volunteers say they would not drive due to the cost of gas... but we are anticipating that 'the day will come'."

"Two drivers recently left the program for a variety of reasons, but they also mentioned the cost of fuel."

"In our rural area with distances of one-way trips from four to ten miles, a round trip could eat up a gallon of gas."

"We have more requests for providing rides since it seems to be cheaper than driving yourself."

"None of our volunteers are verbally admitting that gas prices are affecting their availability, but we are not getting the same level of 'yes' responses for driving that we used to, so it is taking more effort to get volunteers to commit."

"The rising cost of fuel is a real concern for our program with respect to the ability of staff to be out in the community meeting new passengers in their homes to answer questions and review paperwork and to meeting volunteers to provide orientation and training."

One Of The Biggest Worries Is Driver Recruitment

Volunteer drivers are the life blood of a volunteer driver program. Not only do they contribute their time, they also contribute their vehicles, and quite often their fuel. Sometimes they are reimbursed and sometimes they aren't. Most programs (but not all) are concerned with the increasing difficulty of recruiting new volunteer drivers.

"This is the first time in 10 years that recruitment has been a problem."

"Responses to ads for new volunteers are down significantly."

"We are still receiving inquiries from interested drivers, but not at the same pace as in the past."

"Prospective volunteers often indicate they cannot afford to drive since the program doesn't reimburse for gas."

"We are starting to get questions from volunteer drivers about the possibility of reimbursement for fuel."

And, Another Is Reimbursement for Mileage

While many programs do not provide mileage reimbursement, it appears that reimbursement for mileage often is considered an important factor in retaining volunteer driver involvement. Programs that do not reimburse are concerned that their drivers may not be able to continue to drive and programs that provide reimbursement or vouchers for mileage are concerned about the ultimate impact on their budgets. However, regardless of their policy on mileage reimbursement, all worry about the impact of the cost of fuel on their drivers and potential impact on their programs.

"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."

"We don't reimburse for mileage, and the standard mileage deduction rate for volunteer reimbursement is only \$0.14."

"Historically, about half of our volunteer drivers have not requested reimbursement. These volunteers consider their service as their way of giving back to the community. That is changing."

"Recently, several volunteers have asked for mileage reimbursement."

"We currently provide our drivers with mileage reimbursement at the federal reimbursement rate. If the trend (for higher fuel prices) continues, we will need to address the issue."

"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."

"When the price of gas reaches \$5.00 we will increase our reimbursement rate from \$0.20 to \$0.25 per mile."

"Philanthropic and government communities do not seem to understand the need for money to reimburse for mileage."

"Cuts in county budgets means cuts in our funds for reimbursement."

Some Volunteer Drivers Are Addressing The Problem

Although many drivers do not admit to having concerns about the costs of gas, some are making changes that indicate fuel costs can be a problem.

"A few drivers have cut down on the number of rides they are willing to give in a month, but do not say it is because of fuel costs."

"Today, some drivers ask 'how far is it' before committing to provide a ride."

"One volunteer cut back on driving from two days to one."

"Some volunteer drivers have begun restricting how far they will travel because of gas prices and the result is that staff has to do more driving."

“All my volunteer drivers have requested driving only once a week.”

“We have had volunteers ask for assignments closer to home so they don’t have to travel as far.”

“We have had a couple of volunteers decline to drive on out-of-town trips due to the cost of gas.”

Passengers Are Even Trying To Help

Respondents indicated that a number of passengers provide (or have asked if they could provide) money or gas cards as reimbursement to volunteer drivers.

“We have a number of passengers calling and asking if they can reimburse the driver.”

“Some passengers give gas cards to volunteer drivers.”

Most Programs Are Taking Action

The burden of increasing fuel costs on volunteer drivers and programs has precipitated a number of changes in the operations of a number of programs. Many changes relate to reimbursement for mileage. Here’s what respondents say they are doing.

- e-mail thanking volunteer drivers for their good work... and saying they program is trying to figure out a way to get them free gas
- work with the local county transportation program to line up some of the medical appointments with the bus schedule
- information by phone and in newsletters that all volunteers can and should request reimbursement for their mileage, especially if they have to make a choice of limiting their driving because of fuel
- board approval of giving drivers fuel cards in appreciation of their increased sacrifice with a letter explaining the value of the fuel card in relation to their volunteer miles driven the previous month
- distribution of gas cards to help those who express concern
- increased mileage reimbursement rate by \$0.02 as an expression of appreciation
- board increase in reimbursement rate by \$0.06 per mile.
- increased \$0.05 increase for mileage to \$0.505 per mile.
- request additional mileage reimbursement funds of \$0.04 per mile in new budget
- plans to establish a restricted fund that will allow program to reimburse volunteer drivers for mileage
- allocation of funds for “gas vouchers” to partially reimburse more frequent drivers on a quarterly basis paid for by recently received grant
- possibility of writing grant application to oil companies for \$100 gift cards to give to volunteer drivers each year
- development of policy on distribution of gas vouchers to volunteer drivers with funds recently received grant from New Freedoms grant program of FTA
- use of funding from New Freedoms grant program (above) to provide taxi vouchers so that taxis can take passengers to destinations when it is not possible to find volunteer drivers

Conclusions

Are Volunteer Drivers Continuing to Drive?

Yes, regardless of whether they are reimbursed or not, it appears that, at this time, very few volunteer drivers have stopped driving.

“So far, everyone is still driving.”

Is The Cost of Fuel Impacting Programs?

Yes, it is a major concern but it is likely its impact in the future will be much greater than today because of its potential affect on the recruitment of new volunteer drivers. Several programs indicated that it is increasingly difficult to recruit new drivers to their programs and they attribute their reluctance to the cost of fuel. At the same time one indicated that the results of their recruitment efforts had exceeded expectations.

“During the last 6 months, we have focused on a volunteer recruitment campaign. Our goal was 30 volunteers, by July 1. By June 17, we were already at 37.”

Are Programs Doing Anything About It?

Yes, most of the programs that responded to the survey indicated that they were thinking about making changes in schedules or reimbursement rates, and a large number indicated that they already had taken action.

“We are trying to increase the driver base so that each driver will be called upon to drive less frequently.”

Can Passengers Help?

Yes, they can help by expressing their appreciation and by contributing to the program to support mileage reimbursement or gas cards for volunteer drivers rather than giving money directly to the drivers.*

“We had been hearing from our drivers about the continuing escalating costs of gas. We did a mailing asking for donations from the passengers who receive rides from volunteer drivers. We received a nice response, not overwhelming. But this will allow us to defray some of the volunteer costs. We will use the donations to buy gas cards.”

Are Programs Making Changes in Their Operations?

Yes, several programs indicated that they are expanding their efforts to show appreciation to their volunteer drivers, others indicated that they are reducing the distance and frequency of volunteer driver activities, and still others indicated that they are increasing their rates for mileage reimbursement.

“We are giving proactive attention to price of fuel in volunteer recruitment and retention by addressing cost of fuel and offer of reimbursement.”

**The Beverly Foundation does not support the efforts by riders to give money, gas cards, or any other type of payment directly to volunteer drivers. However, it does support passenger donations to volunteer driver programs.*

Is Action Needed At The National Level?

Yes, in addition to actions that will reduce the price of fuel, public and private sector funders as well as the Federal Government can play a role in supporting the ability of volunteer driver programs to continue to serve older adults. The Federal Transit Administration through its New Freedoms grants, the National Center on Senior Transportation, and granting organizations such as the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, AARP, and members of Grantmakers in Aging can bring their considerable energy and financial resources to bear on the problem. Congressional action related to the IRS allowance for mileage that volunteer drivers can claim on their tax returns also would be of great benefit to volunteer driver programs, volunteer drivers, and older adult passengers.

“The \$0.14 per mile standard mileage deduction rate for the use of a vehicle in the performance of charitable activities, as established by the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, is absurdly out-of-date. What was appropriate when the cost of a gallon of regular gasoline was \$1.20 no longer makes any sense. Changing the rate of providing services for charitable organizations requires congressional action, but until legislation is passed, the rate will remain at \$0.14 per mile.”

Recommendations For Action

This feedback from respondents suggest the need for actions at the local, state and national levels. Most recommendations for action by programs and communities, however the last is for action by the US Congress.

When Programs Do Not Reimburse for Mileage

- #1 Show extra appreciation to volunteer drivers through correspondence or telephone calls, especially when reimbursement is not provided.
- #2 Rearrange schedules and possibly even limit service area to reduce expenditures when no mileage reimbursement is available.
- #3 Encourage passengers to donate a few dollars or make a suggested donation to a reimbursement or restricted fund for reimbursing drivers for mileage.
- #4 Inform volunteer drivers that they can use their mileage in providing volunteer transportation as a tax deduction if they do not receive reimbursement.
- #5 Make available statistics or forms regarding tax deductions for gas or miles driving that can be distributed to volunteer driver programs so that they can help volunteer drivers with tax deductible contributions.

When Programs Reimburse for Mileage

- #1 Increase the reimbursement rate to coincide with the rising price of gasoline.
- #2 Prepare grant applications to private and government entities at the local, state and national levels that will support an increase in the reimbursement rate.
- #3 Link with public and paratransit services to provide funding for mileage reimbursement.

Additional Recommendations

- #1 Encourage granting agencies to establish a fund that volunteer driver programs can tap for providing mileage reimbursement.
- #2 Develop a concise message about the importance of volunteer driver programs, the critical role and contribution of volunteer drivers and the burden of fuel prices on the drivers and passengers and incorporate the message in local, state, and national efforts to generate financial support for volunteer driver programs.
- #3 Launch a national campaign to mobilize congressional leaders to develop and pass legislation to increase the current rate from \$0.14 per mile to the standard rate for business vehicles of \$0.585 per mile.

Postscript

Volunteers who drive older adults are committed to their job, often for hundreds of hours and for many years. They know they are needed and that they are making an important contribution. They acknowledge the fact that their greatest reward is the satisfaction they receive. Perhaps that is the reason current drivers are using their best efforts to continue their role as volunteer drivers, regardless of the financial burden. It also may suggest that driving people is much different than driving for other purposes, and explain why the volunteer drivers of transportation programs for older adults are continuing their good work regardless of the increasing costs of fuel.

This inquiry was undertaken by the Beverly Foundation with members of the *STP Exchange*. The Beverly Foundation is a non-profit foundation, located in Pasadena, California, that undertakes research, demonstration and assistance to encourage and facilitate senior mobility and transportation for older adults. The Foundation is a co-sponsor of the *STP Exchange*, a web-based resource for peer-to-peer communication and networking among organizations and programs that provide transportation to older adults. The membership is free and open to professionals, providers, and community groups.

For more information, please go to:

www.beverlyfoundation.org

or

www.stpexchange.org

35 Program Respondents to the Inquiry

Asian Community Center of Sacramento Valley	(Sacramento, CA)
Caring Hands Volunteer Caregivers Program	(Walnut Creek, CA)
Center for Volunteer Caregiving	(Cary, NC)
COAST	(Colfax, WA)
Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley, Inc.	(Lawrence, MA)
Encinitas Out and About Transportation Program	(Encinitas, CA)
Escorted Transportation Services North West	(Arlington, IL)
EZ Ride Community Cars/Meadowlink	(Rutherford, NJ)
Faith in Action of Sewickley	(Sewickley, PA)
Faith in Action Caregivers, Inc.	(Wheeling, WV)
Faith in Action Caregivers-Georgetown	(Georgetown, TX)
Faith in Action Caregivers-North East Austin	(Austin, TX)
Faith in Action Caregivers-Round Rock	(Round Rock, TX)
Faith in Action Caregivers-West Austin	(Austin, TX)
Faith in Action Health Coalition	(Cavalier, ND)
Faith In Action In Red Wing	(Red Wing, MN)
Faith in Action/Rural Community Action Ministry	(Leeds, ME)
I CARE Volunteer Drivers for Seniors	(Decatur, GA)
Interfaith Community Partners	(LaGrange, IL)
Jewish family service	(Bridgeport, CT)
Kindness Inc	(Mountain Home, AR)
M.E.T. Medical Escort Transportation Lifespan Resource	(Atlanta, GA)
Macomb County Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers	(Center Line, MI)
Neighborhood Service Center, Inc./Faith In Action	(Winter Haven, FL)
Rides & Smiles	(Poway, CA)
Rum River Interfaith Caregivers in Princeton	(Princeton, MN)
Sedgwick County Transportation Brokerage	(Wichita, KS)
Senior Transportation and Rides- STAR	(O'Fallon, MO)
ShareCare Faith in Action	(Bethlehem, PA)
St. Johns County Council on Aging	(St. Augustine, FL)
TRIP	(Riverside, CA)
Upper Arkansas Area Agency on Aging	(Salida, CO)
Volunteer Chore Services	(Seattle, WA)
Wellspring Faith In Action	(St. James. MN)
York County Community Action Corp.	(Sanford, ME)