

Volunteer Driving is a Win-Win Solution

by Cathy Wong

We all know or have met somebody who is no longer able to drive because of physical or mental limitations. Most likely it is an older person who is experiencing a health problem, which is normally encountered during the later years of life.

After the age of 70 to 74 we will likely experience difficulty with driving our own personal vehicle. The inability to drive does not only mean difficulty with going to where we need to go but it also is symbolic of the loss of independence and freedom which most Americans value.

Volunteer drivers are people who help a neighbor, a friend, a family member, or a complete stranger by driving them to places. Without volunteer drivers many of their riders would not be able access comfortable transportation. The physical problems which caused older people to stop driving can hinder the use of public transportation. For example, older people with physical problems often encounter difficulty with walking to the bus stop and getting in and out of large buses. Volunteer driving is an option for these people who need a more personalized mode of transportation.

A volunteer driver typically uses his or her own vehicle and picks up the rider at home. During the entire trip, many volunteer drivers report acting like an escort for their riders. An illustration of acting like an escort is when a volunteer driver walks with their rider into the hospital and stays with their rider during the medical appointment. This is important because these riders need special attention due to their health problems.

The rides given by volunteer drivers far exceed providing transportation. Volunteer drivers can be a main source of social support for their riders. During the trips, it may be described as a social occasion when the volunteer driver and rider go to outings. During the trips riders socialize with their volunteer drivers, which is essential to the well-being of older people who are experiencing health problems.

The socialization that occurs between the volunteer driver and the rider is an important and distinct character which is usually not seen in other modes of transportation. The personalized care during the rides plus the emotional support provided by volunteer drivers can greatly contribute to the well-being of older people who can no longer drive.

The helping behavior of volunteer drivers not only makes an impact in the lives of their riders but it also benefits volunteer drivers themselves. Volunteer drivers say that they gain a sense of satisfaction from helping their riders.

A book called *Stories from the Road*, published by the Beverly Foundation, contains many inspiring stories that have been written by volunteer drivers from their personal experiences. In the book, a volunteer driver writes "The best part of being a volunteer driver is the personal

satisfaction I derive from helping those who need help, and by doing so in a direct and immediate one-to-one way.” Not only do volunteer drivers enjoy helping their riders but they also recognize the importance of their altruistic behavior, as stated by a volunteer driver, “Giving such a small amount of personal time makes such a big, positive impact in the lives of people who don’t have an independent means of transportation.”

The internal rewards from making a difference in the lives of their riders and the community taken as a whole contribute to the well-being of volunteer drivers, and the engagement in a meaningful activity enables volunteer drivers to appreciate their ability in positively contributing to the lives of transportation dependent elders.

Volunteer driving is a win-win solution for both the rider and the volunteer driver.

Cathy Wong is a doctoral student studying gerontology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and was the Summer 2007 Intern with the TRIP Program.