The Challenge:

Mrs. Smith lives in a subdivision that’s seven miles from rural Maryville, Tennessee. For this 85-year-old to walk to the doctor or grocery store is out of the question. She has a car, but she no longer feels safe driving due to vision problems. Her daughter, Mary, lives 30 miles away and works full time. She occasionally makes special trips to take her mom places, but it’s a challenge to coordinate.

Until last October, the options for Mrs. Smith, other than asking her daughter, were to call a taxi or to schedule a ride with the local rural public transportation provider. For rural transit, she has to be ready at 8:00 a.m. and could be driven all over the county in a large van before being dropped off for her 10:00 a.m. appointment. Afterwards, a call to the same provider arranges the pickup, which will be around an hour wait until the process is reversed. Mrs. Smith should be home by 1:30 p.m., a round trip of five and one-half hours at a cost of six dollars.

Why Volunteers Were the Solution:

The agency turned to volunteers to solve this need because sustainability was a primary concern. In the SMiles project that was developed, a senior-friendly volunteer transportation program, the volunteer drivers develop relationships with the seniors that they drive, and the riders treasure them.

How Volunteers Help Carry Out Our Mission:

Now, with SMiles, Mrs. Smith calls and schedules a ride with the staff. Her ride request is posted online in a special secure software program, and a volunteer driver, Joy, assigns herself to take Mrs. Smith to the dentist at 10:00 a.m. next Wednesday. The two of them have a friendly chat during the ride and while waiting at the office. After leaving the dentist, Joy takes her new friend to the store and then drops her back home by 11:30 a.m., helping bring in the groceries. Mrs. Smith is eternally grateful to her driver for the friendly, convenient ride. Joy, a recent transplant, is thrilled to have learned so much about her new adopted community. The cost is still six dollars, but with the new benefits of efficiency, comfort and friendly socialization.

Joy, Mike, Dan, Wanda, Flo, and the remaining SMiles drivers take folks aged 60+ where they need to go within Blount County, Tennessee, by driving their personal vehicles. SMiles drivers log into secure software from their home computer or smartphone. From there they check the pending rides for the week and sign up for one that fits into their schedule. Many drivers have favorite riders and regularly assign themselves to their rides. Other drivers take a variety of people and enjoy the unique stories that each elder brings with them.
Seniors become members of SMiles for $25 per year and prepay $6 per round trip. Riders must be ambulatory, with assistance of a cane or walker; no wheelchairs can be accommodated.

Impact:

Senior-friendly volunteer transportation is needed everywhere, but most desperately in places where there are no options other than family or friends. The surrounding rural counties are already reaching out to SMiles for advice and assistance in creating their own programs. Two key ingredients have greatly contributed to the success of SMiles: it’s tailored to the needs of local residents, and staff shares an absolute belief that a well screened and trained team of volunteers are dedicated, trustworthy and reliable enough to provide an essential service in the community. The impact reinforces those key ingredients.

For the Organization: The biggest impact of SMiles on our local community action agency, which houses the county’s Office on Aging, is that the program serves all economic strata in our community, not just low income seniors. The community is realizing that needs of the elderly affect everyone – we’re all in this together.

The impact of SMiles is measured in several ways:
- Number of additional rides that members purchase
- Driver commitment to fill rides (only a handful of rides have ever been abandoned)
- Volunteer retention and enthusiasm
- Gratitude and appreciation

For the People Served: This 64-member volunteer team has given 3,222 trips in 12 months, covering over 20,000 miles within Blount County. Of rides given, 44% are for medical appointments, and 42% are for personal needs like groceries, hairdos, banking and visiting spouses and friends. For the 101 SMiles members living in this rural southern Appalachian county, a freedom returned that hasn’t been known since they gave up the car keys.
- Because of the SMiles volunteer team, Mrs. Kearny is getting her hair done every Friday again. It’s been years since this was possible, and it makes her feel so much better about herself. She also is able to catch up on the beauty shop gossip that she’s sorely missed!
- For Mr. Collins, visiting his wife in the nursing home is again a regular part of his week. He really missed seeing her since he quit driving due to a serious accident last year.
- Mrs. French can again volunteer at the local hospital. She moved to rural Blount County from Chicago and has never driven. Each member has a similar story.

For the Volunteers: For the driving team, it’s providing a meaningful way to impact the lives of their neighbors. Many walk away feeling like superheroes after each ride!
Funding and Resources:

The project’s funding, initially and on an ongoing basis, comes from purchase of memberships and rides from the members, United Way, a planning grant, donations, Office on Aging, and funds from the regional transportation planning organization.

The first-year cost was $58,000, primarily for staff, insurance, marketing, background checks, software contract. One full-time staff member manages the SMiles program and day-to-day operations. Although the volunteers select and commit to their own rides via the internet, the riders call the manager to schedule rides. We also have two part-time volunteers who assist with paperwork.

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SMiles is a direct result of Office on Aging leadership and persistence. The process used was ultimately what produced the senior-friendly transportation program, which a vast majority of community leaders knew was a critical need. By hosting a Blount County Summit on Aging in December 2012, which included business, government, nonprofit and church leaders, and seeking their thoughts on local needs and local solutions to those issues, there was tremendous community buy-in when SMiles was launched nine months later.

Value:

The value of volunteer time during the first year of operation was $46,159.

The value to riders of the Smiles program is indicated by the willingness of seniors to pay the $25 annual membership and $6 per round trip without flinching at the cost. On a program evaluation form, one of the riders wrote the following:

“How SMiles benefits me:

- Reliability – I don’t worry about the driver cancelling at the last moment or forgetting to come.
- Convenience – One call sets this up. I don’t have to call around hunting for a ride, possibly inconveniencing friends.
- Appointments – I can make appointments on the spot with doctor, dentist, hairdresser, etc., and know I can come whenever it’s convenient for them. This program is a veritable godsend to me. Thank you!”

Sustainability:

SMiles was developed to be sustainable, relying primarily on local funding and donations to provide its $58,000 inaugural budget. The program generates more participants on its own, as well.
The average age of a SMiles driver is 67 years; the average age of a SMiles rider is 81. Many members of the driving team are acutely aware that in a few years their role will shift to rider. This understanding, along with the ease and flexibility which the program provides, allows SMiles to continue increasing the driver pool as the demand for rides grows. Many volunteers are recruited through events, presentations, media exposure – but most effectively through Joy, Mike, Dan, Wanda, Flo, and the remaining drivers. Volunteers commit to providing one three-hour ride per month; however, most of them do much more.

Word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool among seniors, so the memberships have steadily increased since the program’s inception in September 2013.

**Replicability:**

These learnings can help you create a similar program.

- Allowing volunteers to control their own commitments is absolutely the key to success. Design a program that gives the volunteers maximum flexibility. SMiles accommodates people who only live here part of the year or who travel extensively to visit family. When they are in town and available, they assign themselves to rides and seem to benefit greatly from their participation.

- It may be possible to build on an existing volunteer driving initiative. Volunteer policies, procedures, forms and process were already in place at the agency for Meals on Wheels, which has more than 100 drivers, and were tweaked to accommodate the SMiles drivers. Meals on Wheels relies on phone calls and regular schedules (i.e., first Monday of month) instead of software to manage it.

- Also essential to the program’s success have been the Assisted Rides software and our Senior Action Council, composed of community leaders, who have advocated on behalf of SMiles, secured funding, and even volunteered as drivers themselves. This group was recruited immediately after the 2012 Aging Summit to give credibility to the model transportation program that had already been developed by a small group of Blount County volunteers.

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