The Challenge:

A task force examining ways to help seniors successfully stay in their homes as they aged identified transportation as a critical element. Studies have shown that a lack of transportation impedes access to essential services and the ability to socialize, and results in social isolation. Specifically, seniors need easily available, affordable, accessible transportation to medical appointments, personal errands, and social activities.

The Ridgefield Senior-Mobility Task Force, a six-member volunteer task force of the town’s First Selectman, started by determining needs in its own community. The task force documented available transportation services for Ridgefield seniors and for residents unable to drive because of medical restrictions, surveyed residents to assess needs, gathered information about replicable approaches used in other communities, and identified possible funding sources.

The task force’s Phase One Report noted that Ridgefield’s senior population was steadily increasing and that a number of residents reported being unable to drive for medical reasons. Although many needs were met by the town’s currently available services, many more were left unmet. In most instances, available services were restricted to particular groups of riders, specific geographic areas and/or purposes (e.g., cancer patients, group members, agency clients, Medicaid eligible riders, medical appointments only, within town only).

The task force found that the issues and concerns reflected in their data, while complex, are not unique to Ridgefield. They are being raised and addressed by communities across the nation.

The most successful models developed in response to identified needs seemed to be those where providers and community leaders worked together to find mutually acceptable solutions. This model was the basis for a September 2012 workshop where providers, community leaders including representatives from senior and disability groups, residents, and other interested parties came together to engage in identifying solutions to the expressed issues.

Why Volunteers Were the Solution:

After exploring many possible transportation models, the task force decided on a volunteer-based model to ensure both affordability and accessibility. Knowing the
Ridgefield community is caring and generous, the task force felt confident this model could work.

**How Volunteers Help Carry Out Our Mission:**

Since the fall of 2012, the original task force has expanded to a working group of over 35 committed volunteers representing providers, community leaders, senior and mobility-challenged residents, and local residents. These committed volunteers established the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, Rides For Ridgefield Inc., in May 2013.

Rides for Ridgefield is a volunteer-driven transportation alliance that provides Ridgefield seniors and residents with mobility disabilities with a single source for learning what ride services are available. We can also assist with making a ride reservation.

Rides For Ridgefield's mission is to ensure Ridgefield seniors and those with mobility disabilities have access to transportation that is affordable, acceptable to the rider, adaptable to the rider’s needs, and a gateway to all the activities and services the riders need to maintain quality of life.

We draw rides from more than 20 current ride providers and fill service gaps with rides from our fully screened and trained volunteer drivers. The volunteer-staffed Mobility Management Center is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The Center provides the following:
- A single source for Ridgefield senior and mobility-disabled ride information;
- Counseling for seniors and mobility-disabled riders regarding transportation needs and available options;
- A centralized reservation assistance service; and
- When no other option fits the needs of the rider, assistance from the Call Center to find a volunteer driver to provide the needed ride.

Our Board of Directors includes representatives from our alliance transportation providers, community and municipal leaders, senior and disabled community organizations, and Ridgefield residents.

**Impact:**

*For the Organization:* Since our ride program began in February 2014, we already have 23 active Mobility Management Center volunteers, including 13 drivers, and have enrolled more than 120 riders. Volunteers have provided transportation information to more than 500 calls and our program continues to grow. Rides For Ridgefield serves as a great example of what a dedicated team of volunteers can accomplish.

*For the People Served and Volunteers:* Since our first ride in February 2014, volunteers have covered 446 trips with over 6654 miles driven. We expect these
numbers to continue to increase at a rapid pace. Volunteers have driven 6654 miles, providing 446 rides for senior and mobility-disabled residents to medical and legal appointments, educational and social activities, social services, for employment purposes and other various activities.

While we say Rides For Ridgefield provides information and rides, what we really do is help our neighbors enjoy a full life even if they can’t drive. They don’t have to feel isolated and homebound.

Without rides, seniors who don’t drive would not be able to attend an evening book discussion at the library or enjoy the Saturday evening Ridgefield Symphony concert; cancer patients would not be able to receive their treatment at hospital cancer centers; dialysis patients could not sustain their grueling schedule; seniors and mobility disabled residents would not be able to shop, bank, or socialize, to the detriment of their quality of life.

**For the Volunteers:** What began with six dedicated volunteers now is a group of more than 35 volunteers who make a big impact on the community.

**Funding and Resources:**

The Rides For Ridgefield annual budget is quite lean, at $40,500, as we rely on volunteers to provide the services. There is just one part-time paid position, a Mobility Center Manager who commits 20 hours per week.

Our funding requirements include salary for the part-time manager, legal and filing fees, printing and postage costs, insurance and training costs, and costs to screen volunteers and market the services. The Town of Ridgefield provides office space and utilities.

Rides For Ridgefield was fortunate to secure first-year funding through a Challenge Grant matched by several generous benefactors. This group has committed to funding 100% of the first year (2014), 50% of the second year (2015), and 25% of the third year (2016). Their generosity has allowed the Board to focus on providing services rather than being concerned with funding.

**Value:**

There is no program revenue. The value Rides For Ridgefield receives is the knowledge that our neighbors’ quality of life is being improved. The senior and mobility-disabled population of Ridgefield is an integral part of the fabric of the community. Ensuring that the transportation needs of this population are met positively impacts the lives and health of those residents and strengthens the health of the community.

The Rides For Ridgefield volunteer team also has provided great value, as it has made Rides For Ridgefield a reality, beginning with problem identification through providing services.
Sustainability:

With anticipated increases in the aging population, Rides For Ridgefield expects to see continued growth in rider requests.

Replicability:

- Leadership involvement is helpful. As Rides for Ridgefield is a new organization, leadership has been actively involved in each phase of the program’s planning, start-up and oversight. Board members are and will continue to be involved as active volunteers in all aspects of making the program successful.

- Involve your volunteers in the problem-solving and planning phases of your project. Doing so has afforded us dedication and commitment from them. As many of our volunteers are in the same age group as those we serve, our volunteers have a very helpful perspective and the joy of knowing they are helping their friends and neighbors—and will, perhaps one day, be grateful users of the services.

- Engage the community to address the needs of its valued members. For us, this approach has made a difference in the lives of both riders and volunteers. Rides For Ridgefield volunteers have taken on this transportation cause, carefully considered all transportation options, proposed a solution, trained tirelessly, and given generously of their time to make this program successful. Community engagement and caring, generous volunteers are the key to Rides For Ridgefield’s success.

- Consider using this approach to solve a variety of community challenges. The community engagement approach that grew Rides For Ridgefield can be replicated easily to address other community needs.

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