

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Drive and Thrive

Rural transportation service offers more than just a drive into town

Hillsborough, NB – (September 23, 2015) When Serge Levesque first moved to Hillsborough, he found the people to be warm and compassionate, but he didn't understand the full extent until he was diagnosed with cancer in June 2014.

"We needed to find a solution to our transportation problem quickly because I wasn't allowed to drive during my chemo treatments or the periods of crippling fatigue that came with them," he said. His wife, Martine, did not drive. They had no family in the province.

While in a doctor's office, Martine picked up a pamphlet describing a new Albert County service called Tele-Drive.

"Tele-Drive is an affordable door-to-door community transportation service for residents who live anywhere from Alma to Riverview," says coordinator Kim Beers. "Our drivers are volunteers who give their own time and use their own vehicle to help bring neighbours to the appointments and services that they need for a healthy, whole life."

The service, which launched in October 2013 with two users and five volunteers, currently provides transportation for 50 households from Alma to Riverview and is growing all the time. Drivers volunteer their time and use their own vehicle, but their mileage is reimbursed.

"The rides are more like wheels for wellness," says Kim, "because 95% are for medical appointments such as chemotherapy, radiation, day surgery, doctor, dentist or eye care. The other 5% are rides to the food bank, physiotherapy, addiction services, day-care, pharmacy, shopping and transporting students for summer employment."

Tele-Drive has 27 community volunteers, among them Lynn Beals, who had recently retired and grown bored with playing golf. She tried a few part-time jobs, but still wanted to feel useful. Then she found Tele-Drive. "It has been a great experience," she says. "I enjoy the satisfaction of being able to help someone out."

She chuckles. "I'm a senior, but they are more senior than me."

As with the other volunteers, she goes far beyond what is expected. When one of her regular clients required day surgery, but didn't have family nearby, Lynn stayed with her until evening, went back the next day, and kept the woman's family informed. "You just do what you think is right," says Lynn. "You think what if your own parents were in that situation."

Kim says this happens all the time. "Our volunteers are building valuable and caring relationships in the community." When she surveyed both volunteers and users, over 50% said they felt an increase in feelings of happiness, and all felt more connected, less stressed and isolated.

“We have six extreme cases of isolation,” says Kim. “This has been life-changing for them. Getting your hair done or going shopping are little things we take for granted, but it’s a big deal for them. It makes me happy to see them feeling better.”

Volunteer Marion Stevens says it has opened her eyes to the the needs of the elderly, and how many do not have anyone to help. “People are lonely and just want to feel valued in some way. They know the volunteers are giving up their time, and are surprised at this. Some may have family members who consider them a bother, and yet people they don’t even know are willing to do something for them.”

But she receives something in return. “I love the stories that they tell me about Albert County years ago. I grew up here, but they hold the history. And the wit and dryness! The drive gives us quality time just for chatting that you might not normally have if you ran into someone at the store or on the street.”

Mary Bailey used to drive her husband Gary, who is in a wheelchair, and her sister Cora, who uses a walker, to appointments. She found it difficult as she would have to park temporarily, unload their equipment, help them inside, then go find a parking spot. After she had cataract surgery, and needed her own drive to and from appointments, they all began using Tele-Drive.

Now a driver accompanies her sister to her appointment to ensure she gets there safely, waits for her, then drives her home again, so Mary doesn’t have to worry about her. “Cora enjoys the drivers because they are so friendly. And in winter, you are picked up in a warm car and don’t have to worry about parking. A lot of people don’t know about it yet, but I highly recommend it. I hope it continues.”

Kim is delighted that the service is connecting people in the community, helping build friendships, and allowing people to do things they could not do before. From Jan to June 2015, Tele-Drive delivered 210 rides, travelled 11369 km and utilized 377.5 volunteer hours.

“We have a wonderfully dedicated group of volunteers without whom this could not be possible,” she says. “And I would love to hear from other individuals or community groups who want to help us continue building on these services. My dream is to continue to build the door-to-door service, to add an accessible van so no one is left out, and to have regular bus service from Alma to Moncton.”

Although this would require major funding beyond what she receives now (see below), she believes in the strength that comes when even a small group of committed people work together.

Fees

Fees are based on distance travelled:

Monthly fee (payable only if a service is required): \$10

Up to 20km - \$10

21-55km - \$15

56-90 km - \$25

91-125 - \$30

126-160- \$35

Additional special rates for hospitals, airports, attractions

About Tele-Drive

The Tele-Drive mission is to provide affordable access to transportation for residents of Albert County, NB. The service is dependable, courteous, safe, efficient, inclusive and sensitive to the needs of all individuals. With only 48 hours advance notice, a dispatcher arranges for a volunteer driver to transport the client from residence to destination and back home again.

Tele-Drive, a registered charity, is funded through the generosity of individual community members, the United Way, the municipalities of Hillsborough, Riverside-Albert and Alma, the Bennett and Albert County Health Care Foundation, and the Westmorland Albert Community Inclusion Network Co-operative Ltd, which partnered with Tele-drive in accessing Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation's transportation funding.

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Photo Caption: (L-R) Tele-Drive Volunteer Marion Stevens and Tele-Drive Coordinator Kim Beers