

# With a Little Help From Our Friends

At meetings with seniors and caregivers we have heard countless complaints about the scarcity of transit options for seniors who no longer drive. Recently people who attended the Rhode Island Foundation's "community dinner" discussions heard the same. Specific complaints include "taxi service in suburban and rural areas is unreliable," "RIPTA is not senior-friendly—it has decreased its number of bus

## On the Senior Agenda



By William F. Flynn Jr.

stops and shelters near senior buildings," and "many people are unaware of an existing state senior transit program for all seniors age 60+." The last-mentioned program is limited to certain destinations such as doctor's offices and requires a co-payment per trip.

The need for better se-

nior transit programs seems like what Will Rogers said about the weather---everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it. Mass transit isn't the answer. Lyft and Uber are part of the answer, but are priced beyond the reach of many seniors. Some senior centers' vans connect riders to their centers and provide trips for shopping or recreation, but expanding them is not a viable solution to such a large problem.

We believe there are proven senior transit programs in Rhode Island using volunteer drivers that provide replicable models. Three such models are F.I.S.H. (Friends in Service to Humanity), Southern Rhode Island Volunteers, and The Providence Village.

With strong local leadership and some philanthropic

investment, similar programs could work in other communities as well.

F.I.S.H. serves residents

and adjacent Pawtucket. Its members serve as volunteer drivers for members to destinations in Pawtucket, East

Providence and Providence. Organizers of these programs are willing to help others start similar programs. In addition, a national group called the Independent Transportation Network (ITN) has started non-profit paid senior transit systems in 13 communities in 12 states and is willing to assist new volunteer-based transit startups. Its website is <https://itnamerica.org>. ITN has visited Rhode Island at the request of a local interest group seeking start-up funding for a statewide transit system but found no takers. Rhode Island's philanthropic and corporate communities need to invest in a volunteer driver senior transit effort. Even volunteer systems will benefit from paying mileage to drivers and obtaining software to make

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of all ages of North Kingstown and Exeter, communities with large rural populations. It is operated completely by volunteer drivers, schedulers and leaders. Drivers are reimbursed 50 cents per mile through charitable donations. Riders may receive three round-trip rides per month to medical social service sites.

Southern Rhode Island Volunteers provides transportation to medical appointments and grocery shopping for Washington County residents, also employing volunteer drivers. The Providence Village is a "village without walls" membership organization based primarily on the East Side of Providence

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scheduling easier.

With 10,000 seniors nationwide turning 70 every day seniors and adult children with aging parents should concentrate their energy on self-help transit efforts as described above. As the public education advocate Marva Collins once said, "my biggest challenge is to convince people that they can do things for themselves---they don't need to wait for someone else to do it."

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