

Agencies Ease Lives Of Area Senior Citizens

By TOM MITCHELL
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For Geneva Bowman, Rockingham County's Community Association for Rural Transportation program provides a terrestrial life raft. "I don't know what we'd do without it," the 77-year-old said.

Bowman's 78-year-old, bedridden husband uses CART for trips to the hospital. Paul Bowman, a retired farmer and truck driver, suffered his first of three strokes 16 years ago. Before the Bowmans secured CART services two years ago, Paul literally leaned on his wife to get around.

"I'd have to put him in our car myself," Geneva said. "CART has made things a lot easier."

The Bowmans reflect a part of society that relies on adult-care help, which is partially funded by United Way of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

In its fiscal 2003 budget of \$837,819, UW allocated \$47,244 for all four of its senior-adult programs. Blue Ridge Legal Aid received the most backing at \$22,334. CART got \$12,110, Generations Crossing received \$7,800 and Rebuilding Together received \$5,000. Generations Crossing and Rebuilding Together received UW funds for

the first time this year.

UW elder-care programs comprise a portion of the community-gear agency's pallet of projects that honor the national alliance's goal of civic re-energizing. Donors to UW may earmark gifts for their localities. Area UW officials insist that their coalition's goal of quality life for local residents takes precedent.

"It's about a better community," said city-county UW executive director Elissa McDonald, in reference to her agency's support of adult needs.

Affordable Transportation

CART, founded in 1996, serves people 65 and older with disabilities or citizens with family incomes at or below the federally designated poverty level. The federal poverty level for a family of four is roughly \$18,000.

Compared to taxis or ambulance transit, CART remains affordable. Roundtrips within the county cost \$12; jaunts beyond Rockingham run \$20 to \$30.

"An ambulance would



Mike Tripp / DN-R

Nelson Bear used driver Dick Plymale and CART for transportation to a doctor's appointment in Charlottesville on Monday. CART is one of four adult-care services sponsored by the United Way.

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charge \$100," Geneva said. "That's more than most of us can afford."

For Nelson Bear, 68, a diabetic who lives near Dale Enterprise with his 70-year-old sister, Betty Moyers, CART serves as a backup vehicle. When Bear's 1988 Dodge broke down in July, CART took the retired truck driver to Charlottesville for hand surgery.

"I think every community should have something like this," Bear said. "It's very helpful."

Home Improvements

Helping cash-strapped homeowners requires the efforts of another UW organ. Rebuilding Together Harrisonburg-Rockingham is a local chapter of the national organization, which was formerly known as "Christmas in April" when it began operations in 1988.

RTHR, which formed in Jan-

uary 2001, annually helps residents. Rebuilding served five clients in 2001, aided seven people in 2002 and backed 10 recipients in 2003. Most of the assisted are elderly, who often lack funds for home repair.

Since its inception, RTHR's parent group has grown from 13 programs to today's 252 national affiliates. Rebuilding Together differs from such home-building programs as Habitat for Humanity, which builds houses from scratch for low-income residents. Also unlike Habitat, which serves a broad range of ages, RT targets seniors.

Rebuilding aids elderly "who have limited to no ability to afford updates and repairs" on homes, says Natalie L. Fitzwater, campaign and marketing director for the local UW chapter.

The RT program provides such safety-related work as wheelchair ramps and hand rails and also helps guard recipients from the home repair's

unethical sect.

"I'm not saying that there aren't legitimate home repair [specialists] out there, but older adults have been particularly vulnerable to housing repair scams," Fitzwater said. "This program is a way for the elderly to get the appropriate repairs so they can remain in their homes."

Legal Assistance

Customer-service cheating attracts another UW outlet; Blue Ridge Legal Aid, which serves the Shenandoah and Roanoke valleys. The group helps the elderly access legitimate needs, from honest help to health care.

Blue Ridge elderly services paralegal Anne See often toils for ailing seniors, such as people who encounter red tape while filing for benefits.

"The most frequent [case] I get [involves senior] access to health care," See said. "Either for benefits, like Medicaid, or for services, like home health."

Enriching The Lives Of Older Adults

These services are in the United Way's older adults category:

Blue Ridge Legal Services:

Legal Aid to the Elderly

CART: Yellow Cab Contracted Services

Generations Crossing: Adult Daycare Scholarships

Rebuilding Together: Home Repair

See also assists aged victims of financial exploitation that may involve family.

"Lots of times people are exploited financially, whether it's someone signing [and cashing] their checks or using their money inappropriately [in other ways]," See said. "We frequently [invest] and revoke power of attorney."

For relatives, elder day care remains a key concern. Generations Crossing gives Harrisonburg and Rockingham an affordable adult day-care site.

The GC program, based at Park View Mennonite Church near Eastern Mennonite University, serves seniors weekdays from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Cost is income based. The program's focus considers respite for its client's full-time caregivers, which often includes family.

Generations Crossing, which opened in May 2002, formed after a three-year study of area adult day-care needs by Elder Alliance, Inc., a community-based study group. The center's concept stems from a 12-year-old Waynesboro program run by the Valley Program for the Aging.

Generations Crossing's name reflects a vision of its leaders, including executive director Betsy Hay, whose ideals include social settings that assemble seniors with children.

GC's bookend mixers do joint

good, Hay adds. "The older adults are being enriched by contact with the children and the children are learning a lot about making friendships of all kinds. There is such a richness of knowledge and experience in that room."

The GC participants' youngsters come from the Early Learning Center, an area educational program geared for youngsters ages 2-6 that runs nine months a year. In the past 15 months, GC has provided 38 adults with 1,850 days of care. The program accommodates 20 persons with an average daily attendance of 10 people.

"We feel like we have given persons who have been isolated by their age or their disability a reason to live," Hay said. "For the caregiver, we have given hope and support to make their lives easier."

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