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Service offers free rides to hospital

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ARLINGTON--The promise of a ride from Arlington to the John Peter Smith Hospital campus in Fort Worth brightened Miguel Ceja's day.

He rode a van from the JPS Health Center on Sanford Street to get radiological care 16 miles away, often a difficult journey for the elderly or for low-income Arlington residents with no access to public transportation.

"This is good. It helps, and this is the first time," said Ceja, 60, as he and his wife, Josefina, boarded the van.

The van trips between the Arlington health center and John Peter Smith began last month, but the service had been talked about as a possibility more than 10 years ago, said Arlington Councilwoman Kathryn Wilemon.

"It is one way to help in a city that does not favor public transportation," Wilemon said, adding that the fledgling JPS effort has spurred interest in finding a way to help the unemployed meet state and federal requirements to receive assistance.

The current medical van trips are a collaborative effort of JPS, Mission Metroplex and Arlington. Mission Metroplex provides the vans, the city provides \$25,000 in grant money to pay for the service, and JPS provides the patients and does the scheduling.

Some diagnostic services, such as MRIs or CT scans, and some specialist care are only available in Fort Worth, said Georgette Boozer, director of the Arlington health center.

"Until this year, everybody was on their own," Boozer said. "Either they had a car or had to ask someone to take them."

The Arlington center sees about 2,000 patients a month, she said. So far, only a handful of patients are taking advantage of the free transportation each week, but that is expected to change.

JPS is getting "positive comments" on the service and expects it to grow as appointments are coordinated with the van schedule, Boozer said.

The service is being closely watched by advocates for low-income Arlington residents and area officials who met last month to see if it is possible to cobble together transportation for people receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

People who receive those benefits are required to do job hunting and job training, under rules intended to make them financially independent and self-reliant.

"We have people who have walked miles to get here," said Gayle Florentz, a receptionist at the Workforce Solutions Center, the one-stop job resource center at 140 W. Mitchell St., on the edge of the University of Texas at Arlington campus. "A lot of people who come here ask about transportation."

Program participants who live in areas without public transportation, such as Arlington, were able to get a waiver from the work-search requirements. That was changed by the Legislature two years ago, and now the requirements are waived only if someone is totally disabled, has a disabled child or family member or a child under 1 year old.

The number of people eligible to receive Needy Family benefits has dropped throughout Tarrant County, but nowhere as much as in Arlington, where it dropped from 673 in January 2004 to 380 by November, records show.

"The removal of the transportation waiver may have something to do with it," said Jeff Humber, director of the eight job resource centers in Tarrant County operated by SERCO of Texas, a Las Colinas-based company.

It is difficult for people in south Grand Prairie, south Arlington and Mansfield to get to the job center at UT-Arlington or another at the Resource Connection at Interstate 20 and Campus Drive, Humber said.

"One thing is certain: If they don't have transportation to get to us, they don't have any transportation to get to and from work," he said.

There is a possibility of getting some grant money, said Don Ellis, chairman of the Workforce Solutions board in Tarrant County, the group that oversees the job resource program.

"It's an attempt to help the working poor," Ellis said. "We're still gathering information on the magnitude of the problem."

Arlington may be able to access some grant money through the Federal Transit Administration, but local matching funds will be necessary, said Michelle Bloomer, a senior transportation planner with the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Tillie Burgin, Mission Arlington founder and director, said the organization could help the unemployed, as it has JPS patients.

"We're still working on that, and we are willing to help. We have the vans and drivers," Burgin said. "It's a blessing to be able to help."

IN THE KNOW

Van service

Pickup for van service from JPS Health Center Arlington, 601 W. Sanford St., to John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth is available at 8 a.m. and noon Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. The van returns to Arlington at 1 and 4 p.m. For information, call (817) 920-6300 or stop by the health center.

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