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Mobility Matters helps seniors overcome transportation hurdles

By Jon Kingdon

It's easy to take for granted the ability to drive, to go shopping and make the required visits for one's doctors and dental appointments. For many seniors, the ability to travel by car or public transportation has been lost, cutting them off from the general public and forcing many to move prematurely to long-term care facilities.

For a long time, seniors have lacked alternatives to driving themselves and taking public transportation. Lafayette resident, Elaine Welch, the CEO of Mobility Matters, saw a problem and made it her mission to address it. In 2005, Welch, who also has an MBA degree from Saint Mary's College, launched a program called Rides for Seniors to address senior mobility needs. "After retiring as a registered nurse and working as a volunteer ombudsman, I was very upset at what I saw in the nursing homes," Welch says. "I wanted to do something about it."

Doing something meant addressing the problem head on. Welch rode the buses and cabs to learn what was and wasn't available for seniors and how difficult it was for them to utilize public transportation. "These seniors needed someone to drive them to their medical appointments and not to just be dropped off. They need to be escorted into the doctor's offices and to have someone to help them with their shopping and finally to make sure that they are settled back in their homes, not just dropping them off at the curb. Our services are 'door through door.'"

Located on Carol Lane in Lafayette, the Mobility Matters building, which is next to and belongs to Our Savior's Lutheran Church, was originally used as a crisis helpline service that began in the 1970s. "The church helps us as one of their missions and rents us the building at a very reasonable rate, but we are a private 501(c)(3) non-profit organization," says Welch.

Though located in Lafayette, the services provided by Mobility Matters extend throughout Contra Costa County, servicing over 250 clients and utilizing 130 volunteer

drivers. In the Lamorinda area, there are 45 individuals that utilize the service and 27 drivers to meet their needs.

Sam Sotelo, director of programs for Mobility Matters, says his goal is simple: "We are just trying to make the world better for everybody." In 2017, Mobility Matters provided 3,179 rides in Contra Costa County.

The program is individualized, with only the volunteer driver and the client in the car to insure the safety of both. With some clients with vision and balance problems, it is essential that the volunteer's focus be entirely on the client.

Sotelo says there is a constant effort to raise funds for the program. "One of the main grants is through Caltrans and some smaller grants from the county and private foundations. There are also donations from individuals as well and Mobility Matters holds an annual raffle to help fundraise."

Drivers may not be younger than 25, or older than 75, due to insurance requirements. Using their own vehicles, the drivers can request reimbursement for their gas expenses and must go through a training program Welch runs, utilizing her nursing background. "We do a three-hour driver's training class. We explain how the clients call in for help and how we make the assignments for them and what types of visits they are making," Welch says. "We stress how to work with the clients who are more vulnerable physically. We familiarize them with their special equipment, such as walkers, and what to do should the client slip and fall. Unlike Uber, Lyft and cabs, we assist riders from start to finish."

Though Mobility Matters would like to help all those in need, they simply do not have enough volunteers and financial resources to do so. The seniors cannot be under 60 years of age, and Mobility Matters cannot accommodate those who require wheelchairs as they require special vehicles to be transported.

If the company is unable to

directly provide rides to an individual, they will do what they can to address and facilitate needs. "We have a toll-free transportation, information and referral helpline where we attempt to match riders with providers that can meet their needs," Sotelo says. "We have a 'Way to Go Contra Costa' resource guide in hard copy and online which will inform them of the services that fill their needs."

Mobility Matters recently expanded the services to include veterans in the county with similar needs. Unlike seniors, there is no age minimum for a veteran in need. "With so many veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders and physical disabilities, many of them are falling into the patterns of the seniors as they grow older," Welch says. "These individuals need the type of help that we are providing our seniors. Ideally we would like to have a veteran serve as the volunteer driver as they can share similar stories and situations."

The need for volunteers is constant, according to Sotelo. "Many of the drivers develop great friendships with their clients. We would like to double the number of drivers we have currently. If we could do that, we could then provide 'quality of life' rides such as attending meetings, getting haircuts and other needs."

Pamphlets for Mobility Matters are available in senior centers, resource buildings and libraries across the county. Being forced to give up a driver's license can be a shock to the system. Welch wants to be able to provide help to those people immediately. "I want every Department of Motor Vehicles office to have a station that has a sign that says 'mobility equals independence; you don't have to drive to keep your independence,' and to offer the information from the American's With Disabilities Act and to let everyone know what is available for them once they can no longer drive."

For those looking for help, or those looking to volunteer, call (925) 284-6161.

Seniors

What to do when you see early signs of memory loss

By Linda Fodrini-Johnson

What do you do when you notice a close family member or friend having more and more challenges with memory or making sound decisions ... and how should you approach this sensitive subject?

Recently, I was asked to do a podcast interview with a geriatrician. She asked me if there were any books for families dealing with this beginning stage of a dementia that brings on worry and concern. Sadly, my answer is that I could think of none that just addressed this issue.

When my mother first started to exhibit some lapses in judgment or memory, I didn't want to confront it head on for two reasons: 1) I did not wish to see this fiercely independent woman (who was driving all over San Francisco with friends a decade younger than her) lose her independence. I needed her to be my strong role model even at 86. This is called denial. 2) My clinical background said I just needed to gather more information before jumping to conclusions. So, I started a log of times she forgot to take the keys out of her garage door as she drove away, or repeated the same story to me five times, or when she went to see six different doctors with vague symptoms.

I had been providing my mother a personal assistant once a week since she was about 80 years old. She just needed someone to help her with organizing paperwork and following up on the telephone for her when she had questions regarding a bill or an upcoming medical

appointment because her hearing was impaired and phone calls were challenging. Her personal assistant came for two hours a week and was amazed at how well my mother was. She was my gatekeeper as mom's memory and judgment started to fail. Her dementia was from small strokes.

Not everyone has this type of information and monitoring of a parent at a distance or even nearby. Often those with dementia like Alzheimer's disease are socially appropriate for a long time into the illness, and even the family doctor might miss it on routine appointments. But, when you have the red flags that safety is at risk, it is time, or probably past time, to jump in. Start slowly, maybe with someone you call a friend or a trainer, when they are really a paid caregiver from a reputable agency, like Eldercare Services.

If you jump in and say, "Mom your memory is failing," most likely you will be faced with total resistance and denial. How each of us approaches a parent can make all the difference in the success of the intervention. The best way to design a good plan is to bring in a third-party expert, called a professional geriatric care manager, that will give you the most chance of success with your intervention. You might have a hard time with being entirely honest with a parent, but a professional care manager can help you to design "therapeutic fiblets." These are sometimes called white lies that are to be used to reduce stress for everyone, and most of all

protect the self-esteem of the person with the early stage dementia.

If an evaluation has not been done, the care manager will help you make that happen and connect you with the best dementia screening clinic in your area.

At Eldercare Services, we have classes on caring for someone with a dementia. We start our next series at 5:30 p.m. March 21; classes are complimentary and held every other week for a three week period. We also offer a free support group for families held on the second Thursday of each month at 6 p.m. in our office. Advance registration is required, please call to register at (925) 937-2018 or visit www.EldercareAnswers.com.



Linda Fodrini-Johnson, MA, MFT, CMC, is a Licensed Family Therapist and Certified Care Manager. She has been practicing professional care management since 1984. Linda founded Eldercare Services, a full-service care management and home care company in 1989, which now employs over 200 caring people. Eldercare Services has been providing Bay Area families with care management, home care services (caregiving), advocacy, counseling, support groups and education for 29 years.

POETRY

WINTER RAIN

by Resident Don Maynard

Welcome rain, soft gentle rain,
Lawn soaked deeply to its roots,
The shade tree thanks you
With outstretched limbs
For your gift of life.
Dark bark, smooth, scaly,
Conceals your moisture underneath
That's dormant now but energized
And surges up the trunk
When spring arrives.

Run-off rain from spongy turf
Crosses solid sidewalk, gutter
Down the street,
To vanish in the storm drain.

While in the sky above,
Gray brooding rain clouds
Shape vapor into raindrops
That scatter
To nourish life below.

Listen to the pit pat rhythm,
Tiny raindrops in the puddles,
While ever growing ripples
Create their own mosaic.

Walk outside garbed in your raingear,
Breathe in deeply the sweet, dean air.
And as a child again,
With tongue stuck out,
Savor the rain.

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