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Volunteers needed to give vets free rides to hospital

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Jessie Dye fought for his country in three wars during a Navy career that spanned 31 years.

Now that Dye is fighting his own personal battles against brain cancer and old age, his country is paying him back.

Dye, 82, and his wife, a year older, are too infirm to drive him five or six times a month to his doctor appointments at the Veterans Medical Clinic in La Jolla.

No bus covers the 12-mile route from his home in Rancho Bernardo to the hospital, and a taxi would cost too much on a fixed income.

Enter Rob Drake, 51, a volunteer who frequently gets up before the sun to ferry Dye and other North County vets in a van. He's one of nearly three dozen volunteer drivers with the Disabled American Veterans free-ride program run out of the La Jolla clinic.

“This program's been a godsend for me,” said Dye as he sat in a waiting room outside the clinic's transportation office. “I would either have to depend on neighbors – which most of them are working – or pay somebody at least $40 to drive me.

“I can't afford much of that,” he said. “This is my only out.”

Although the La Jolla free-ride program is the oldest and largest of its kind in the country, it has a shortage of volunteers.

Carolyn Jackson, the program's coordinator and only paid employee, said she needs 48 drivers working four hours a week to offer rides to veterans in all parts of the county each weekday. Currently, she has 34.

“We're so short of drivers,” she said, “I have to turn down every third veteran.”

Although anyone may sign up to help, the clinic's volunteer program always has been heavy with veterans, especially World War II vets.

But that generation is rapidly fading into history. Most of them now are older than 85, the volunteer program's mandatory retirement age for drivers. Others can no longer pass the mandatory yearly physical exam.

“Twenty years ago, you had a lot of World War II vets who were still relatively young, but now they're older,” said Jim Swolley, the Disabled American Veterans service officer for California.

Tom Lamb Jr. is one of those aging vets. He served three years in the Navy during World War II (surviving the sinking of the carrier Princeton at the 1944 Battle of Leyte Gulf), followed by 38 years working for the city of San Diego.

Since his retirement in 1987, Lamb has put in more than 25,000 volunteer hours and driven 300,865 miles for the transportation program. He was by far the program's most experienced driver until last year.

“Just a little while ago, I had to retire,” he said. “They found out I had a heart murmur.” He still shuttles patients around the complex in a golf cart.

The driver program dates to 1987, Jackson said, when Congress cut a VA-funded program to pick up veterans unable to drive to hospitals for routine doctor appointments. (The VA continues to pick up low-income vets with severe disabilities.)

To pick up the slack, veterans' groups in Oceanside and Escondido raised $10,000 toward the purchase of two vans. That inspired Disabled American Veterans to take over the program; eventually, it to spread to VA hospitals across the country.

With its huge population of ex-service members, San Diego remains the nation's biggest program. Jackson said her office serves between 900 and 1,300 veterans each month from all over the county.

Now, though, driver programs across the country are on a collision course with demographics – just as Vietnam veterans are starting to suffer from age-related illnesses, and the military is retiring injured Iraq War veterans into the VA medical system.

“They've had places where they've had to park vans because there are not enough volunteers,” Swolley said.

Jackson is hoping the soon-to-retire Baby Boomers will fill the gap left by the dwindling Greatest Generation to prevent that from happening in San Diego. Drake is her poster boy.

He retired from the Navy as a lieutenant commander in 2000 at age 45 with no financial worries. (His wife, an airline flight attendant supervisor, still works.)

“I was very good at saving money, so I never had to work another day in my life,” Drake said.

He wanted to become a high-school industrial arts instructor but was surprised to learn that shop classes had virtually disappeared from San Diego secondary schools. So he turned to volunteering instead.

Today, Drake juggles eight volunteer jobs, including one as a proctor for the state teacher exam and several ushering for symphonies, playhouses and orchestras.

But each Thursday is dedicated to veterans. He rises well before sunrise and leaves his home in Escondido by 5 a.m., trying to beat the worst of the traffic out of town.

The night before, he calls each of the eight to 10 North County veterans on his ride list to set up times and locations. Sometimes he gets a surprise, such as last week, when he learned that one 77-year-old Marine veteran had moved from Mira Mesa to Chula Vista. The VA had failed to record a change of address that took place two years ago.

“I could have said, 'Too bad, so sad,' ” Drake said, forcing the vet to reschedule his appointment.

Instead, he adjusted his own schedule, dropping off seven other vets at the hospital first and silently hoping for no mid-morning tie-ups on Interstate 5.

It's the traffic that makes the job tiring, which is why most volunteer drivers work just four hours a week.

Drake works eight.

“You do this more than one day a week, it becomes a job,” he said.

Many of the retired vets who form the backbone of the VA Medical Center's 1,000-plus staff of volunteers don't care for the stress of getting behind the wheel. Some of them can't for health reasons.

“There are lots of volunteers there. But how many can drive?” Drake said. “The best thing we could do is get some women who have an empty nest now.”

He said the VA loses some volunteers because of the hurdles they must clear. Besides going through orientation, fingerprinting and two tuberculosis skin tests, drivers must take a physical exam.

Jackson said, “It's not fast, it's not easy, but it's so rewarding.”

Volunteers get free parking at the hospital and a $5 coupon toward lunch in the cafeteria. The transportation office is always well stocked with baked goodies. After serving a certain number of hours, they get prizes such as ball caps and jackets.

For Drake, though, the best reward is hearing the stories of the men and women who served before him.

Last week, he met David D'Ore, whom he drove from Chula Vista to La Jolla. D'Ore served in the Marine Corps from 1948 to 1971 as a combat photographer, including two tours in Vietnam.

The morning of the Tet offensive in late January 1968, D'Ore and another senior sergeant traveled to a South Vietnamese village for a regular visit to hand out candy to the children. Not knowing about the nationwide Viet Cong uprising, he and his buddy were stunned by what they found.

“Everybody in the village was dead,” D'Ore said.

Suddenly, out of the pile of corpses, a man leaped up and attacked him with a rifle butt. D'Ore grabbed a machete and broke the man's arms. But he let the man live.

“He probably thought we were the ones who did it,” D'Ore said. “He was fighting for his country, just like we were.”

D'Ore used to volunteer at the VA hospital himself, but he lost his driver's license because of failing eyesight. Now he relies on other volunteers to get to his quarterly doctor appointments.

Which gets to the heart of the reason why Drake is helping out now.

“Favors are meant to be passed on, not repaid,” he said. “When I'm 85, maybe somebody will do this for me.”

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