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TOP STORIES

Nonprofits fill gaps in Tarrant County's mass transit

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EULESS — Beatrice Hebert doesn't drive a car and, like many people in Tarrant County, lives in a city without public transportation.

The Euless resident, who gave up driving several years ago, was recently diagnosed with breast cancer and gets radiation treatment five times a week. At first, she was worried about how she'd get to the appointments, but she learned through her doctor's office that she could ride each day on an American Red Cross bus.

In an area where few cities invest their tax dollars in public transportation, and substantial gaps in the mass transit system remain for those who don't have a car, nonprofits such as the Red Cross are shouldering an increasingly larger share of the load in helping residents get where they need to go.

"They are so wonderful. Thank God they have this service," said Hebert, who is originally from Beaumont but moved to Euless three years ago to be closer to her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren.

On a recent afternoon, she climbed aboard an 18-seat Red Cross bus for the 10-minute ride from her apartment to the Edwards Cancer Center at Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital H-E-B.

Bus driver Paula Lewis helped Hebert, who uses a walker, off the bus and escorted her into the treatment center.

Growing need

The American Red Cross Chisholm Trail chapter in Fort Worth has helped people with transportation needs for 30 years, transportation director Leah Schumann said.

But it can only do so much.

"We're willing to expand our program. It's just trying to find the money," Schumann said. "We do our very best to fill these gaps, but there's only so much we can do to fill that need."

The chapter provides various services with a fleet of 41 buses and vans on an annual operating budget of \$1.9 million, Schumann said. The money comes from donations, contracts with cities, partnerships with other agencies and some state funding for capital purchases.

But it's not as if the riders can just hop on a bus. In most cases, rides are provided based upon need, usually to residents who are disabled, are seniors or can't afford other transportation. Most services require riders to make a reservation, sometimes several days in advance.

Some transportation services are purely for medical needs. Others, such as HEB Transit, are partnerships with churches and other groups to help people get to work.

Still others are contracted by cities — such as Northeast Transportation Services in Bedford, Euless, Grapevine, Haltom City, Hurst, Keller and North Richland Hills — to provide rides anywhere within the cities' borders to qualified seniors or people with disabilities.

Ridership on the rise

Overall Red Cross ridership has increased 11 percent in five years. It provided more than 101,000 passenger trips in the fiscal year ending June 30.

Ridership on HEB Transit has more than doubled in three years to 3,921 passenger trips annually. That increase occurred even though Colleyville and Watauga dropped out of the program, citing low ridership and budgetary concerns.

Those are relatively small numbers compared with a public agency such as the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, which provides traditional bus and rail service in Fort Worth and Richland Hills and co-owns the Trinity Railway Express. In 2008, the T provided a total of 8.5 million passenger trips.

But these nonprofit agencies intentionally keep a low profile because, for the most part, they're already helping about as many people as they can, regional planners said.

The Red Cross doesn't even publicize its services; most passengers learn about it through word of mouth, often from a church or a medical professional who recognizes that they need help. Many others learn about nonprofit transit providers through the United Way of Tarrant County, which operates a 211 referral service that helps callers sort through their transportation options.

"You have the main public transportation provider, and in Tarrant County it's the T," said Michelle Bloomer, public transportation coordinator for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "They're able to provide a certain level of general public or mass transportation, either fixed-route bus service or commuter rail service. But there's a significant need they just aren't able to meet. So a lot of the small nonprofits are popping up to fill those needs."

Dollar bills in the mail

There are also several smaller transit providers. Among them is the Mid-Cities Care Corps, a church-supported group that enlists the help of volunteers to take senior citizens to places such as the doctor's office, grocery store and pharmacy.

The group now regularly provides rides for 616 clients, up from 584 last year. The service is free to residents 65 and older — 60 and older for those on Social Security disability — and the drivers don't accept money.

But many riders want to pay a fare anyway, office manager Anne Agee said.

"We get little dollar bills wadded up in the mail all the time," she said. "A lot of our riders want to pay something."

The service, which started in 1981, has 103 volunteer drivers who take clients in their own cars. Mid-Cities Care Corps conducts a criminal background check on the volunteers and provides supplemental insurance.

No signs of slowing

The trend shows no signs of slowing, as area cities cut their services to make ends meet.

Last month, Lake Worth abruptly canceled its contract with Yellow Cab to serve its residents, leaving several riders stuck without the transportation that they had depended on for years.

Richland Hills officials are studying alternatives to T bus service and have called a referendum for next year to ask voters whether they want to leave the transportation authority. City officials have been briefed by the Red Cross and Yellow Cab's parent company, Irving Holdings, about other options that could fill the transportation gaps.

The T is encouraging Richland Hills residents to keep their T bus service, but elsewhere it welcomes any help it can get from nonprofit groups. It's a way to expand transit beyond the T's service area, said Nancy Amos, T senior vice president.

More than half of Tarrant County's 1.8 million residents live outside the T's fixed-route jurisdiction.

The T even contracts with the nonprofit agencies to provide some of its Mobility-Impaired Transportation Service in Fort Worth, Amos said.

"We try to make these services available to the best of our ability, rather than try to do it all ourselves," she said.

Sharon Lindly of Watauga rides a Red Cross bus to doctor appointments two to three times a week. Lindly, who has emphysema, recently quit driving at the request of her grown children.

"These drivers — bless their hearts. They're so sweet," she said.

Need a ride? If you live in Tarrant County but not in an area served by the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, call the United Way's 211 referral line — or 877-886-4833 or 817-258-8100 — to find out what other transit services you qualify for.

In most cases, a reservation is required, often several days in advance. Most services also require a small fare, usually \$1 to \$3 each way.

A sample of what's out there:

Handitran, Arlington. Door-to-door rides for qualified residents who are 65 and older or have disabilities. \$2.

Northeast Transportation Service (NETS). Door-to-door service to most destinations in Bedford, Euless, Grapevine, Haltom City, Hurst, Keller and North Richland Hills. Riders must be 55 and older or disabled. \$1.50.

HEB Transit. Primarily a ride to work for qualified residents of Hurst, Euless and Bedford. Access to Trinity Railway Express stations is also available.

Tarrant County Transportation Services. Door-to-door transportation in Azle, Benbrook, Crowley, Everman, Forest Hill, Kennedale, Mansfield, Saginaw, Sansom Park and Westworth Village. Each city is guaranteed service one day per week. \$2.50 each way.

American Red Cross. Rides to and from medical appointments — a program formerly known as WHEELS — for qualified residents who are 60 and older or disabled. \$2.50 to \$5, depending upon ability to pay. Calls prioritized by medical need.

Source: North Central Texas Council of Governments