Give A Lift Program

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The Give A Lift Program

The Give A Lift Program is a volunteer-based initiative that matches the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged with volunteer drivers who provide their own energy, vehicle, and time to assist their fellow citizens in getting to medical appointments, the grocery store, the pharmacy, and other destinations.

How Give A Lift Came to Be

Fountain Hills is a community of 25,000 that sits on the edge of the Phoenix Metro Area, in the foothills of the McDowell Mountains. The Town has become since its 1989 incorporation a favorite for retirees who come to Arizona during the winter months. In all, over 25% of the Town’s population is over 65 years of age. Many of our seniors, meanwhile, have little or no means of transportation. In fact, as another indicator of the situation, more than 900 home delivered meals are provided monthly.

Until 2009, Maricopa County had been providing our elderly, handicapped, and disadvantaged with transportation via its Special Transportation Services (STS). From 2008 to 2009, the participatory costs imposed on cities escalated dramatically. Fountain Hills’ participation costs climbed from $45,000 to more than $135,000. Ultimately, in the early months of 2009, the County announced that it would be discontinuing STS, blaming the decision on the floundering economy, evaporating revenues, and budget cuts.

Realizing the impact that this development would have on the most vulnerable of our community, staff assembled possibilities and developed strategies that could be presented to the Council. These options and strategies included the Town providing the STS service itself. A cost analysis of that option revealed that the Town’s operating fund would need to provide $165,000 in the first year to operate an STS-like program. With revenue evaporating as quickly in Fountain Hills as anywhere else, it was evident that the Town could not afford this kind of commitment. In fact, it would be difficult for the Town to continue a $135,000 annual participation subsidy even if the STS program remained intact.

The choices then narrowed for us. Do we allow STS to sunset (or rather, fade away into the sunset) or do we intervene in some way as a Town and establish an alternative to STS. Again, purchasing the vehicles necessary to transport ambulatory and non-ambulatory individuals and operating a Town transit program was not a cost-feasible solution. Likewise, efforts failed to locate a private sector provider who could provide this service at an affordable rate.

That’s when we turned our attention to our most important Town asset – our volunteers. The premise would be simple enough. Instead of inserting government as a solution to this problem, why not allow an opportunity for our citizens to serve each other. We named the initiative Project Give A Lift, and our volunteer coordinator spread the word among her core of volunteers. The response was tremendous.
In a little more than a month, dozens of volunteers came forward and volunteered to be matched with a “less mobile” citizen; and the process is simple. The beneficiary coordinates a schedule of needed transportation with the volunteer. The volunteer picks-up the citizen at the appointed time and takes them to the grocery store, pharmacy, doctor’s office, etc. and returns them home. Volunteers meanwhile utilize their own vehicles and fuel.

**Give A Lift’s Importance to Fountain Hills**

The Give A Lift program has done so much more for our community than simply providing a means for the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged to find affordable transportation and/or allowing the Town to save taxpayer dollars. The true value of this program lies in the coalescing effect this volunteer opportunity has had on our community. With Give A Lift, we have more fortunate individuals reaching outside of themselves to serve their fellow citizens. Their participation represents a significant sacrifice of time, resources, and energy. The results of the program are therefore made less evident using intrinsic measures. Rather the program’s true importance and impact are obvious by observing the program’s contributions to building a sense of community in our Town.

**Who Has Benefited from Give A Lift**

The most immediate beneficiaries of this program are obviously those individuals who do not have the means or ability to secure their own transportation. Specifically, in the program’s first six months, nearly 200 rides have been provided by 32 volunteers. In addition, the Town saved $165,000 in the program’s first year with the assumption that this saving will become greater as the years roll by. However, most importantly, those volunteers have enjoyed the opportunity to connect with and provide service to their fellow citizens. In the end, the primary beneficiary of Give A Life is the entire Town of Fountain Hills, simply because it helped us become a better community.

**How Was Give A Life Initiated and Implemented**

Give A Life as a concept was presented to the Town Council formally in the Spring of 2009. At that time, the Council was informed that the new program would not burden the General Fund. Negligible indirect costs are associated the program’s administration as provided by the Town’s Volunteer Coordinator. This individual, under the direction the Town’s Human Resource and Risk Administrator, created program guidelines and began recruitment efforts shortly after Council ratification. The innovation itself is the product of need. The old adage, “Necessity is the mother of invention” rings true in Fountain Hills.
What Were the Risks

Dozens of elderly and disabled citizens had come to depend on the County’s transportation program to reach various venues to receive critical medical services. Others were and are equally dependent on reliable transportation. It was obvious to all of us from the beginning that any program we assembled or proposed would need to be provided at a level of service equal to that eliminated by the County. In addition, we were concerned that ridership would outpace our number of volunteers. This is still something that we watch; but thus far we have been equal to the demand.

The Environment

As we approach the next fiscal year, a sobering fact hovers above us -- The Town’s operating budget has declined 27%. At the time Give A Lift was introduced, revenues were down 17% with no bottom in sight. This was and remains a time of severe financial stress. Innovation has become more than a buzz word; it has become the life blood of our organization. In 2008, Administration introduced a new program called “Fountain of Innovation”, and departments were encouraged during the calendar year 2009 to submit innovation projects which either lowered costs without diminishing level of service – or increased level of service without increasing costs. Give A Lift was one of 19 projects submitted in 2009. In short, while the organization and community emotional climate was one of great emotional angst, it was and is still a season of innovation that continues to leave a positive imprint upon our internal culture and our community at large.

Costs and Savings

Since Give A Lift is a volunteer-based program which requires minimal oversight on the part of our Volunteer Coordinator, costs associated with this program are truly negligible. However, the savings realized by the Town tops $165,000 in the first year alone.

Lessons Learned

One primary lesson stands apart from everything we learned while conceiving and implementing Give A Lift – and it is this. Traditional methods of 1) discovering a community need and 2) throwing money at it has been replaced by first asking the question “How can we involve citizens to enrich their own lives and those of their fellow citizens? The old assumption that a community need is ultimately answered by a funded program has become a dinosaur.