

Take the Wheel to Help County Veterans

If you are looking for a rewarding way to help Montgomery County veterans—and you enjoy driving and meeting wonderful people—then the Montgomery County Veterans Transportation Service (MCVTS) is looking for you.

Founded in 1991, the all-volunteer transportation network provides veterans and their eligible dependents with free transportation, Monday through Friday, every week of the year, to and from civilian and VA hospitals in the Nashville area. To keep this much-relied-upon service operating and to ensure every veteran who needs transportation gets it, the organization needs men and women willing to spend just a few hours each month behind the wheel of one of the group's two comfortable, air-conditioned, and well-equipped vans.

Today's vans are a far cry from the 1978 bus the fledgling organization bought from the school system for \$100 back in 1991—a bus that had no air conditioning, no seat belts, and got only eight miles to a gallon of gas, said Wes Westerman, chairman of the MCVTS and a retired Army command sergeant major. “Since 1991, the service has transported more than 18,000 veterans and currently logs more than 38,000 miles every year. In 2008, we transported 1,607 passengers,” he said. “Many of these veterans are handicapped and in wheelchairs, and without our help, they wouldn't be able to obtain proper medical attention,” he added, pointing out that Korean and Vietnam veterans who rely on the transportation service are now in their 60s and 70s, and a new group of wounded veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan will be needing assistance in the future. Currently, there are only six volunteers who drive veterans to hospitals such as Vanderbilt, St. Thomas, Baptist, and the VA hospitals in Nashville and Murfreesboro, among others. To keep up with increased demand, a larger crew is desperately needed. “At one time, we were up to 15 drivers, but we've lost several because of moves, illness, or death,” Westerman said. Many active drivers are getting older, and younger volunteers are needed to grow and strengthen the transportation service, he said. Westerman said drivers can volunteer one to four days a month. MCVTS covers all insurance; volunteers need only to be insurable, hold a valid driver's license, be in good health, and enjoy helping the men and women who've honorably served and sacrificed for their country.

Veterans who use the service are grateful for the ride to their medical appointments in Nashville and also for the people who selflessly serve, as not having to worry about transportation eases some of the burden of dealing with a disability or disease. Thomas Gray, Richard Archer, and Richard Herman are three such veterans. Gray, whose shoulder and elbow disabilities often keep him from driving, has used the van service periodically over the past three years. “It's really important to vets who can't afford to drive or who don't have cars or can't drive ... when I'm able to drive, I don't use the van so space opens up for others,” he said. Archer and Herman concur. Both have relied on MCVTS for about 10 years. “If we didn't have it, I'd be in trouble, because I'm not allowed to drive,” Herman said, as Archer nodded in agreement. MCVTS is the only all-volunteer organization in Tennessee and Kentucky authorized to transport wheelchair patients to civilian hospitals and clinics, in addition to hospitals and clinics operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs. While most of the service's drivers are veterans themselves, it's not a requirement—anyone with a desire to pitch in will be welcomed with open arms. “All you get is a ‘thank you’ and a handshake, and that's all we expect,” Westerman said, noting that the real reward is in knowing that the thanks of every veteran and their family members are sincere.

Though the service is free to veterans who need transportation, MCVTS, as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is always in need of regular monetary donations to cover gas, vehicle maintenance, and other operating costs such as office supplies. Westerman said gas alone costs almost \$5,000 a year, and the service tries to replace one van every three years if their bank account allows. Volunteers also staff the MCVTS office from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, answering questions and scheduling trips. To learn more about volunteering with the Montgomery County Veterans Transportation Service or to make a donation, contact the office at 350 Pageant Lane, Suite 308, Clarksville, TN 37040, or call 553-5175.

HOW TO HELP

WHAT: Insurable drivers in good health with a valid license are needed to transport disabled veterans to medical appointments in the Nashville area. Vehicle and insurance provided. Donations are also needed for operating costs.

WHEN: Routes run daily; drivers choose how many days a month to volunteer.

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