

Volunteer drivers feeling the pinch

Agencies struggle with high gas prices

By Tom Breen

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With the price of gas likely to stay close to \$2 a gallon for the foreseeable future, drivers are learning to adjust — finding the gas station with the lowest prices in town, taking fewer trips, and driving shorter distances.

But largely ignored in the price watching is a group of motorists who don't have the luxury of cutting back on trips: volunteer drivers for social-service organizations, most of whom pay to fill their own tanks.

Nationwide, groups such as Meals on Wheels, which delivers meals and provides companionship to about 1 million homebound elderly people daily, are reporting scattered instances where drivers are resigning, unable to keep up with the cost of maintaining their routes.

Locally, similar groups aren't reporting resignations but say high gas prices have forced them to streamline their budgets and come up with ways to help their volunteers shoulder the financial burden.

The Hartford-based Community Renewal Team, which delivers more than 700 meals a day to more than 30 towns in the Connecticut River Valley, in addition to operating a number of "community cafes," has determined it will maintain the same level of service, though that

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Programs to continue services despite high gas prices

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likely means budget cuts.

Liz Dupont-Diehl, CRT director of media relations, says the group will have to go longer without replacing some equipment in its huge Hartford kitchen, where meals are made from scratch.

"We're paying higher gas prices like everyone else, but where it mostly falls, especially in the Meals on Wheels program, is on the volunteers," she says.

The situation is made more difficult because CRT operates on a fixed budget, making it particularly vulnerable to sudden, unexpected cost increases, she says.

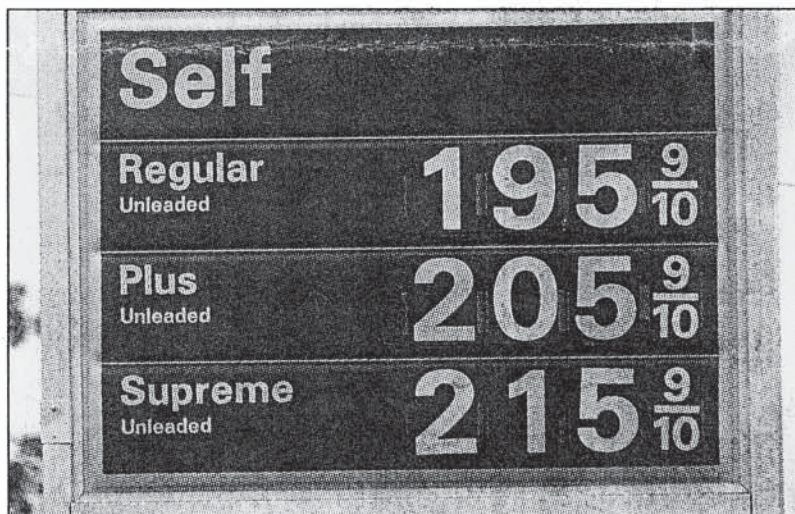
Fixed incomes are something that many volunteer drivers know about, according to local and national groups. Many volunteer drivers are retired and living on fixed incomes, which makes extra money spent on gas more of a burden.

Manchester resident Kristi Zaiman drives cancer patients to medical appointments as part of the American Cancer Society's Road to Recovery program. A volunteer, Zaiman says she became interested in the program after her mother, who lived in Buffalo, N.Y., and suffered from cancer, had difficulty getting to her doctors' offices.

As with many volunteers, Zaiman says paying more for gas is difficult but won't make her stop.

"It always hurts," she says. "But the patients need to go where they go, so you can't stop."

In the past fiscal year, Road to



Jim Michaud / Journal Inquirer

Gasoline prices are affecting service programs that rely on volunteer drivers, including Meals on Wheels.

Recovery provided more than 9,000 rides throughout the state, with some drivers making only one trip a week. Zaiman says she has driven patients as far as Stafford and New Haven for appointments.

The American Cancer Society, which had relied on volunteers to pay for their own gas, is designing a program that would reimburse drivers with gas cards based on how many trips they make.

Kate Langstone, director of communications for the society's Connecticut chapter, says a recent grant has made reimbursements available, but once the money runs out so, too, will the program.

"It's just our way of trying to ease

the burden for a time," she says.

John Daigle, a volunteer driver for the program who lives in Vernon, says reimbursement would be nice but that he would continue to provide rides, no matter what.

"I haven't even thought about that," he says, referring to the prices that the federal Department of Energy says are likely to stay at about \$2 a gallon for the next several months. "It hasn't affected my other driving, and it hasn't affected doing this."

Volunteers such as Daigle are the lifeblood of such programs, but nationally not everyone has been as dependable. Meals on Wheels programs around the country have seen

drivers unable to continue their routes. The number is small, but the examples are telling.

"These volunteers themselves are often on fixed incomes, so when gas prices go up it makes a difference," says Peggy Ingraham, director of policy and legislation for the national Meals on Wheels organization, which is based in Virginia.

"It's not that their hearts weren't there, it's just that they couldn't do it anymore," she says.

Ingraham has become concerned as directors of programs around the country have told her they may have to cut service to make up for the cost of gas. In Waterbury, for example, a Meals on Wheels program run by New Opportunities expects to overspend its fuel budget by more than \$15,000 by the end of September.

With meals for seniors costing about \$5 each, Ingraham notes, "That's a lot of meals for senior citizens."

So far, though, she has been proud to note that many communities have stepped up to donate money and gas cards as soon as the problem becomes known.

"People are saying that as a result of the attention, people have stepped forward to help," she says.

After all, that's the credo by which social service organizations live.

"The association has as its regular tagline: 'So No Senior Goes Hungry,'" Ingraham says. "That's our mission, and that's what we're going to do."