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Services with a Human Touch Can Help Seniors with Transportation Challenges

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None of us is getting any younger. Which is why we should all start thinking now about the challenges that seniors face when it comes to “getting there.”

That’s one of the top priorities of the SWCAA, the Southwest Connecticut Agency on Aging. Because, to maintain an independent life, seniors need to be able to get from their homes to doctors appointments, social engagements and even volunteer work. And their care-givers need to be able to get to their clients’ homes.

In the SWCAA region (Greenwich to Stratford) 20 percent of all residents are over age 60. By 2020 that proportion will be 25 percent. And with aging come issues of vision and cognition, especially behind the

wheel.

Giving up your private car is a much-feared rite of passage for seniors, usually prompted by coaxing from their kids who start noticing dented fenders. The DMV has no mandatory retirement age for driving, though if you accumulate enough points on your license you may need re-testing.

That's not to say there aren't folks over the age of 90 who are still good drivers. But seniors are also smart enough to avoid driving on the interstates and the parkways and they don't like driving at night.

With both parents often holding down daytime jobs, it's often the senior who's tasked with picking up grandchildren after school in addition to tending to their own numerous medical appointments.

But what happens when seniors lose their cars and the sense of independence they provide? They become isolated, sometimes going days without social interaction, provoking depression and even accelerating dementia.

That's why SWCAA is doing a regional assessment of all our towns and cities to see what alternatives might be available. Clearly in big cities like Stamford and Bridgeport there's mass transit. But in rural towns like Monroe and Weston, there's none.

Most communities do have some sort of ADA transportation, but that's only if you can prove you're disabled. While mandated by the Federal government, such senior shuttles only guarantee a 30-minute window when it comes to pick-ups, often leaving clients anxiously waiting outside in the cold, worrying if they've missed their ride.

Even in communities with bus service, seniors may not be big fans if they have to walk long distances to the bus stop [...] or cope with long walks home carrying groceries.

Sometimes church groups will organize driver-volunteers while in more affluent towns there are non-profits that specialize in assisting their residents aging issues, including transportation.

Another attractive alternative are services like Uber and Lyft which whisk you door to door, on demand. But even these services have problems: they're not affordable if you're poor and not accessible if you don't know how to run a smartphone app.

SWCAA is hoping that a special "senior version" of Lyft and Uber can be developed where seniors can call a dispatcher to book a ride and handle payments. That way the seniors have someone they can talk to, someone who can also follow-up and make sure they got to their destination safely. That "human touch" means a lot.

Self-driving cars may soon be on our streets, but we'll see if seniors feel comfortable with that tech, too.

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Whatever the alternative, transportation is essential to keeping our seniors active and engaged.

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