

## Volunteer drivers to receive gas money for helping homebound

by *Edythe Jensen* - Feb. 6, 2009 08:21 AM  
The Arizona Republic

A pilot mileage reimbursement program that pays volunteers 55 cents a mile to drive the **elderly and disabled** will start in Chandler and Gilbert on Feb. 17.

Touted as a less costly transportation option than taxi coupons and Dial-A-Ride, the plan is similar to one used by Mesa but is the first regional program of its kind. It has public backing from cities, transportation officials and non-profits whose volunteers already do the job without compensation.

The plan comes at a time when authorities in Arizona and elsewhere face increasing difficulties providing affordable transportation for the elderly and disabled. Valley Metro officials have said if the Chandler and Gilbert mileage reimbursement program is successful it could be extended beyond July 2010 and expanded to other parts of the Valley.

About Care, a Chandler non-profit that serves homebound in Chandler and Gilbert won the contract to run the 18-month program administered by Valley Metro and

funded with a \$48,000 federal transportation grant. Reimbursement is based on the current federal mileage rate.

Jacques Meyers of Chandler will be one of the beneficiaries. The 82-year-old retired civil engineer said he makes several volunteer trips every week, driving About Care clients to doctors' appointments and recreation. Money for gas would help "but the benefit for me is meeting a lot of interesting people," he said this week as he picked up Evelyn Seiler of Chandler at the city's downtown senior center.

"They come from all over the United States and sometimes I've lived where they lived or my kids live where they lived," Meyers said.

For Seiler, who had to quit driving because of vision difficulties, Meyers is her connection to the community.

"When you lose your wheels, you're isolated," she said.

Anne Marie McArthur, **executive director** for About Care said her organization's 125 regular volunteers and 400 seasonal volunteers have been providing the service in the two cities without compensation for three years. She hopes money for gas will inspire more to volunteer. As part of the agreement with Valley Metro, About Care must enforce the trip rules and screen

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eligible participants who must be 65 or older or have Americans with Disabilities Act certification.

Neighbors Who Care, a non-profit that serves south Chandler and Sun Lakes, also provides volunteer transportation services but wasn't eligible for the reimbursement grant because it serves a limited geographic area, director Chris Stage said.

When the program was proposed, she said reimbursement "would be huge" for the often cash-strapped volunteers, some who had to reduce trips when [gas prices](#) skyrocketed.

Stage said her organization is seeking private grant funds to start its own mileage reimbursement program later this year.

"With the economy, we're having people tell us they can't afford to support us financially like they used to so they are giving their time," she said.

The only other mileage reimbursement program in the Valley is Mesa's [East Valley RIDEChoice](#). Under Mesa's program, qualifying residents are paid 44 cents per mile for up to 300 miles a month when a friend or family member drives them, said Julie Howard, Mesa transit coordinator.

East Valley Dial-a-Ride, another option for people who can't drive, has long wait times

and requires 24-hour notice, transit officials have said.

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