



COMMUNITY

Cancer patients need help getting to treatments

By Angela Blackburn
METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

Driving people with cancer to doctor's appointments and treatment may sound like it could be depressing. Yet the long-time volunteers who do the job say it's just the opposite and that's why they've done it for so long.

The Canadian Cancer Society units in Oakville and Burlington are hoping residents hear that message as the units are in desperate need of volunteer drivers.

"I don't think we'll ever have enough drivers because drivers have lives, too," said Debbie Mahaffy, unit assistant for the Canadian Cancer Society, Burlington unit.

Added Lisa Moffatt, fundraising co-ordinator for the Oakville Unit: "We have 100 clients in Oakville and only 30 to 40 drivers."

The situation is similar in Burlington and Milton (the latter being co-ordinated through the Burlington office).

With snow birds preparing to take flight and others managing busy schedules now that Christmas is fast approaching, better screening leading to more diagnoses and an aging population, the driver shortage is nearing the critical point, according to Mahaffy, who said the units are very concerned about burning out the volunteer drivers they do have.

"It's not fair," she said.

Not only is it tough getting drivers rounded up, but particularly so finding those willing to commute back and forth to Toronto hospitals. Many volunteer drivers are retired from careers that saw them commute to Toronto and they just don't want to do it again. Others, who've never made the commute regularly, are not keen to start.

So the local units of the Canadian Cancer Society are putting out a broad appeal. And then there's all that waiting — among the top virtues of volunteer drivers is patience.

All that said, why would anyone want the job?

"You would think it would be depressing, but it's just the opposite. These are people (the patients) who have a zest for life," said Carole Terry, herself a cancer survivor who has been a volunteer driver in Burlington for



ON THE ROAD TO A CURE: Volunteer drivers Tony Hordowick, Carole Terry and Alf Hilton invite people to come out and volunteer as the Canadian Cancer Society units all across Halton, including Milton, are currently experiencing a shortage of drivers in their transportation services.

nearly five years in a bid to give back.

"That was one of the concerns I had, but it turned out to be the exact opposite," agreed Tony Hordowick, a driver in Burlington for six years.

Hordowick said one of his funniest days stacked up when he drove a car full of breast cancer patients to treatment and, he still chuckles as he recalls, they all spoke very openly on the ride — as though he wasn't there. "I heard far more details than I wanted to," he laughed.

The funny stories about what happens on trips for treatment and appointments that turn into adventures, friendships and often unexpectedly good times, as well as poignant moments make it all worthwhile for the volunteer drivers.

Oakville's Alf Hilton hasn't had cancer touch his family, but said he's been driving for seven years because the help he can give to others at a time of great need makes all the difference — to them and to himself. The drivers also watch as friendships are

born among the various patients who get a ride in their cars.

Sometimes patients who get the worst news are able to receive comfort and support from others on the ride.

"The patients realize they are not alone," said Mahaffy of the specific trips and in their health situation.

Mahaffy said she recalls a wife who insisted on going with her husband to his treatment for prostate cancer. Not long after, the wife called Mahaffy to say she would not be going again — as her husband and the other prostate cancer patients who rode with them were "having too much fun" and so her support wasn't necessary.

There's driver training provided for volunteers, said Mahaffy, but it's not about driving, it's about dealing with cancer patients. Ride-alongs are also arranged for new drivers so they're able to learn the ins and outs of parking and systems at the 13 hospitals Halton cancer patients attend for treatment.

In fact, it's those types of details the driv-

ers can relieve the patients of as they focus on their own health and emotions.

Many of the patients are seniors who wouldn't be able to get to treatment without the help of the cancer society. Others are parents with young children where both partners can't take five weeks off work to get their children to daily treatments.

Yet others are simply too weak or ill after treatment to even consider driving themselves or taking local transit — which is difficult in itself as many treatment locations are in a different city and transit connections are sparse if not non-existent.

Volunteer drivers must maintain liability insurance on their vehicles, but are reimbursed 35 cents per kilometre for their fuel costs, and the cancer society provides parking vouchers for the hospitals to which they drive.

Those interested in volunteering as a driver in Milton can contact the Burlington Unit at 1251 Northside Rd., (905) 332-0060 or burlington@ontario.cancer.ca.

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