

Charities hurt by rising gas prices

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

Rising fuel costs pose a threat to York Region's non-profit sector and the services they deliver, administrators warn.

United Way of York Region's 40 member agencies, providing more than 100 programs, are experiencing the pressure of fuel costs that have tripled in a decade and risen 30 per cent since last summer, CEO Daniele Zanotti says.

"They're feeling very stretched," he says. "I know of a number of organizations whose staff and volunteers are finding travel prohibitive. In all cases, volunteers, who are the backbone of many services, and employees and being affected across the region."

Troublesome, too, is the geographic vastness of our region and the ever-increasing demand on social services, Mr. Zanotti adds.

"Agencies have to penny pinch and find creative new ways to cut costs," he says. "What's worrisome is the horizon and how long we can stretch what already are minimal dollars."

The burden of paying more at the pumps has non-profit organizations fretting about the continuation of quality care and keeping staff and volunteers, he says.

The Canadian Cancer Society is reliant on volunteer drivers to take patients to and from treatments. They transported 840 York Region clients 384,564 kilometres in 2007, the organization's Major MacKenzie Unit volunteer engagement coordinator Angela Belleau says. The society's 65 volunteer drivers are reimbursed 35 cents per kilometre and for parking costs.

The rate was enhanced by six cents last month to keep pace with gas costs and to encourage some volunteers who were cutting back on their hours, she says.

"Our program is unique," she says. "We don't get government funding and there's no cost to our clients. Still, we're accountable to as many clients as possible and we're always in need of volunteers."

Markham's Don Hobson has been donating his time and vehicle to the society for eight months while he looks for a new executive position. He drives patients to Toronto hospitals two days each week, logging as many as 180 kilometres. He donates his mileage reimbursement back to the cancer society.

"What they pay covers the gas costs," he says. "If gas prices go up, I'd still volunteer. I know some who couldn't afford to do that."

Losing drivers to gas costs could force patients to spend hours on public transit or paying \$50 cab fares to get to their treatments, he adds. To optimize fuel, the society is looking at a new, centralized



STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS TRABER

Don Hobson is a volunteer driver with the Canadian Cancer Society's Markham/Whitchurch-Stouffville Unit. Charities are feeling the extra pinch as gas prices have tripled in the past decade and risen by 30 per cent since last summer, United Way's CEO Daniele Zanotti said.

driver program next year, Ms Belleau says.

Gas hikes may jeopardize volunteer continuity, Community Home Assistance to Seniors acting executive director Deborah Compton says.

The organization is assisted by more than 500 volunteers, many in its transportation program, delivering meals to seniors so they can remain independent in their own homes.

The Newmarket-based non-profit service also has 100 home and personal support staff members who use their vehicles to travel to clients.

Expensive fuel has had a two-pronged impact on the organization, Ms Compton says.

"It's a major barrier to recruiting volunteers and it has affected personal worker turnover," she says. "All this affects continuity of client services."

Only staff are compensated for their travel time. Considering hundreds of thousands of kilometres are travelled each year to assist clients, the price of gas is now a major operating expense. Ms Compton says the organization is looking at implementing a per-kilometre fuel allowance to address that pressure.

Pricy fuel has hit the Canadian National Institute for the Blind as well. It provides services and supports necessary for clients to enjoy a good quality of life while living with vision loss.

Services are provided at no

cost to all residents of York Region through the central region's Newmarket office, associate director Tom Burger says. The organization's central region, encompassing York, serves 4,900 clients annually.

"Yes, it's an issue and has had a profound impact on what we do," he says. "Our vision rehabilitation staff, 23 in the central region, travel to clients' homes."

While CNIB staff receive 40 cents per kilometre, a benefit reviewed every 24 months, the spike in fuel costs exceeds compensation. Compounded by a 6 per cent client increase, the organization is scrambling to ensure continuation of services.

"We're economizing in other areas," he says. "We're forever tak-

Get help or help out

Sources if you need help or want to help:

- United Way of York Region, 905-474-9974, toll free 1-877-241-4516 or www.uwyr.on.ca on line.
- York Region Food Network, 905-967-0428, www.yrfn.ca
- Community Home Assistance to Seniors (CHATS), 905-713-6596 or toll free 1-877-452-4287, www.chats.on.ca
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind, 615 Davis Dr., Suite 200 Newmarket, 905-898-6413, toll free at 1-800-563-0887.
- Canadian Cancer Society, 905-294-5925, toll free at 1-800-567-4324 and multilingual line at 1-888-939-3333 and www.cancer.ca on line.

ing from other areas and cutting back on management travel."

The organization is convening more meetings via telephone and computer and encouraging client peer group meetings where staff teach new technologies.

CNIB employs a fleet of vehicles used for vision assessments which are marginally less expensive operationally, Mr. Burger says. But, gas and the cost is a constant. As such, CNIB make submissions to local health integration networks and the Ministry of Health to counter the anticipated expense of fuel, he says.

The specter of even higher gas prices frightens Transit Georgina executive director Cathy Wilkinson.

The grassroots organization provides 12,000 rides to 900 at-risk, senior and isolated clients annually. Typically, they are transported to work, medical, mental health and food bank programs.

"Gas prices are huge for us," she says. "We've lost some volunteer drivers and others are particular about the rides they're taking."

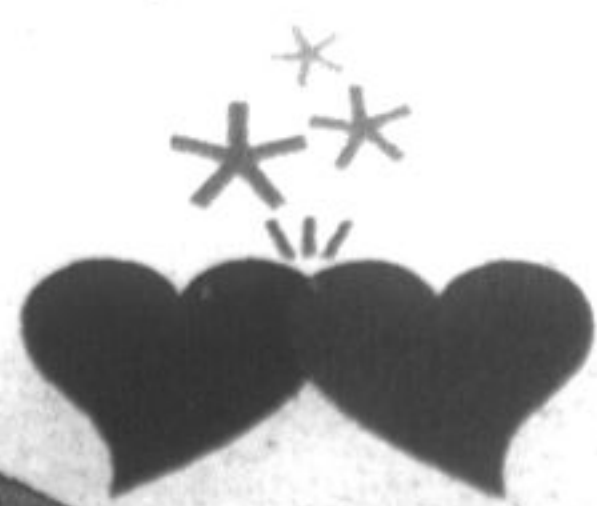
Funded by the region, the Town of Georgina and a Trillium grant, the organization pays its 40 volunteers 40 cents per kilometre in the public transit-challenged area.

"It's scary," she says. "We provide the accessibility piece for many social services, but we're not a focus for funders."

"We're small, non-profit and doing the best we can for Georgina residents."

The York Region Food Network, working in partnership with the region's nine food banks, relies significantly on transportation, executive director Joan Stonehocker says.

"It's a concern, yes," she says. "Higher gas costs dramatically affect people on low or fixed incomes and York Region's food banks are feeling the typical summer pinch."



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