



DEBORAH OUTING

World War II veteran John T. Mooney volunteers every Wednesday to drive veterans to their medical appointments at VA facilities in Bedford, Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury, Mass.

Looking for a Few Good Drivers

A longtime VA-DAV program that offers transportation to veterans in need is now trying to revitalize its aging driver population.

Help Wanted: Immediate openings for drivers to transport veterans to medical appointments. Successful candidates must pass a medical exam, have a valid driver's license, a safe driving record, and carry current auto insurance. Full and part-time positions available at VA medical centers nationwide. Schedule: Monday through Friday. Hours: Flexible. Salary: None. Benefits: The satisfaction of helping the nation's veterans in need. Call (202) 554-3501.

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Volunteer Transportation Network is looking for additional volunteer drivers to sustain its program of providing free rides to veterans needing transportation to

their medical appointments at VA medical centers and clinics. Although there are 9,059 volunteer drivers, the program faces an aging driver population and must recruit younger volunteers, according to Edward E. Hartman, DAV's national director of Voluntary Services.

"We're very fortunate to have folks that believe in the program," Hartman said.

The program has been around since 1987, when Congress reduced funding for VA's Beneficiary Travel program. DAV decided to initiate a nationwide volunteer-based transportation network, in concert with VA's Voluntary Service Office, to provide transportation to eligible veterans.

Hartman said his organization took on the mission because DAV is dedicated to a single purpose: "to build better lives for disabled veterans and their families."

Had DAV not taken on the mission, Hartman said, many veterans would probably have had to forego the medical care they are entitled to receive. He explained that the veterans who use the volunteer driver program are typically too ill to drive themselves, do not have family members around to drive them to their appointments, or have no other means of transportation.

"I think it's a godsend for veterans who have served to maintain our freedom," said Laura Balun, director



World War II veteran Alfred Faticoni volunteers five days a week to drive veterans to their medical appointments at the Newington campus of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System. To date, he's logged more than 59,000 hours behind the wheel.

RICHARD THOMPSON



TERESA BELL

Left: Navy veteran Eric Wells typically puts in a 14-hour day driving 420 miles round trip when he volunteers once a week to take veterans to their VA appointments in Helena, Great Falls and Missoula, Mont.

must produce proof of a safe driving record, a valid driver's license, current motor vehicle bodily injury liability and property damage, or personal insurance, and be willing to attend training. Balun noted that if a volunteer driver has an accident while on assignment, the driver would be covered under the federal government's insurance.

In addition to establishing policy, Balun said VA also handles program logistics. For example, once the vans are purchased and donated by DAV or other organizations, the VA medical center is responsible for vehicle maintenance and for providing a government credit card to fuel the vehicle.

DAV employs 181 hospital service coordinators based at most of the

VA medical centers and free-standing clinics located around the country. The hospital service coordinator is responsible for setting up a transportation office at the medical center and making sure it is adequately staffed to match volunteer drivers with transportation requests from veterans.

DAV donates between 100 and 150 vans each year to local programs. DAV headquarters pays 60 percent of the cost of the vehicles through the DAV Charitable Service Trust and the DAV Colorado Trust; local departments and chapters cover the remaining 40 percent. The local chapters raise the money for the vans through various fundraising events. A total of 1,795 vans have been purchased at a cost of \$36.5 million by DAV and donated to VA health care facilities since the program's inception.

Hartman noted that DAV has been fortunate to have Ford Motor Company on board as a corporate sponsor. The relationship began when Henry Ford donated 50 Model-T Fords to DAV so that disabled veterans returning from World War I could attend DAV's 1922 annual convention in San Diego. That relationship has continued to grow. Hartman said Ford donated 11 vans to the program in 2006 and has donated a total of 117 vans since 1996.

Corporate goodwill is not the only support DAV and VA rely upon to sustain the program—they also rely upon the selflessness of veteran volunteer drivers like Alfred Faticoni, Eric Wells and John T. Mooney.

Faticoni is a 79-year-old Army veteran who has been volunteering his time to drive veterans to their medical appointments at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System's Newington campus for nearly 50 years. He started driving long before the formal program began as a way to help out his fellow veterans in need through his participation in his local DAV chapter. Today, Faticoni volunteers five days a week, Monday

through Friday, and has logged more than 59,000 hours and 207,000 miles as a volunteer driver. Most of the veterans he transports are from the Korean War and Vietnam War eras.

A resident of Newington, Faticoni said he decided to start volunteering as a way to give something back to the hospital volunteers he encountered as a young private. In 1948, Faticoni was assigned to unload boxcars and load airplanes with food as part of the Berlin Airlift. While washing dishes during KP, he broke a glass, severing some arteries in his left hand. He was shipped from Germany to the Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania, where he was treated for two months, and he spent another month at the Newington VA hospital recuperating.

"The volunteers at the VA hospital treated me so good, I wanted to reciprocate," Faticoni said.

He said his volunteer work "makes me feel I'm giving back something that was given to me."

Wells is a 53-year-old Gulf War veteran who has been volunteering one day a week for the past 10 years. He has logged about 3,000 hours and more than 90,000 miles as a driver. Wells estimates that about 30 percent of the veterans he transports served in the Korean War era, 30 to 40 percent in the Vietnam War era, and the

rest are from other eras.

A resident of Stevensville, Mont., Wells decided to start volunteering when his VFW post voted to support the transportation network when it expanded to the southwestern part of Montana. He said he considers the program "a viable, necessary thing" given the number of veterans in his state who can't or don't drive.

"I thought if I expect to use [the transportation network] when I get older, I better put something in now while I can drive," Wells explained.

On the days he volunteers, he drives an average of 420 miles round trip and puts in a 14-hour day. Wells drives the veterans to their VA appointments in Helena, Great Falls and Missoula. He started his own business remodeling and restoring old houses after retiring from the Navy in 1993, which gives him the flexibility to devote time to his volunteer work.

"Even though I'm a sailor, I'm kind of soft-hearted," Wells said. "When somebody needs some help, I don't mind helping them out."

Fellow sailor Mooney was recruited to become a volunteer driver 15 years ago when he retired as a police officer. The 80-year-old World War II veteran volunteers one day a week, on Wednesdays. Most of the veterans he transports served in the Vietnam War era.

A resident of Burlington, Mass., Mooney has logged 7,000 hours and driven about 25,000 miles. He said he enjoys driving the veterans to their appointments throughout the state of Massachusetts—Bedford, Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury.

"I like talking to them," Mooney said. "I run across people that were in the same outfit I was in." Mooney served as a gunners mate 3rd class with the U.S. Navy Armed Guard from Feb. 6, 1943 to Feb. 4, 1947. He served throughout the North Atlantic and South Pacific while in the Navy.


Mooney said he plans to continue driving for the program as long as he remains healthy.

"I can't bring myself to tell them I won't be able to come in no more," he said.

Hartman is hoping to recruit more volunteers like 17-year-old Melissa Shaw. Shaw is a high school senior from St. Francis, Wis. She volunteers with the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee three days a week during her summer vacations and Christmas breaks. She answers the phone, schedules rides for veterans, and types up the vehicle run sheets.

Shaw hopes to start driving veterans once she turns 18. She has been volunteering since June 2003, and has logged about 1,000 hours. The daughter of a Navy veteran, Shaw said she enjoyed volunteering at her father's fish fry events at his VFW post since age 7 so much that she decided she wanted another outlet for her volunteer work with veterans.

"I wanted more connection with them," she explained. She hopes to tighten that connection soon behind the wheel of a transportation network van.

Interested in becoming a volunteer driver? Contact the Voluntary Service chief at your nearest VA medical center or call DAV Voluntary Services at (202) 554-3501. 

By Renee McElween



DAV has enjoyed a relationship with Ford Motor Company as a corporate sponsor for many years. Model-T Fords donated by the company are shown parked on the street in front of a sign welcoming DAV members to the 1940 annual convention in Green Bay, Wis.

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