**SERVICE PROVIDES QUALITY OF LIFE LINE**

**Sourcewise has been a blessing for South County seniors in Morgan Hill and Gilroy**

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Autumn’s slanting light bathes the South County hillsides in a golden glow to create a sense of tranquility at arm’s length from the bustle of Silicon Valley.

The pastoral image has drawn folks to Morgan Hill, San Martin and Gilroy as the Bay Area’s population exploded over the past two decades. But the open spaces also can be isolating for the elderly as they begrudgingly hand over their car keys and the California tradition of independence.

“When they’re in a rural area, they become more vulnerable,” said Aneliza Del Pinal, a planner for Sourcewise, a Santa Clara County organization dedicated to improving seniors’ lives.

Driver Emily Escalante, helps Mavis Roe, 85, out of the Sourcewise van as she and Tom Bambino, 93, make their way to the Morgan Hill Senior Center.

In the past year, Sourcewise has become a lifeline for almost 50 seniors by providing free transportation Monday through Friday to Morgan Hill and Gilroy senior centers. With 11,500 area residents at least 65 years old, the San Jose-based group is trying to address a growing need that could easily be overlooked in the less populated basement of the county.

“They saved my life, really,” client Tom Bambino said of giving him mobility.

Bambino, 93, was one of four senior passengers during a recent morning ride-along in a lime green van called “Speedy Shuttle.” Good-natured driver Emily Escalante collected each commuter at their home to take them to the Morgan Hill Senior Center.

The shuttle has become part of the daily routine for the men and women who enjoy getting out of the house to spend part of the day mingling with others.

Mavis Roe, 85, left, and Larry Garner, 62, right, chat while being driven to the Morgan Hill Senior Center

“I’m going to eat, to gossip, to play games and do puzzles,” said Larry Garner, Escalante’s first pick up on this day.

Sourcewise currently has a van and a seven-seat passenger bus to ferry the elderly to the two senior centers in the morning and home in the afternoon.

The service launched in April has a waiting list of 18 seniors who want to take the shuttles. Ten more candidates are being evaluated to see if they qualify.

The need is amplified in sprawling communities lacking in city-like public transportation networks. Caltrain, for example, services South County only in the morning and evening. The Valley Transportation Authority’s light rail doesn’t extend that far south. Sourcewise executives found some people relied on taxis or long bus trips to get to the senior centers.

Wish Book readers can support the program with donations that help to pay for vehicle maintenance, drivers’ salaries and increasing the service with additional vehicles.

Transportation Specialist Emily Escalante heads out to pick-up a client in a Sourcewise van.

In a disposable society where the aging often find themselves disconnected, the seemingly simple task of transportation has potential long-term benefits. A correlation between health and loneliness gained attention this year after Brigham Young University researchers found that social isolation increased the risk of premature death by about 30 percent. In another study, scientists reported that feeling lonely is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The shuttle service offsets the sense of desolation in a community where bedroom housing tracts butt against farmland.

The socializing begins in the van for the four seniors who are Escalante’s regulars. The driver crisscrosses the southern edge of Coyote Valley from a mobile home park to a housing tract to Bambino’s ranch-style home along Morgan Hill’s Wine Trail.

Using a cane, Bambino ambles to the van with hearty hellos for everyone. He wears a U.S. Army veterans cap and carts along his acerbic New York humor.

Bambino owns a 2007 Cadillac but keeps his trips to the pharmacy and grocery store to a minimum.

“I try to steer clear of going out at night, in the rain and heavy traffic,” he said. “I’m not all there anymore.”

Bambino, who lives with his brother and sister-in-law, used to attend Elks Club events when he was more mobile. The van service allows him to remain socially engaged at the seniors center, which offers a variety of activities at Centennial Recreation Center across from the city’s skate park.

Carmine Bambino appreciates the transport service because he is a full-time caregiver to his ailing wife and doesn’t have time to take his younger brother across town.

Sourcewise officials hope they can expand the program to help relieve overstressed caregivers even more. They’d like to offer transportation to medical appointments and shopping, said Rosie Jimenez, Sourcewise’s director of South County services.

Tom Bambino, 92, has his seatbelt fastened before heading to the Morgan Hill Senior Center.

The group also is investigating the possibility of a route extension to Santa Teresa light rail for seniors who use services located in the north county.

But for now, the main draw is the connectivity to the world outside of the home for Mary El Masry, 86, who never drove. Her husband, who died two years ago, did all the chauffeuring.

Living alone in Morgan Hill, El Masry was “feeling sorry for myself,” while stranded at her house.

Then she found Sourcewise.

“I’m so thrilled this service is offered because it really is a lifeline for her,” El Masry’s daughter Lorna said.

During the first visit to the senior center, El Masry breathed in the landscape and thought, “Oh, no, I’m old but I don’t feel that old.”

Then she met other patrons and regained her sense of vibrancy. The Englishwoman stays in contact with friends and family in the United Kingdom by Skype. But too often their tales of woe bring her down.

Then she boards “Speedy Shuttle” with its neon colors and catches up with fellow passengers who enjoy the outings.

“I come here and it’s so bright,” El Marsy said of the center.

Escalante, the driver, often hears such spirited comments when making her rounds.

It never fails to bring a smile to her face.

Sourcewise's colorful van seats seven. The organization hopes to add vehicles and drivers to expand the popular service.

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