

The Distance to Hope: Transportation Help for Cancer Patients

A Request to the Herrick Foundation

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Introduction

St. Mary's of Michigan is a busy and vibrant health care provider based in Saginaw, Michigan. We service a unique population mix of urban, suburban and rural patients at our downtown Saginaw location, drawing patients from a wide radius throughout the central and "Thumb" areas of Michigan. For many people, St. Mary's of Michigan provides essential health care services that are unavailable elsewhere. Today, there are 23 St. Mary's of Michigan specialty centers located throughout the mid-Michigan region.

The Seton Cancer Institute at St. Mary's of Michigan provides an exceptional level of care for cancer patients throughout mid-Michigan. The Seton Cancer Institute is part of the University of Michigan Cancer Care Network, providing cutting-edge technology and treatment for patients in the tri-cities area as well as patients from the many rural areas and numerous small towns in a broad coverage area of lower Michigan. Treatment is provided at several Seton Cancer Institute locations in order to make care as convenient for patients as possible.

Seeking Care Miles from Home

Despite our best efforts to offer treatment services in convenient locations, patients who rely on St. Mary's of Michigan for their cancer treatment often face significant transportation challenges. Many of these patients live long distances from treatment facilities, necessitating a series of long and expensive trips from rural areas and remote cities and towns throughout the region. These trips were particularly costly in 2007-2008 as gas prices skyrocketed. For patients who don't drive or who have sub-standard vehicles, such trips are out of the question.

Compounding these transportation difficulties are the factors which often accompany cancer – loss of some or all income; physical weakness which makes driving a difficult chore; and the advanced age of many patients. Taken together, these factors often cause people to miss appointments, making their treatment program less effective.

Vans, Gas Cards Help Patients Travel

For several years, St. Mary's has provided transportation services for patients who are otherwise unable to get to treatment facilities in West Branch and Marlette. Each of these Seton Cancer Institute locations draws patients from a wide radius, including many individuals from small towns and rural areas.

The service has proved to be a popular option for many people, and the vehicles have logged heavy mileage. In 2006, a group of St. Mary's physicians pooled their resources to continue this helpful program. They contributed significant funds to the purchase of a pair of vans that are used in the West Branch and Marlette routes. Each van is driven by a

St. Mary's staff member. Beginning in the early morning, each van follows a pre-determined route, picking up people at their homes or at convenient locations, arriving at the St. Mary's facility in the morning so the patient is on time for his or her appointment. Once everyone has completed treatment, the van takes everyone home, a process which continues into the evening hours. It makes for a long day for drivers and passengers, but patients have expressed tremendous gratitude for the shuttle service, which often makes the difference in whether or not an individual will receive cancer treatment.

Each day, the vans are filled to capacity for the long trips. In 2007, the vans that service the Marlette area provided rides for 746 patients, and in 2008 the number of riders reached 1,063. The West Branch van served 1,122 riders in 2007 and provided 1,730 rides in 2008.

The odometers of the vehicles reflect this heavy usage. The 2006 Marlette van has now surpassed 86,000 miles, while the original Marlette van has logged a remarkable 311,000 miles. The lone West Branch van has logged over 222,000 miles. St. Mary's has kept each vehicle in excellent shape with diligent attention to maintenance and repair schedules. However, we are nearing the point where the vehicles' age and mileage rates make continual repairs less cost-effective than the purchase of new vans.

The shuttle service is not the answer for everyone. Some patients are able to drive themselves, or to have a friend or family member drive, but the cost of travel has proved to be a burden. In response, St. Mary's has provided pre-paid gas cards in recent years to help patients and their caregivers to cope with high fuel costs. While prices have come down in recent months (as of this writing, the price has dropped below \$2.00 for a gallon of regular gasoline), travel still represents a significant expense in an individual's overall cancer treatment program.

Gas cards and vehicle maintenance are not normally part of the budget of the Seton Cancer Center, but the institution felt it necessary to carve out space in the budget to provide these critical resources. Responding to these needs was essential, as transportation was becoming a dire concern for many of our patients.

Our Goal: Helping People Receive Lifesaving Care

St. Mary's of Michigan is proud of its unique role in the mid-Michigan region. We provide quality cancer care for people over a wide geographic area, offering services and treatments that are otherwise unavailable to many of our patients. Every year, our capabilities increase, and our capacity for innovation expands.

However, none of that matters if our patients are unable to get to our facilities. That's why we continue to pursue commonsense, helpful services that will help individuals travel to St. Mary's of Michigan facilities in timely ways.

In 2009, we aim to replace both vans with new model minivans that will provide years of reliable service. In addition, we want to continue to provide gas cards for people who are

using their own vehicles to traverse great distances in order to make it to appointments. The positive response we've received from patients is evidence that this service is appreciated, and also in great demand.

Evaluation

With the addition of new vans, we expect ridership to continue to increase in 2009 and beyond. We anticipate that more patients will choose St. Mary's of Michigan Seton Cancer Institute for their care, as one of the major barriers to care will be eliminated. We also expect program participants to have improved health outcomes, as they will benefit from an uninterrupted treatment program.

Since the inception of the service, we have kept detailed records of the number of patients using the vans, the number of trips, and the mileage on each vehicle. Each of these metrics has shown an increase year-over-year, which we interpret as a sign of success. We also track the cost of maintenance and repairs on each vehicle.

In 2009, we will continue to keep meticulous records in order to measure the impact of new vehicles. An increase in ridership, which we anticipate, will indicate success. Also, decreases in maintenance and repair costs on new vehicles represents a positive outcome.

Evaluation results will help us understand how successful we are in meeting the transportation needs of our patients. Tim Laugh, Director of the Seton Cancer Institute, will share the results with his entire staff and will invite suggestions for how this ongoing need can be met through other options, if possible.

Your Partnership in this Effort

Our total fundraising goal for this effort is \$80,000 – enough to pay for two new minivans and a large number of \$50 gift cards which hospital staff members can provide to patients. **Your grant of \$40,000 will provide a significant portion of this goal and help us ensure many more years of reliable transportation for thousands of patients.** Thank you for consideration of this critical need.