

# MARINSCOPE

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## Whistlestop helps seniors keep on truckin'

### Marinscope

Remember that sense of independence you felt when you got your first car? Well, that feeling — or at least the desire to be independent — never really goes away. But sometimes everyone needs a hand, or a ride.

Whistlestop's white buses are a common sight on Marin County roads, helping to keep senior citizens on the move. The San Rafael-based nonprofit is adding to its services by rolling out a Non-Emergency Medical Transportation program for Medi-Cal members.

Doctors and Whistlestop officials identified one of the biggest barriers for older adults and people living with chronic illnesses is just getting to medical appointments. Without a

ride or someone to help get them to see the doctor or dentist, some seniors just skip appointments. Without regular checkups, dangerous health conditions might worsen as they go unnoticed and untreated.

"A lack of transportation is a big challenge to dialysis patients and cancer patients," said Erick Villalobos, general manager, transportation services at Whistlestop. "But this service is not just for people with acute conditions. Preventative care is essential for good health. This is life."

With this new transportation service, Whistlestop will provide routine and specialized medical appointment transportation to eligible participants that are covered by Medi-Cal in Marin County. Participants

may request NEMT for a variety of medical-related reasons, including preventive care visits, surgical treatment appointments and procedures, dialysis treatment, and prenatal, substance abuse, dental

and vision care.

The NEMT service can be a life-saver to patients, but also a huge money saver for providers.

"At Whistlestop we recognize the critical role transportation plays not only in access to care but also in improving health outcomes," said Villalobos. "It can be difficult and costly to arrange transportation for vital doctor's appointments or medical procedures. In addition, the total cost of missed healthcare appointments in the United States every year is an astronomical \$150 billion. Whistlestop's new NEMT service will help ensure that eligible participants in Marin County have access to proper medical care while also helping medical providers to recoup lost revenue from missed appointments."

Every year 3.6 million Americans miss doctor appointments due to a lack of reliable transportation, and no-show rates are as high as 30 percent. Furthermore, a study commissioned by the Medical Transportation Access Coalition found that missed doctor's appointments led to medical complications and expensive medical costs. Primary study findings uncovered that 58 percent of nearly 1,000 beneficiaries surveyed reported that they would not be able to make

it to medical appointments without NEMT. Additionally, 10 percent of surveyed NEMT participants reported that they would die or probably would die if they did not have the transportation services they currently receive.

In July 2017, Whistlestop conducted a proof of concept pilot program with Marin Community Clinics for Missed Appointment Reduction Service. During the pilot, more than 650 clinic appointments were kept due to the newly available transportation. "One of the largest barriers for our clients is safe, reliable transportation," said Dr. Mitesh Popat, CEO of Marin Community Clinics. "Feedback about the MARS program was extremely positive among staff and patients who expressed their gratitude for how the pilot program made transportation to and from medical appointments seamless and easy. We're thrilled that Whistlestop is expanding this critical and life-saving service for vulnerable residents of Marin."

The NEMT program has helped to reduce no-shows by nearly 100 percent among its participants, according to Villalobos, who notes that not everyone is aware the service is available to them.

To qualify for NEMT services, an individual must

be covered by Medi-Cal (Medicaid) and must have a physical or medical condition that makes it difficult for them to travel to a medical appointment by car, bus or train. If a person needs help getting out of the house, into a vehicle or to a medical office, she/he may qualify for NEMT services. Receiving NEMT services requires prior authorization from a medical provider.

In addition to NEMT services, Whistlestop will continue to offer its full suite of specialized transportation services, including special needs transportation services through its partnerships with Marin Transit and Golden Gate Transit, and free rides through its CarePool volunteer driver program.

For additional information on NEMT rides or other transportation services, please contact Whistlestop at 415-454-0964 or [medical@whistlestop.org](mailto:medical@whistlestop.org).