

DRIVER TRAINER

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Vivalon, Community Action Marin launch free skills academy for low-income people



ALAN DEP — MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL

Vivalon Rides driver John Reyna walks by some of the organization's buses in San Rafael on Monday.

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Vivalon driver John Reyna likes what he does.

A commercial driver for the nonprofit for nearly eight years now, Reyna enjoys helping residents get around the county. There are some clients he has known for years.

It was hard when programs shut down during the pandemic. He was furloughed. He's back at work these days. Now that things are opening back up, he said the drivers could use a hand.

"Now it seems to be a lit-

tle short (staffed), but they are training drivers," Reyna said. "It will work out."

Facing a pressing need for vehicle operators in an expensive county, Vivalon — which services older adults and people living with disabilities — and San Rafael-based Community Action Marin have launched a partnership to create a local and free commercial driver's license training academy.

The academy's goal is to provide training to low-income people seeking local commercial driving jobs. By getting trained at the academy, drivers who graduate can earn paid driver

staff positions at Vivalon Rides. Vivalon also intends to leverage relationships with Marin County employers to assist graduates in finding other local employment opportunities.

"Driver shortages are a reality locally and nationally, and the added constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic have increased this reality exponentially," said Anne Grey, Vivalon CEO.

"We're thrilled to partner with Community Action Marin, an organization with a rich history of assisting underserved communities, to create this innovative driver training acad-

emy that addresses Marin's driver shortage, while also helping graduates find reliable paid jobs."

"People are looking for more than a job and this is an opportunity for them to build a brighter future for themselves and their families," said Heather Bettini, economic justice director at Community Action Marin.

Bettini said the nonprofits have already recruited trainees and the academy is expected to begin this week. Classes of three to six people ages 21 and older will be held for six months, with the goal to graduate 48 drivers.

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"We know there's a driver shortage in our community," Bettini said. "We know there are people who are looking for jobs and want to potentially start a new career pathway. This project is a great way to meet both of those needs."

Bettini said positions start around \$18 to \$20 an hour for commercial driving, which can lead to "a way to make a living wage in Marin."

"There's a lot of upward mobility and ability to progress within the career," Bettini said.

She said CAM can help those who may encoun-

ter obstacles to joining a driving program, such as by providing child care or access to affordable, nutritious food.

Erick Villalobos, general manager of transportation services at Vivalon, said the two organizations discussed the idea for an academy at the beginning of the pandemic, but had to wait two years to safely launch the program.

"The beauty of this is, you would have a student, somebody who is licensed, in quick," Villalobos said. "You're ready to work and you work locally because there's so many job opportunities right here in Marin."

Villalobos said Vivalon prefers to have local workers. Knowing the cost of liv-



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Vivalon Rides driver John Reyna opens the doors of one of the organization's buses in San Rafael on Monday.

ing in the county, the two organizations are also discussing a referral program to accompany graduates from other areas and help them get hired and reside

in Marin.

"That's the bottom line, to get them working as fast as possible," he said.

"We're hiring, we're definitely in our growth spurt

right now. We're all chasing after the same people."

Community Action Marin client Homayoon Abdullah said he is interested in applying for the academy.

Right now he lives and delivers food in Brentwood, but said he hopes to get his commercial license, get a job in Marin and move to the county.

"I have a big family, so I need to work hard to earn more money for my family," he said.

Reyna, who said he'd recommend the job to anyone, praised the staff who train drivers.

"I still ask them questions, and I have a great deal of confidence in them — and I have a great deal of confidence in Vivalon," Reyna said.