

## Non-profit senior service plans North Jersey expansion

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A local organization is trying to make it cheaper and easier for seniors to get to the beauty parlor, the movies or anywhere else they'd like to go.



ELIZABETH LARA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

*Ann LaHoff of North Arlington being helped into an EZ Ride car by driver Javier Chica of Meadowlink, a provider of low-cost rides for seniors in Bergen and Passaic counties.*

About 250 seniors are regularly using the low-cost taxi rides that have been offered for the past four years in southern [Bergen County](#). Now, those rides could be expanded into the northern reaches of Bergen County and [Passaic](#) counties, where many miles can

separate an elderly resident from shops, restaurants and social venues.

Meadowlink — the [Wood-Ridge](#)-based non-profit that runs the EZ Ride Senior Community Car program — plans to add 40 more cars to its current fleet of eight to serve those seniors.

"We're hoping to build partnerships with many more communities where we know the need for transportation is growing," said Krishna Murthy, executive director of Meadowlink, which runs other transportation programs in the region that are subsidized by grants.

The details on EZ Ride Community Cars:

**Who:** Currently open to residents who are 60 and older in 10 Bergen towns and in West Milford

**When:** Service operates Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**How much:** Members pay an annual \$15 fee and are billed monthly for rides. The initial pickup fee is \$2.50, and trips within 10 miles cost 55 cents a mile. Trips beyond 10 miles cost \$1.10 a mile. There's a 50 percent discount for shared rides

**How to join:** In Bergen/Hudson, call 201-939-4242; in Passaic, call 201-621-2577

No longer being able to drive can shrink an elderly resident's world. Both Bergen and [Passaic](#) counties, as well as a handful of towns and social service-agencies, offer seniors free bus or van rides. But they generally must be reserved well in advance and priority is given to those with the most

pressing of needs, like a trip to the doctor or to the grocery store.

That generally leaves out the older resident who wants to visit a friend in a neighboring town. Murthy's favorite story is about a 71-year-old woman who recently called for a ride to an Apple store so she could take a class on how to use the MacBook her grandson had given her.

Murthy's organization considers such outings to be basic social needs — ones many senior citizens deny themselves because the cost of a private cab is prohibitive, or because public transportation is too hard for them to negotiate.

By using volunteers to drive the GPS- and camera-equipped cars, EZ Ride is able to offer seniors rides at an initial pick-up fee of \$2.50, plus an additional 55 cents per mile, making a 10-mile trip a fare of \$8 — a fraction of what a private taxi or car service in North Jersey would charge.

John Verdi, a 65-year-old Kearny resident who underwent a heart transplant 10 years ago, said he was cooped up at home for weeks at a time until he heard about the EZ Ride program three months ago. A movie buff, Verdi has been using the service at least once a week to take him to the theater at [Clifton Commons](#), where he sometimes takes in two movies in an afternoon.

"Before this, maybe I'd get out once a month to see a movie," said Verdi, who has respiratory problems and needs to carry an oxygen tank with him. "I look forward to this every week now."

The round-trip fare that EZ Ride charges Verdi to go to [Clifton](#) is \$14.98. Previously he had to hire a private cab, which cost him

\$20 one-way. To save money, he would ask a family member to drive him the other way.

At 92, Sadie Mugavero of [Lyndhurst](#), also tries to limit what she spends on getting around. She walks 2 miles a day in good weather, including to the grocery store. So she doesn't use EZ Ride for anything more than the three or four doctor's appointments she has each month. But for those trips, she's happy not to deal with the hassle of having to reserve a ride with one of the government or social-service agencies that offer them for free.

"This is easier for me to know a car is coming to get me and bring me back," Mugavero said.

Currently EZ Ride can take its enrolled members — who must also pay a \$15 annual fee — to locations in [Wood-Ridge](#), [North Arlington](#), [Rutherford](#), [Lyndhurst](#), [Moonachie](#), [Carlstadt](#), [East Rutherford](#) and Kearny. [Hackensack](#) and [Teaneck](#) were recently added to the list.

"Within a month, we should be in [Leonia](#) as well," Murthy said.

The program also has one car each based in Essex, Union and Monmouth counties. It started a pilot program in [West Milford](#) six months ago.

The [West Milford](#) program is offering a glimpse of the challenges the program might face in trying to achieve its goal of offering service in farther-flung and less-dense suburban communities. Nine volunteers offered to take turns staffing the one car based in the 85-square-mile [Passaic County](#) town. But the car sits idle for long periods each day because Meadowlink decided it had to double its fee on any trip over 10 miles to \$1.10 per mile to cover the cost of

the vehicle traveling back to its destination without a passenger.

"The big challenge for us is the long trips," Murthy said. "It's hard to make it affordable and not go into a river of red with this program."

[West Milford](#) officials had asked Meadowlink to start the service, but now Mayor Bettina Bieri questions whether there'll be enough ridership to sustain it.

"It just ended up costing more than some seniors wanted to spend," Bieri said.

Murthy said the organization still wants to proceed with the [West Milford](#) pilot for the time being and to continue expanding into more towns, once it firms up some initial promises of new grant money to buy the additional cars.

He hopes that seniors in northern Bergen towns will be more willing to pay the additional cost of longer trips, or that community leaders can help by planning ways for seniors to save money by sharing rides.

"We only plan to go into communities where the officials want to work with us to coordinate it and to help us find the volunteers," Murthy said. "We're trying to build a sense of community with this program."

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