

Wheels of Hope gives more options for those looking for help



Social worker Amy Tuneburg with Kevin Jones, right, chairperson of the Merrimack Valley Substance Use Disorder & Criminal Justice Committee, and Luis Luna of Dracut, center, owner of Lucos Transportation, which will provide a free transportation service to those needing a ride to treatment, called Wheels of Hope. (SUN/Julia Malakie)

By **LUKE O'ROARK** | loroark@lowellsun.com | Lowell Sun

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LOWELL — For Kevin Jones, helping those effected by the opioid epidemic is personal. He lost his nephew to the epidemic four years ago and struggled his last few years while working in the Lowell Fire Department.

It's a big reason Wheels of Hope — a new transportation service to the Merrimack Valley — is such a big deal to the former firefighter.

For those struggling with substance-use disorder and looking to receive help, Wheels of Hope can provide free transportation for those struggling with opioids, alcohol or crystal meth.

“It's not just the individual that is devastated by the opioid epidemic,” said Jones, who served 25 years with the Fire Department before retiring last June. “It's entire families that are effected by the issue.”

The Merrimack Valley Project, which Jones closely works with now, in January launched Wheels of Hope, a transportation service that will provide free transportation to any individual from the Merrimack Valley who has a reserved bed at any treatment facility throughout the state.

The program is a service of the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline in coordination with city-based Lucos Transportation at 45 Dix St.

From a logistics standpoint, once a person has a reserved a bed at a treatment facility, he or she can call the helpline at 800-327-5050. Specialists are available Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., and weekends and holidays, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The line is staffed by English- and Spanish-speaking specialists, and interpreter services are readily available for other populations.

Once the call is made, a three-way call with the helpline and Lucos Transportation will occur — confirming the pickup and drop-off location for the ride. To be picked up, a person must be in a public place, such as a hospital, library, church, fire station, police station, municipal building, courthouse or transportation center. He or she will be brought directly to the treatment facility.



Right to left, social worker Amy Tuneburg with Kevin Jones, chairperson of the Merrimack Valley Substance Use Disorder & Criminal Justice Committee, and Luis Luna of Dracut, owner of Lucos Transportation, which will provide a free transportation service to those needing a ride to treatment, called Wheels of Hope. (SUN/Julia Malakie)

The program is available in the following towns and cities: Amesbury, Andover, Billerica, Boxford, Chelmsford, Dracut, Georgetown, Groveland, Haverhill, Lawrence, Littleton, Lowell, Merrimac, Methuen, Newbury, Newburyport, North Andover, Rowley, Salisbury, Tewksbury, Tyngsboro, Westford and West Newbury.

Transportation to recovery centers outside the region can be arranged as long as the ride originates in the Merrimack Valley.

Drivers for the program are trained in first aid and how to administer naloxone (or Narcan), and are committed to providing safe, confidential rides to those in need, a press release from MVP said. Social worker Amy Tuneburg said 20 people have used the service since it began. Three people used the service Wednesday, Lucos Transportation owner Luis Luna said.

“They’ve been grateful,” Tuneburg said. “As a social worker who has had the privilege of being of service to the people of the Merrimack Valley who have been battling the disease of addiction for the last 10 years, I feel personally connected.”

The service aims to close a critical gap identified by the Merrimack Valley Project in its fight against substance-use disorder in the region. It’s not just about receiving help, social worker Tuneburg said, but also how you’re going to get help.

The pilot program was modeled after the Substance Abuse Treatment Enhance Program in Hartford, Conn., that has provided rides to thousands of Connecticut residents who do not have transportation access to local or regional recovery centers.

Seeing parallels in both population and geographic area, Merrimack Valley Project leaders sought to emulate the program in the Merrimack Valley, according to a press release from MVP.

“It affects everyone in the community I work with, whether it be co-workers and clients,” Tuneburg said. “It touches everyone in some way, and that’s why it’s important to get people the transportation they need.”

Funded in the 2019 state budget, MVP leaders have then worked with the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline to launch the program, according to the press release. The Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline is the only statewide public resource for finding substance-use treatment and recovery services.

“We here at Lucos Transportation feel blessed to be given this opportunity to serve our community by providing transportation to those in need,” Jessica Mieczkowski and Luis Luna in a statement. “For the 10 years that we have been in service, our commitment is to provide confidential, safe, clean rides at an affordable price to our community.”

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