



For some, transportation makes treatment and recovery possible

Wheels of Hope service update
June 2020

Wheels of Hope provides an essential service for people in the Merrimack Valley seeking treatment, but for whom transportation is a barrier. For those who wish to access detox, residential treatment, sober housing, and medication for addiction treatment (MAT) services, Wheels of Hope can provide free transportation with just a phone call.

Wheels of Hope is a service of the Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline, the only statewide, public resource for finding licensed and approved substance use treatment and recovery services. People in the Merrimack Valley seeking treatment can call the Helpline at 800-327-5050 to arrange for transportation, in English, Spanish, and any other language. Hospitals, courts, health care providers, social service providers, and treatment centers can also use Wheels of Hope to help their clients identify treatment options and have them safely transported to the right facility for them.

Members of the Merrimack Valley Project identified the need for transportation services for people seeking detox and residential treatment services in the region, and worked to secure funding to close the transportation gap. **Funding for the pilot program, made possible by a Massachusetts legislative earmark to assess treatment-related transportation needs in the Merrimack Valley, ends on June 30, 2020.**



Despite setbacks due to COVID-19, Wheels of Hope has provided **87 rides** in about **four months of service.**



About **one-third** of all Helpline callers from the Merrimack Valley **requested a ride to treatment.**

Building awareness – and then COVID-19

Through outreach and existing relationships, word of mouth, interactions with the Helpline, and promotional materials, awareness and use of Wheels of Hope services began to build since launch in January 2020. Roughly half of riders sought treatment for opioid use, while others cited alcohol or other drugs as their primary substance of use. Ridership steadily increased in January and February.

Unfortunately, as uptake of the transportation service was increasing, COVID-19 hit Massachusetts. The transportation provider, Lucos Transportation, took precautions to keep cars clean and prevent potential transmission of the corona virus. Ridership went down as fewer people sought treatment

services and some programs limited admissions, but has steadily increased again since the initial statewide shut-down.

Expansion of transportation services

As of May 27, 2020, Wheels of Hope expanded services to provide transportation for people going into sober housing or starting medication for addiction treatment (MAT). Many people seeking MAT experience a lag in access to transportation through Medicaid, for example, and Wheels of Hope will fill that gap for up to a week. **Ridership immediately jumped with expanded services.**

Unintended positive outcomes

Wheels of Hope is grateful for the quality of service and commitment brought by the local transportation vendor, Lucos Transportation, based in Lowell. In addition to bringing business to a local, family-owned company, Wheels of Hope has created new connections between drivers, riders, and the community at large. Wheels of Hope has become recognizable to treatment providers and those they serve, and Lucos Transportation has gone above and beyond to treat their riders with respect, care, and compassion.

Impact on Providers

“Wheels of Hope has been a lifesaver, especially during the pandemic. It’s easy to use for me and for my clients. Knowing that Wheels of Hope is there relieves the anxiety and opens up options about which detox a client might go to, since rides are offered to providers across the state. **Knowing that people can get to treatment when they want it makes my job easier.** And the drivers have been great.”

- Merrimack Valley Harm Reduction Provider

“Setting up reliable transportation is a chronic challenge for clients seeking substance use treatment. Scheduling a ride for a client through Wheels of Hope is so easy. This resource also empowers clients to schedule rides themselves during times that their case manager may not be accessible. Clients experiencing homelessness are able to get rides from public pick-up points, and the staff are welcoming and supportive to clients who may be trying for treatment more than once. **This resource has taken a huge weight off of us as providers.”**

- Community Health Center Provider in the Merrimack Valley