

MTA customers rely on volunteers

By Arla Shephard Bull
Mason County Life

In the past five years, Mason Transit Authority has seen a 59 percent drop in the number of volunteers who take part in the agency's volunteer driver program.

The volunteers transport Mason County residents who are over 60 and have no alternative method of transportation to necessary medical appointments, sometimes as far as Seattle.

Many of the former volunteers have had to stop driving because they themselves have developed medical issues and become in need of the program, said Christina Kramer, outreach manager at Mason Transit.

"Even in light of all we do to support our volunteers, with luncheons, thank you cards and training, it appears that volunteerism nationally

is going down," Kramer said. "Volunteer transportation in particular is having an even harder time. There's a perceived risk taking someone into your car."

Kramer checked with other local nonprofits and groups and realized she wanted to create a way to encourage more people to volunteer around Mason County.

The first annual volunteer summit, sponsored by Mason Transit Authority and United Way of Mason County, took place Wednesday, Oct. 7, at the Mason Transit-Community Center in Shelton.

Twenty-three groups, representing nonprofits and programs as diverse as the City of Shelton's Parks and Recreation Department to the Mason County Senior Activities Association, joined together to share their need

for volunteers.

"We always need volunteers," said Kariane Cunningham, volunteer coordinator with Adopt-A-Pet in Shelton. "Even if say, they have a fear of dogs, but want to give. There is always a chore like cleaning the kennels. We have dogs that need walks all the time. There is always something."

Recruiting volunteers can be difficult because volunteering can be like a full-time job, said Cunningham, who herself is a full-time volunteer.

"It's a lot of hours," she said. "Even for myself, there's not always the time to do my job and it's a full-time volunteer job. Some people have jobs. I'm raising a kid. It's become really difficult to show the public the importance of community service. It's the hub of public service." Some organizations, such

as the Nifty Thrifty store managed by the Mason County Senior Activities Association, don't have as much trouble filling volunteer spots.

"At least 80 percent of our volunteers have been with us for at least three years," said Patti Verni, store director of Nifty Thrifty. "But I always have room for one or two new people. A number of people come and go, especially during the summer months."

The City of Shelton has volunteer opportunities with the Parks and Recreation Department and the Shelton Police Department would like to start up a volunteer program.

"We have groups that volunteer on a project-by-project basis," said Mark Ziegler, director of Parks and Recreation. "But I don't necessarily have a volunteer base dedi-



PHOTOS BY ARLA SHEPHARD BULL

Nearly two dozen organizations came together for the first annual volunteer summit sponsored by Mason Transit Authority and United Way of Mason County, Oct. 7. Organizations as diverse as Turning Pointe Domestic Violence Services to Sound Learning need more volunteers.

cated to ongoing basic work at our parks. Something as simple as weeding or pruning would free up our staff for important issues, especially liability fixes."

The Shelton Police Department could use volunteers to help map crime data or perform residential checks on homes where owners are gone on vacation, said Lt. Les Watson.

Groups like Hood Canal Kiwanis and Kristmas Town

Kiwanis also need volunteers with their community projects.

There are volunteer opportunities that match nearly anybody's interest, Kramer said, from helping the homeless at Crossroads Housing and domestic violence victims at Turning Pointe shelter to working near books at Timberland Regional Library and with adult education at Sound Learning.