CO: Calhan Connection Bringing Public Transportation to Rural El Paso County

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Oct. 19--A local nonprofit is offering Calhan residents a service they say they've never had: reliable public transportation.

Calhan Connection will allow eastern El Paso County residents to take a bus to and from the Colorado Springs area for $5 each way. The program was launched Wednesday by Envida, a nonprofit that provides transportation and home care to Colorado Springs residents who are elderly or disabled.

In the past, some programs have sporadically provided transportation for seniors. But this will be the first to serve people of all ages, said Patty Jolly, a third-generatio Calhan resident and community outreach coordinator.

"I'm very excited," she said. "Even the small mountain towns have public transportation of sorts, and we just have not -- ever."

The 14-seat bus will leave from Calhan's Community Outreach Center every Tuesday and Thursday about 7 a.m. and 1 p.m. It will stop at the Calhan and Peyton post offices, the Walmart in Falcon, two hospitals in northern Colorado Springs, and Mountain Metropolitan Transit's Voyager Parkway Transfer Center before heading bac east. Each roundtrip is expected to take about four hours, said Gail Nehls, CEO of Envida, formerly called Amblicab.

If residents live within about a mile of the route, they can request to be picked up and dropped off at their home for $1 each way, Nehls said.

Using information from the National Household Travel Survey, Envida estimates that nearly 1,700 people in eastern El Paso County don't have vehicles to fulfill basic needs, such as going to the grocery store or seeing a doctor.

"We've heard reports from people that reside in Calhan that it might take $80 one way to take an Uber or Lyft or zTrip (taxi)," Nehls said. "They just can't afford that."

To help pay for the bus service in its first year, El Paso County has allotted roughly $37,000 -- money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that's distributed by the county through the Community Development Block Grant Program. The U.S. Department of Transportation's Rural Transportation Assistance Program has contributed about $25,000, and Colorado's Division of Transit & Rail is providing a new wheelchair-accessible bus, Nehls said.

If it's successful, Envida hopes to establish another bus route to serve residents in Yoder and Ellicott, she said.

Transportation has become an unmet need for many seniors, particularly in rural areas, who wish to "age in place" instead of moving to an assisted living facility or a nursing home, said Pat Ellis, president and CEO of Springs-based Silver Key Senior Services.

"It's difficult to get new routes funded," said Ellis, who praised the new program.

Others, too, are expected to benefit from Calhan Connection.

Some residents only drive on rural roads and feel uncomfortable driving into the city, Jolly said. The community outreach center also often hears from residents who need a ride back into town after a medical procedure.

"They have to depend on friends and neighbors," Jolly said.

Teenagers and young adults in the area might need transportation to workplaces, she said.

"Our job-seekers in the Calhan area will greatly benefit from this," said Becca Tonn, a spokeswoman for the Pikes Peak Workforce Center, which has career counselors that serve the town's residents.

The need for public transportation in the county is expected to increase in the coming decades as population growth in Colorado Springs spills over into rural areas, said David Krutsinger, director of the Colorado Department of Transportation's Division of Transit and Rail.

"A lot of young people are moving to the cities, and that means that folks are retiring in homesteads and farm properties. They need the support," he said.

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