

## Getting new wheels for meals

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In recent years, the team at Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland noticed a weak link in its operation — the wheels.

Many of the nonprofit's 28 vehicles were old, and expensive to run and maintain. The organization was able to replace two each year, meaning that the oldest were about 14 years old. They had poor gas mileage and lacked the ideal temperature control features for food delivery.

With each new vehicle and maintenance cost, "we were pretty much putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound," said Silas Fuller, distribution manager for Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland.

But Saturday will begin a new era for the wheels of the operation, when four new vans from PHH Arval make their debut.

The nonprofit began looking into fleet management about a year and a half ago. It was about ready to contract with Enterprise for this service when another option arose — Sparks-based PHH.

Coincidentally, PHH staffers had been volunteering with Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland for 25 years through the Lunch Bunch program, in which employees at a volunteer company take turns using their lunch hour to deliver meals.

"After having them help us 25 years, it seemed only appropriate," said Jan Heifner, deputy executive director for the organization.

The new partnership allows Meals on Wheels to lease, rather than buy, its vehicles. The organization previously had to shop around for two new vans each year, spending more than was necessary on a less-than-ideal product.

It will now lease four new vans per year to replace old ones. The fleet will comprise newer, more efficient and more easily maintained vehicles, with better gas mileage and more efficient ways to charge the electrical appliances inside. The new wheels are customized with separate temperature-controlled compartments for hot and cold food, so volunteers can deliver to more people in more locations.

The total on-the-road cost of each vehicle will be about 40 percent less than that of the old fleet.

And by using PHH Arval's fleet management services, the nonprofit's staff will spend less of its time on billing. Dozens of maintenance and fuel invoices will be replaced by one bill from PHH Arval.

Overall, the new arrangement will allow Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland to provide 1,000 more meals per year, Heifner estimated. The nonprofit declined to disclose the cost of the contract with PHH Arval.

While Meals on Wheels programs exist in many places, each is an independent organization requiring its own structure.

Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland is one of the largest programs in the country. It delivered more than 1 million meals to home-bound clients from July 1, 2012, to June 30, 2013. More than a third of those meals went to people over the age of 85. More than 85 percent of the organization's clients are 65 or more years old.

About 63 percent of the organization's clients are in Baltimore or Baltimore County, but the heating and cooling compartments of the new vans should allow for longer drives, so that volunteers will be able to deliver food in more locations. Each of the new vans also holds up to twice as much food compared to the old vehicles.

The nonprofit has a paid staff of about 100, but relies heavily on its force of 2,800 volunteers.

In addition to meals, it provides volunteer companions, grocery delivery and safety reassurance – volunteers alert a client’s emergency contacts if he or she fails to answer the door, or shows signs of needing help. This has saved many lives, said Heifner.

“We’re more than a meal,” she said. “It’s really important for us to watch every penny.”



*PHOTO CAPTION: One of the new Meals on Wheels vans provided by PHH Arval was on display Thursday outside PHH headquarters in Sparks. Rich Zambroski, left, PHH's truck engineering manager, showed off the vehicle's features while Silas Fuller, right, distribution manager for Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland, demonstrated how the van can be plugged into power at the loading dock to keep the food refrigeration and heating elements running while the engine is off. (Maximilian Franz/ The Daily Record).*