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Vanpools let riders commute stress free

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Northwest Guardian

Published: 01:36PM September 12th, 2013

Commuting on Interstate 5 can be awful.

That's not a revelation to anyone who uses the key artery to travel to and from work during rush hours. Those commuters who work on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, whose units and staff agencies form the second largest employer in Washington state, routinely share in frustrations that arise from heavy traffic and security checks.

The revelation is that you — service member or government employee — can avoid it.

The vanpooling program at JBLM is convenient and affordable.

As in free, said Kelly Rosacrans, one of the employee transit coordinators at JBLM. The Department of Defense picks up the tab, as long as the vanpool transports you for more than 50 percent of your commute.

"We have somewhere between 70 and 80 vanpools," Rosacrans said. "I can usually set people up with vans that might fit their schedule."

That's not always possible, Rosacrans said. When that happens, there's another option — find four of your coworkers and start your own.

To join a vanpool

The state's online vanpool scheduling system, rideshareonline.com, guides you through creating an account, finding vanpools in your area traveling to your workplace and linking up with the drivers. You can tailor the search to your schedule.

Once you've found a vanpool, there's paperwork to apply to receive up to \$240 in DOD vouchers to pay your share.

Sustainability Outreach Coordinator Miriam Villacian said that's the time to call Rosacrans or her counterpart, Makieda Hart.

"From there, you can smooth out some of the wrinkles that rideshare doesn't address," Villacian said.

Or you can just call them first, Rosacrans said. Because of service members' schedules and the paperwork involved, it sometimes is easier that way.

"It can come across as very daunting, but it isn't," Rosacrans said. "It's pretty simple."

To start a vanpool

It gets a little more complicated when it comes to starting one, but that didn't stop Air Force Capt. Michael Wall.

The logistics officer with the 627th Logistics Readiness Squadron lives near Olympia. He joined a vanpool in 2012, and people noticed it dropped him off so close to work and on time.

He talked to a few others in his office and found out four others lived within a few miles of him. Five is the minimum number needed to establish a vanpool.

The scheduling aspect is one reason why Villacian encourages service members to form pools within their units.

Working with Rosacrans and Thurston County's Intercity Transit, Wall said he was up and running with a Dodge Caravan in two months. That was after a background check, a defensive driving course with the transit agency and some other paperwork.

Wall is one of two pool drivers and also helps handle the bookkeeping.

"It's not rocket science," Wall said. "Can you keep track of who rides with you and your miles every day? It's that easy."

What if?

But emergencies happen, the kind that don't involve bringing four or more coworkers with you in a van.

Not to worry, Villacian said. Each transit agency has an emergency ride home program that allows a vanpool member to call a taxi. For Pierce Transit, the program has a cap of six emergency calls per calendar year.

Save the receipt and turn it in to the ETC to get reimbursed, Rosacrans said.

Wall said Intercity Transit takes it a step further — if an emergency happens and one of the drivers must take the van somewhere, the remaining riders can call Intercity Transit to arrange a ride home.

No matter what, Wall said, the program makes the commute a lot easier to handle. On the days he doesn't drive through the slow crawl to JBLM, he reads a book. "Especially on Fridays on I-5," Wall said. "No one wants to be in that."

To get involved

To find a vanpool that works for your schedule, go to rideshareonline.com or call Kelly Rosacrans at 253-966-1776. Riders usually can test ride a couple of times to see if the vanpool works for you.

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