

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Drivers volunteer for veterans

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By HAYS BURCHFIELD - Bulletin Staff Writer

Ethelena Cabiness and James H. Hunt of Martinsville recently were honored for their years of service driving thousands of miles transporting hundreds of local patients to the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Salem.

In February, Hunt received the Disabled American Veterans National Commander's Award in recognition of his completing 100,000 miles as a volunteer driver for the Disabled American Veterans Transportation Network.

Cabiness received a certificate and pin on May 2, 2004, from Stephen L. Lemons, director of the Salem medical center, recognizing her for completing 75,000 miles and 1,750 hours of service.

Hunt started driving sick veterans in 1997, but a medical condition forced him to stop driving last year. Cabiness started doing all the driving. She now drives a van-load of people to and from Salem every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and Hunt rides along in the front passenger seat.

Martinsville resident Frank Pulliam, a Korean War veteran who served in the Air Force from 1953 to 1957, is one of the patients Cabiness drives to the Salem VA Medical Center. Pulliam has cancer and does not own a vehicle. He said Hunt and Cabiness have taken him for medical help more than 100 times since 1997.

"I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for them," Pulliam said. "I'm almost blind, and I have cancer. If it weren't for them taking me to the VA, I just wouldn't be able to go to the doctor. They take me all the time."

Pulliam said Henry County and Martinsville used to have five people who drove patients to Salem, but Cabiness now is the only driver. He and Cabiness said there is a need for local volunteers to drive patients to Salem.

"Sometimes we have to turn down some people because we don't have room for them," Cabiness said. "We usually have more than five people on each trip, and the van only holds a maximum of seven."

The van they use is a white Ford Windstar owned by the Martinsville Paul R. Shorter Chapter 52 of the Disabled American Veterans. Cabiness said the VA pays for the van's gas, upkeep, tags and inspection sticker.

Sam Riddle of Martinsville is another veteran who rides with Cabiness and Hunt to the Salem hospital. Riddle was in the Army from 1944 to 1946 and has ridden with the two for three years.

"They're good drivers, and I appreciate it," Riddle said. "They're mighty good people. They care about you. They do what they can for you the best way they know how." Hunt, who served in the Army from 1962 to 1968, said he started volunteering to drive to Salem after he went on disability.

"I just needed something to pass away the time," Hunt said.

Cabiness said she got interested in volunteering to drive after seeing Hunt do it. "I realized that the veterans really needed some help, and I really enjoy it," Cabiness said. "I feel like I've done something to help somebody. And I enjoy the people I carry. People really look forward to going with us, and they say they couldn't do without us. We just have a joyful time in that car ride to Salem."

She said the trip to and from Salem, which is more than 150 miles, is a great time for her and Hunt to get to know their passengers.

"We learn all about their lives," Cabiness said. "We learn their dos and don'ts. We really get close to them."

People "can't give them enough praise," Pulliam said.

If there are veterans in the area who need a ride to the VA Medical Center in Salem, Cabiness said they should contact Michael Giles at the hospital. He will give their names and address to her and Hunt.

Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer driver should call Giles at (540) 982-2463 ext. 1164.