

Not-for-profit expands deliveries by bike

by Theresa Wallace

On a furnace-hot June day, cyclist Denise Inglis was waiting in claustrophobic traffic for a light to change when a tough-looking construction worker in the truck right beside her rolled down his window.

"I was surrounded by cars," Inglis says, "and when he put down his window, I thought he was going to heckle us and tell us to get off the road, which is what you expect sometimes when riding in heavy traffic downtown. But instead he said, 'Way to go, you're doing a really tough job.'"

Inglis was delivering Meals on Wheels in downtown Ottawa with Marie Paquette. When the two cyclists volunteered at the same time last spring, they split one car route, which consists of 12 to 16 deliveries of a hot lunch, fruit and dessert.

"But delivering solo involved constantly searching for a safe place to lock up and then hauling all the meals up to whatever apartment we were delivering to so nothing would get stolen while we were gone," Inglis says. "We decided to adopt the system used in car deliveries, in which one driver and one "runner" team up. We now do the whole route together – one of us stays with the bikes while the other delivers the individual meal."



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Meals on Wheels is a not-for-profit organization that delivers prepared meals to seniors and adults who are ill, disabled or convalescing. Each Meals on Wheels organization in Canada is independent with its own administration and funding. Jill Dodd, coordinator of volunteers for Meals on Wheels/La Popote roulante, which serves central Ottawa, says until this past spring, they'd never had more than a couple of cyclists delivering at any one time. But now they have five; although, all but one of them will take a break from delivering by bike for at least three months during the winter. Dodd recently purchased more quick-release bike racks and large, portable plastic containers to carry meals. Inglis, a Can-Bike 2 instructor with the City of Ottawa, has offered to train other cycling volunteers. Dodd admits five biking volunteers doesn't seem like many, considering that in the past year hundreds of volunteers delivered close to 66,000 Meals on Wheels meals in Ottawa. Still, she's determined to expand the program.

"Saving the gas allowance we pay our volunteers is great," Dodd says. "But what's more significant is that attracting volunteers who deliver meals on bikes is a way to practise environmental sustainability while drawing a younger demographic into the program."

Dodd says she's particularly inspired by a Meals on Wheels group in Montreal at Santropol Roulant, located on the Plateau in Montreal; a third of its 60 volunteers are on bicycles, while most of the others walk or bus their routes. In another Meals on Wheels program serving parts of Vancouver and Richmond, eight out of 60 deliverers use bikes.

Inglis says it takes her and Paquette close to two hours to complete their deliveries. She estimates they do the route at least as fast as it could be completed in a car.

"We're doing something good for the environment, getting exercise, enjoying each other's company and getting a chance to socialize with the people receiving the meals," Inglis says. "All our clients know we deliver their meals by bike, and they think that's pretty cool." 🍵