

Softball marathon to benefit We CARE

By RUSS O'REILLY
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This summer, local children facing lifelong disabilities will again benefit from a softball marathon, but it will be held by a different organization.

With Easter Seals no longer providing medical rehabilitation services at 501 Valley View Blvd., We CARE is going to run a softball marathon in August to benefit the children just as Easter Seals had done each summer in the past.

The We CARE Foundation is a nonprofit foundation administered by the Central Pennsylvania Community Foundation. The We CARE Foundation was created to support the programs providing pediatric rehabilitation services at 501 Valley View Blvd.

One hundred percent of the funds raised through the efforts of the We CARE Foundation will be used in Blair County for programs being provided by Tyrone Hospital, also a nonprofit organization, Tyrone Regional CEO Steve

Gildea said.

Hospital contracts with ProCare Therapy to provide physical, occupational and speech therapy services both at Tyrone Hospital and now at We CARE Therapy Services.

"The prior tenant (Easter Seals) of the 501 Valley View Blvd. building failed to properly maintain the facility for many years. Everything from the access road, swimming pool, playground and landscaping, to simple maintenance like painting and repairs were neglected," Gildea wrote. "Funds are needed to catch up on this neglected maintenance and also to modernize the facility. In addition, the prior tenant took most of the valuable equipment needed to provide the therapy services."

In January, the Blair Recreation Commission received a request letter from Easter Seals to use Seitz Field as it always has for the softball marathon fundraiser in the summer.

However, at that time, it had been announced that Easter Seals was stop-

ping therapeutic services at the 501 Valley View Blvd. location.

Mike Hofer, executive director of the commission, said he reached out to the Easter Seals representative who signed the request letter to see whether the organization was still requesting the field despite no longer functioning in the county.

He said the organization's response was the softball marathon would not be held, but Easter Seals requested Hofer to hold the dates for another organization from Hastings that Easter Seals supported.

Hofer received a request from We CARE Therapy for the same date.

He took the decision to the commission's board, which granted use of the field to We CARE and denied it to the other organization.

"We want to make sure money raised is benefiting kids here in Blair County," Hofer said.



Mirror photo by Gary M. Baranec

Mark Ledford, the criminal justice and first response program coordinator at YTI Career Institute in Altoona, demonstrates how the shooting simulator works.

YTI adds shooting simulator to aid student training

By SEAN SAURO
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Aiming down the sights of a laser-tipped pistol, Mark Ledford pulled a trigger as numerous dangerous criminals appeared in a small room at the YTI Career Institute in Altoona.

Ledford, the criminal justice and first response program coordinator, was showcasing a new technology — a light-based shooting simulator — that the school purchased as a firearms instruction tool.

"We stress hands-on training," Ledford said, explaining few like simulators exist in the area.

The simulator runs disk-based programs depicting different law enforcement scenarios. Using a decommissioned, laser-tipped pistol, students view the scenarios on a screen and choose when to shoot. A sensor on the screen responds to the pistol's laser tip.

During a demonstration, Ledford showed a video protest. In one scenario, the protesters threw water balloons. In another, they fired guns, which should prompt students to fire the laser pistol, Ledford said.

Another simulation showed drawings of three individuals — some with guns and some without. Ledford said students are timed and are supposed to shoot only the drawings depicting threats.

"A traditional video game shows that you have to shoot everyone. We want our students to be able to recognize threats," Ledford said. "The tendency is to shoot. We are trying to teach the students that is not always the case."

Ledford said before the purchase of the simulator, which he said likely cost between \$7,000-\$10,000, the program didn't offer much firearms training.

In the future, additional software can be purchased to add to the simulator experience, Ledford said, explaining some software includes voice recognition programs, allowing students to respond to on-screen actors.

He said with heightened scrutiny on law enforcement as a result of recent shooting incidents, familiarizing students with firearms is valuable to the criminal justice program.

"The tendency is to shoot. We are trying to teach the students that is not always the case."

Instructor
Mark Ledford

The simulator was installed about a month ago, and instructor Joe Thomas said he and other instructors have been running through the simulations to better understand the programs before they are introduced to students.

"The first time you do it, because it's a simulator, it is a little weird," Thomas said, adding that though the scenarios are fake, they should help students respond in real situations.

Thomas said shortly after he went through firearms training, a situation arose when he had to pull his pistol. He said at that time, he was unsure if he was ready.

The simulations should help students in these types of situations, he said.

"It just shows them when to shoot and when not to shoot," he said.

Ledford said using a real, decommissioned firearm also has its benefits — students can become familiar with the weapon and its weight.

"We got a lot of students who have never held a firearm," he said.

Eventually, Ledford said he'd like to invite local law enforcement personnel to use the simulator for training, too.

Ledford said YTI's program runs on a 21-month cycle with the next cycle beginning in May. This next cycle will be the first to utilize the simulator as part of the curriculum, as well as iPads and other electronic-based curriculum.

However, Ledford said some students have had a chance to run through simulations.

"It's interesting to see how they react, when they shoot and when they don't shoot," he said. "The simulator is something I felt would be a good tool for our students."

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NUMBERS: One-way tickets still \$29

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"We want to remind people of the airport and that they can fly to Pittsburgh and beyond," Cestari said, echoing the billboard message.

Beyond the billboards, Cestari said plans call for the use of print, broadcasting and online resources, as part of a "much bigger integrated partnership program."

In comparison, Sun Air's immediate predecessor, Silver Airways of Fort Lauderdale — which served the airport and provided flights to Washington, D.C., between August 2012 and November — reportedly tried to entice local passengers through online booking websites and pop-up advertisements.

Cestari said Sun Air has to use a more comprehensive approach to marketing its flights because it's an independent company that has no affiliation with a major airline and its promotional program.

Recognizing that independence, Sun Air's plan calls for interaction with local business organizations and specific businesses that may be able to attract flyers in both directions. There are bed-and-breakfasts within easy distance of the Altoona-Blair County Airport that could draw more clients from Pittsburgh by enticing them to fly, Cestari said.

In addition, Pittsburgh International Airport, through its PIT Connector program, has shown support for Sun Air's efforts by setting up a dedicated gate for Sun Air's passengers, putting them within easy walking distance of other gates.

"They're helping fund part of promotional effort," Cestari said.

Pittsburgh airport personnel have also spoken of promotional efforts to entice flyers to shop at its Airmall featuring 37 vendors as listed on the airport's website.

The changing picture under Sun Air

Joe Hurd, president and CEO of the Blair County Chamber of Commerce, said that Sun Air's efforts, along with the hiring of Plessinger, have been noticed.

"I think both have been good injections of enthusiasm and commitment, some-



Mirror photo by J.D. Cavrich

A billboard advertising the Altoona-Blair County Airport is part of an effort to build ridership with the new Pittsburgh flights.

A closer look at ridership

Passenger numbers increase after slow start

Month	Total passengers	Daily average
December 2014	256	8
January 2015	186	6
February 2015	129	4
March 2015	364	12

Source: Altoona-Blair County Airport

thing that didn't always exist in the past, at least to the degree as it does now," Hurd said.

Airport authority members were discouraged and critical of the daily flight service that Silver Airways provided between the Altoona-Blair County and the Washington-Dulles airports until Nov. 30. Silver had a reputation for canceling flights and leaving passengers in need of alternative transportation to make connecting flights.

Silver continues to serve the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport, where airport authority members remain concerned about their airport's dropping passenger numbers and canceled

flights. For the authority's April meeting, a representative of Silver Airways was expected to attend. But he didn't make it because his flight was canceled.

Meanwhile, the Altoona-Blair County Airport Authority members will be keeping a close eye on passenger numbers. For their March meeting, Plessinger presented a chart detailing the number of flights and passengers. He said he will be updating it monthly.

Under the Essential Air Service program which provides federal subsidy in support of passenger service, the Altoona-Blair County Airport needs to have at least 10 departing passengers a day. With passenger numbers increasing,

Plessinger told the authority he didn't think that would be an issue.

What could be an issue is a rule that surfaced last year when the U.S. Department of Transportation indicated that it would not award future EAS subsidy in excess of \$200 per passenger. To refrain from exceeding that level, the Altoona-Blair County Airport needs to average 33 passengers per day.

Cestari said his company remains committed.

"The biggest challenge we have is that people seem to have forgotten about the (Altoona-Blair County) airport," Cestari said.

Survey could be revealing

Hurd said the Chamber's transportation committee is interested in an updated survey that might provide some insight into the use of air travel by local businesses and if Sun Air needs to make any changes that would accommodate specific needs.

"The one thing that impressed me most about Sun Air is their willingness to listen to the needs of the community ... and right out of the box, they've been very positive and really seem to want to provide a valuable service," Hurd said.

"But the verdict remains out as to whether this new arrangement will be more conducive for travelers. ... People will probably still drive to State College, depending on where they're flying to. Or they may still drive to the Pittsburgh airport," Hurd said.

"Businesses may load up a van of eight and drive to the BWI airport."

Since introducing flights in December, Sun Air has kept its ticket price at \$29 for a one-way and \$58 for round-trip tickets. And at this time, all bookings have to be made through Sun Air's website, independent of online bookings sites for air travel beyond Pittsburgh.

That will be changing in mid-May, Cestari said, after those online reservation systems are updated.

"They have all the information now, so it should be possible in about two to three weeks," Cestari said.

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