

Running for more than the finish line

Via employees and people with disabilities want to participate in today's races.

By Tim Shoemaker

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Jolene Fetherman and Megan Sefcik are not card-carrying members of the local running community.

Fetherman's previous running experience consists of going from home to first base in softball. Sefcik once ran a 5K, took the lead, but watched as almost everyone in the race passed her.

But Fetherman and Sefcik are exactly the kind of runners Via, the Bethlehem-based non-profit service agency, is looking for this morning when it sponsors the second annual Lehigh Valley Hospital Marathon and a series of other events between Allentown and Bethlehem.

The marathon, which serves as a qualifier for next year's Boston Marathon, starts at 6:45 a.m. at Ninth and Hamilton Streets in Allentown, and after winding through Bethlehem and other points in the Lehigh Valley, finishes at Riverside Park in Easton.

The Relay Team race also starts at Ninth and Hamilton and goes off at 7 a.m. Approximately 300 walkers will participate in a 5K event, which starts at 10 a.m. under the Main Street Bridge in Bethlehem.

Via Communications Director Lisa Walkiewicz said that more than 1,150 runners and more than 358 volunteers will aid in the fundraiser.

Approximately 253 of those 1,150 will run the full marathon and 20-mile race, and more than 900 others will participate in the Relay Team race, in which each five-person team will run between 4.5 and 6.5 miles. The first finishers should reach Riverside Park between 8:30 and 9 a.m. Another 300 walkers will participate in a 5K walk, which starts at 10 a.m. under the Main Street Bridge in Bethlehem.

Last year, the race made more than \$30,000. This year, Walkiewicz said that the number is already higher. She said that fans interested in watching the race can find a spot by looking at Via's Web site, <http://www.vianet.org/marathon>, and that donations can be made year-round.

"The most important thing it does is raise money for our program," Walkiewicz said. "We have a significant need to raise money, about 30 percent of our overall budget every year. This is a great way for us to get our name out in the community and make more people aware of us."

The Dashing Dems, a team consisting of Bethlehem mayor John Callahan, Lehigh County executive Don Cunningham, 133rd District Representative Joe Brennan, State Supreme Court Judge Jack Panella and Assistant City of Bethlehem Solicitor Joe Kelly, registered this week.



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Walkiewicz is counting on the race to have not only star power like the Dashing Dems and the serious runners, but also the enthusiasm of people like Fetherman and Sefcik, Via employees who race on different teams, but will run together along the same 5-mile stretch. Not for the love of running, but for the love of helping.

Fetherman, a Portland native and Pen Argyl High graduate, handed out water last year to the runners. This year, she's changing places.

"I'm running because I volunteered last year," she said. "It was awe-inspiring. I wanted to be a part of it. It was amazing to see what people have to physically go through. A lot of people don't just do it for themselves. They're also behind the mission. The fact that they would put themselves through to help an agency like us was just amazing."

Sefcik has been with Via for less than a year, so she didn't participate in last year's event. But the Allentown resident said she won't be intimidated by being in the same race with serious runners. This race is definitely not about the destination. It's about the journey.

"We're running for the cause," she said. "Our goal is just to finish."

"I'd say that the most interesting thing about this is all the reasons why people are running," Walkiewicz said, handing out registration packets and T-shirts in the VIA office Friday afternoon. "We have individuals because their child received services from us. Or they work with individuals with disabilities every day. We have one team whose every member has a disability."

Fetherman told the story of a co-worker at Via who has bad knees and no running experience, but has been training hard for three months just to get in shape for the race.

"If I could make a suggestion to people, it would be to at least come out and volunteer," Fetherman said. "If not this year, next year so that they could have the same experience I did the first year. I guarantee that once they volunteer, they will get involved."

Tim Shoemaker is a freelance writer.