Blount County Community Action Agency’s Senior Miles (SMiles) program has received a $4,000 award from the U.S. Administration for Community Living-funded Aging Network Volunteer Resource Center. It is one of six awards as part of a national competition to recognize and support the work that trained volunteer teams are playing in communities across the country in supporting older adults.

“The teams that were selected help demonstrate what a difference a group of empowered, organized and driven volunteers can make,” said Tom Endres, director of the Aging Network Volunteer Resource Center. “More Aging Network organizations are turning to volunteer-led teams to create and maintain or expand needed services in their communities when funding diminishes or runs out.” Since SMiles program’s launch on Oct. 1, 2013, local seniors have received more than 4,000 rides from the-more-than-50 volunteer drivers.

SMiles serves those who are age 60-plus, do not drive, are ambulatory and in need of reliable, safe rides for essential trips. Seniors or their families and friends can purchase a designated number of $6 round-trip rides in advance with an annual membership fee of $25. Memberships can be given as gifts or rides can be prepaid for a loved one.

To be considered for the awards, volunteer teams from across the country submitted stories detailing how the team directly contributed to the organization’s mission, how volunteer team members benefitted from their service experience and how the team made a measurable difference in their community.

Volunteers vital

“Volunteers have always played a critical role at Area Agencies on Aging and throughout the Aging Network,” said Sandy Markwood, CEO, National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. “With the growth of volunteer teams taking on lead roles, agencies will be better equipped to tackle the challenges of serving our nation’s growing aging population.”

“I just find it incredibly rewarding for our volunteers to be recognized,” said Joani Shaver, director of the Blount County Office on Aging. “It’s so exciting. It just proves we’re onto a good thing here in Blount County.”

During 2015, SMiles will concentrate on financial sustainability. “Next year, we hope to be able to continue what we’re doing and maybe expand the program if we get enough volunteers to expand our hours or destinations. We’re right in the middle of designing a fundraiser for next spring so we can raise more of the money locally, and we don’t have to depend on other entities to keep our program going.”

SMiles volunteers are screened and trained before being accepted as drivers. They use their own vehicles to provide rides and can receive either gas reimbursement or IRS tax-deduction documentation, if preferred. Those wanting to volunteer, who are over the age of 21 with valid driver’s licenses and have proof of insurance, can call 865-724-1331.