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The Need for Wheels

Warren Peascoe, Vienna, West Virginia

My wife and I had just testified at an EPA hearing. As I approached the minivan for the two-hour drive home, I noticed a puddle under the engine. Because I use a power wheelchair, I could not slide under the car to look for a leak or sample the liquid. I began to worry what would happen if the van—which is modified with a ramp, hand controls and rotating front seats so that I can transfer easily into the driver's seat—would not start. How would we get home? How could we transport me and my chair?

Since contracting polio at 4½, I have walked with braces and crutches. In high school my parents put hand controls on the family car, and I got my driver's license. My first car was a graduation present from college. It allowed me to attend graduate school, go on dates, court and marry my wife, get a job, and raise two sons. I was independent. I was mobile with my braces and crutches and, when needed, could use multiple modes of public transportation: taxis, buses, trains and airplanes.

Deciding where to store my forearm crutches has always been a problem. My first car was a two-door and had bench seats. I simply opened the door and put them on the floor of the back seat. My next car was a four-door but still had a bench seat up front. I could store the crutches on the floor of the front seat just behind my feet. Then came bucket seats. Luckily, there was room between the side of the seat and the door of the car to store the crutches. There is no convenient place to store crutches in the minivan. I keep a pair secured by seatbelt across the back seat for emergency use.

Hand controls are cleverly designed so that an able-bodied person can also drive the vehicle. There are two basic types of hand controls. Both clamp to the steering column of the vehicle. I use "right angle" hand controls. I push a lever forward and a rod pushes the brake pedal. I move the lever downward and a series of gears push the gas pedal. The other is called a "push pull" control. The brake operates the same, but the gas pedal is pushed through a series of gears by pulling the lever.

All the rental cars I've used over the years had "push pull" hand controls. On several rentals, when the lever was pushed to put on the brake, it also pushed the gas pedal causing the vehicle to accelerate. I always check the operation of strange hand controls before I start driving.

On newer models, it is more difficult to clamp the hand controls to the steering column. Many new cars have a shroud around the steering column, and many



Minivan with folding ramp extended. The driver's seat is turned so that I can transfer into it from my chair.

continued on page 4

car rentals companies do not want to install hand controls because it may damage the shroud.

Vehicle adaptive equipment can be very expensive and is generally not covered by medical insurance policies. Over the years, the cost for hand controls, unlike

computers, has gone up. The last time I had hand controls installed, the installer had to be certified and required documentation that I was trained to use the controls even though I had over forty years of experience. New vehicle rebates for adaptive equipment from manufacturers, tax deductions for medical expenses, and veteran's benefits may be of some help; however, many people are priced out of equipment that could change their lives.

When I retired about 15 years ago, PPS forced me to transition first to a

scooter, and now to a power wheelchair. With my wife's help, we considered several options to transport my scooter or power chair. Currently I use a Braun minivan conversion which has a folding ramp and lowers the van. Both of my front seats turn so that I can transfer and either drive or ride as a passenger.

At cardiac rehabilitation, I met a gentleman who was blind who used the local para-transit bus. He would call the bus when his treatment was finished and wait for it to take him home. He needed

to arrange for transportation one to two days in advance. The bus would pick him up within an hour of the scheduled time. I thought this required a lot of waiting and great patience on his part.

I preferred having my own transportation in order to go when and where I wanted with no waiting and no need to schedule my trips. In addition, I found out that it takes about three weeks to get approved to use the para-transit system.

When we finally got home after the EPA testimony, we stopped at an auto dealership to get the leak checked out. It turns out the leak was in the cooling system. They did not have the time or parts to make the repair that day, so they filled the radiator and gave us a gallon of water. We nervously drove home. I later had the van repaired locally.

Fortunately, the van has always remained drivable, even when it has needed repairs. I don't know what I would do if we were away from home and the van broke down and was not drivable. How to transport the power wheelchair and myself home remains a question.

I decided it was time to look into para-transit. I called our transit authority (bus station), and they referred me to ADARIDE. Once eligibility is established, the transit authority can provide transportation in a vehicle with a lift. They can pick you up from home and transport you to any location in their service area. The authority does require advance notification. They will send the para-vehicle within an hour of the scheduled time and only charge up to twice the normal bus rate. I decided to apply right away, so that if I needed to use it, I would not have to wait for approval. One can apply by calling 887-232-7433 or visiting www.adaride.com.

Para-transit service, required by the ADA, is available for people who cannot use fixed-route bus or train service. In general, para-transit service must be provided within 3/4 of a mile of a bus route or rail station, at the same



To operate the hand controls, a lever is pushed forward to engage the brake and down for the accelerator.

hours and days, for no more than twice the regular fixed-route fare. It is also available to people who have a specific disability that prevents them from traveling to a boarding location or from a disembarking location. Distance, terrain, weather or architectural barriers (lack of curb cuts or sidewalks) may form a basis for eligibility. For example, a person who walks with a cane and would need to travel 3/4 mile to the bus route but cannot walk that great a distance (even if only in winter), may be eligible. ADARIDE is the agency that determines eligibility.

I phoned ADARIDE and a very nice person guided me through the application process in order to make sure I met the eligibility requirements for para-transit. Support forms from a health professional are also required. After about three weeks, I received the notification that I was eligible for para-transit. The next step was to go down to the transit authority and get a picture ID, which will allow me to use para-transit anywhere in the country where it is available.

Because it takes a few weeks to get approval, I recommend that anyone with a mobility impairment in an area with bus service check with their local transit authority to see if they qualify for para-transit. Let ADARIDE do their job to determine eligibility.

“Change, caused by the loss of ability, happens. I may not like it, but polio and PPS has taught me to be adaptable.”

Change, caused by the loss of ability, happens. I may not like it, but polio and PPS has taught me to be adaptable. Things I could do yesterday, I may not be able to do today. And things I can do today, I may not be able to do tomorrow. Advanced planning can take the sting out of forced change. ■

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