

Recommended Safe Procedures for Transporting People who use Wheelchairs

The safe transportation of all of the individuals who we support happens every day. But even if we succeed 99% of the time in providing safe transportation, we have not really succeeded at all. This is especially crucial in transporting people who use wheelchairs. They are especially vulnerable in accidents. With a bit of planning and preparation, we can make this process much safer.

Safe Vehicles

Providers are encouraged to schedule regular inspections of the vehicles which are used to transport people who use wheelchairs. In addition to standard vehicle inspections which might include testing the brakes, the lights, and other components of the vehicle, the inspection should also include those features which are specific to accommodating wheelchairs. They would include the following:

- There are sufficient wheelchair tie downs to accommodate the maximum number of people who use wheelchairs who would be transported at one time
- All of the tie downs are in good working order
- The floor area of the vehicle where the tie downs are affixed is clean and clear of obstructions
- There are sufficient shoulder harnesses to accommodate all the people who are being transported
- All the shoulder harnesses are in good working order
- The wheelchair lift mechanism is in good working order
- The safety gate on the lift platform automatically deploys when the lift is engaged.
- The safety gate retracts when the lift is level to the ground
- The vehicle emits a warning sound when the lift is engaged
- The parking brake works
- The manual back up system for the lift is in good working order

Safe wheelchairs

It is important that the wheelchairs that people are using when being transported are in good repair.

Parts to check:

The frame of the wheelchair is intact, has no cracks or missing screws, bolts, or other hardware

- The brakes are in good working order
- For power chairs, the mechanism to power up and power down the chair works correctly
- The controls are adapted so that the individual and/or staff cannot be accidentally power up the wheelchair

- Safety belts are in good working order.

Safe Procedures

Staff who are involved in transportation should all be trained in the correct procedures for transporting people who use wheelchairs. Here is a checklist you can use:

Loading passengers

- Park the vehicle in a safe location for loading, unloading passengers. Avoid hills, ditches, uneven terrain. Be mindful of traffic. Insure that there is plenty of room to operate the lift and safely maneuver the wheelchairs on and off the lift. If the vehicle is a rear loading vehicle, be certain to allow a lot of room at the rear of the vehicle
- Engage the emergency brake on the vehicle
- Deploy and lower the lift until it is level to the ground
- Assist the person to maneuver the wheelchair onto the lift platform. If the vehicle is a side loading van, they should be facing away from the vehicle. If the vehicle is a rear loading van, they should be facing towards the vehicle
- Power down the wheelchair, and deploy the brakes on the wheelchair
- Use the lift platform safety strap
- Stand next to the lift and activate the lift mechanism
- Make certain that the safety gate on the lift platform engages to insure that the wheelchair cannot roll off the lift
- After the lift is fully elevated, go into the vehicle and assist the person to maneuver the wheelchair into the correct position in the van.
- Insert the four tie down mechanisms to the fixture on the van floor. Make certain that they are secured, and locked in
- The two front straps should be even with the front wheels, and to the outside of them.
- The two rear straps should be between the two rear wheels
- Secure each strap to the frame of the wheelchair. Most wheelchairs will have transportation hooks built in. Do not affix the straps to the wheels, footrests, or any part of the chair which can come off
- Once all the straps are affixed, pull them tight
- Deploy the shoulder strap. Even if an individual has a seatbelt for the wheelchair, this is not designed to provide safety in a vehicle accident, you must use the vehicle shoulder strap

Unloading passengers

- Deploy the lift
- Detach the shoulder strap and tie downs
- Assist the person onto the lift platform
- For a side loading vehicle, insure that the wheelchair is facing out, for a rear loader, the wheelchair should be facing towards the front of the vehicle.

- Make certain that the wheelchair is powered down, and that the brakes are engaged
- Make certain that the safety gate on the end of the lift platform is engaged
- Engage the lift platform safety strap
- Go to the outside of the van and use the control to lower the lift
- Assist the person to move their wheelchair safely off the lift platform
- Make certain that they are in safe place, or assist them to move their wheelchair to a safe place

Safe Planning

Have a plan for how many staff will be needed for safe transportation for each outing and what they are expected to do

- The safe procedures for loading and unloading passengers can be time consuming and it requires the full attention of the staff.
- If you plan to transport more than one person who uses a wheelchair at a time, you be mindful of how many staff will be needed to insure the safety of all passengers
- When transporting more than one individual who uses a wheelchair it is a good idea to plan the logistics of the procedure beforehand. This will enable staff to focus their attention on supporting the individuals instead of trying to decide which staff will do which step of the process. This will depend on who is being transported, what their support needs are, and where they are going to be embarking and disembarking from the vehicle

Emergency Safety Procedures

Despite all of our best efforts to insure safety, accidents can and will happen. In the event of an accident, staff may become upset, anxious, and may not be able to be calm, and think clearly. It is important that staff know how to proceed if this should occur.

- Staff should have access to a cell phone
- They should immediately call 911 in a person in a wheelchair is impacted by an accident, if they fall out of a wheelchair, or if there is any question of an injury.
- People in wheelchairs may be vulnerable to head or spinal injuries in the event of a fall.
- After calling 911, providers may have other protocols for staff to follow; calling a supervisor or others at their agency for notification and back up, etc.

The Department of Developmental Services and the Center for Developmental Disabilities Evaluation and Research have developed a comprehensive training on the safe transfer for individuals to and from a wheelchair van. This can be accessed via the following link:

<http://shriver.umassmed.edu/programs/cdder/webinars/dds-safe-transportation-people-who-use-wheelchairs>