

Driver Training Key For Safe Passenger Transportation

By Rick Iacoboni

The National Highway Safety Administration (NHTSA), the National Council on Disability (NCD) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) have concluded that the best protection in the event of a collision or sudden stop is a shoulder and lap belt system. For wheelchair passengers, combine that system with a four-point retractor wheelchair anchoring system and height adjustable head & backrest and you have a securement system which stabilizes passengers in a rear or frontal collision, reducing the chance for injury and trauma.

While equipping vehicles with the proper securement systems seems like a logical solution, it's only one part of an equation with many moving parts when it comes to protecting both wheelchair and non-wheelchair passengers.

For example, an NHTSA study determined that out of the 61 school bus passengers killed between 2005-14, only four were wearing seat belts. Most passengers had access to seat belts. Another NHTSA study analyzed National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) data on motor vehicle incidents from 1991-95. Conclusion: 35% of injuries or deaths of passengers were due to improper or no wheelchair securement.

The American Bar Association says transport companies can be held liable for passengers injured in collisions or sudden stops in which their wheelchairs were improperly secured to the vehicle.

From afar it would appear that installing state-of-the-art securement systems that meet government safety and performance regulations would be the end-of-the-story. However, assuming that passengers would automatically use

securement equipment just because it was available was a huge miscalculation by the mobility industry. "Providing safe transportation begins with having access to the right equipment. That's a great start," says Peter Haarhuis, CEO of AMF-Bruns of America. "What's missing is the driver training component."

Driver Education

Driver training must touch on the following components:

Securement Equipment: Drivers must be trained on securement equipment for both wheelchair and non-wheelchair passengers. They need to understand their passengers' equipment and the best way to protect them while traveling.

Regular Equipment Check-Ups: In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), drivers must provide regular safety check-ups for accessibility equipment such as platform barriers, handrails, vehicle ramps and wheelchair tiedowns and occupant restraint systems (WTORS). Accessibility equipment is exposed to excessive wear-and-tear as well as extreme weather and travel conditions.

WTORS Components: Drivers must understand that WTORS components cannot be interchanged. While pieces and parts may look similar, drivers must be trained NOT to mix and match components from different manufacturers. Doing so compromises the integrity of the securement system in the event of a collision.

Stopped Public Transportation Vehicles: When vehicles are stopped, drivers must be trained on procedures relating to passengers entering

and leaving the vehicles. A Kentucky transit authority conducted a four-year study and learned that almost 75% of incidents involving passengers using wheeled mobility devices (WMDs) occurred when transit busses were stopped. Nearly 60% of these incidents took place on the lifts/ramps.

Creating Awareness

Over and above driver training -- transport companies, organizations and authorities have an inherent responsibility to promote securement equipment usage to:

End Users: Students, adults, seniors, general workforce and wheelchair passengers.

Influencers: Leaders/administrators at schools, government, medical & therapy centers, senior centers, etc.

Mobility Industry: Vehicle modification vendors, vehicle manufacturers, mobility vehicle dealers, etc.

Media: Public service announcements, news releases, social media and press conferences.

Additional awareness can be created through traditional marketing tactics such as vehicle signage, bus shelter signage, advertising and collateral materials, i.e. flyers, brochures, posters.

The Balancing Act

"It's all about balance," adds Haarhuis. "The mobility industry's safety pendulum shouldn't sway one way or the other. Having the right securement equipment along with consistent driver training increases the odds dramatically in providing safe transportation for both wheelchair and non-wheelchair passengers."

For more information on training, go to:

NTSB: www.nts.gov

NHTSA: www.nhtsa.gov

NCD: www.ncd.gov
