



Things to Think About!

Wheelchair Accessible Vans Part 1: What's Right For You?

By Linda Jorgensen

There are many wheelchair accessible options available for vehicles for the average consumer in today's market. More types of lift systems and new equipment adaptations are available now than ever before. And while the number of models available is still growing it is important to note that disability accessible vehicles are still pretty costly and not every vendor who advertises adaptations is properly trained in adaptive equipment and its installation. There are many unscrupulous vendors who will put any type of lift you want on any vehicle you want without ensuring the vehicle and the lift system are actually compatible. The result of a faulty installation can be costly and sometimes catastrophic. Families must make the best-informed choice for their own specific situation, safety, and budget.

Be aware, not all conversion vendors or the products they sell will meet family needs or nationally accepted safety standards. Any time a vendor makes alterations to a vehicle, especially a vehicle's frame, the frame is weakened which creates a safety danger in accident situations. We recommend visiting www.nmeda.org for industry safety standards and doing some homework before choosing a vehicle, a lift, or control system and finding an installation vendor. Not all installers are created equal. Be sure you work with someone trained and knowledgeable!

There are three important considerations a family must make before looking at ANY new vehicles. These are:

1. **Family Needs.** What does your family need in a vehicle? Are you going to be primarily driving around town or out in the country towing a farm tractor? Will you need seating for more than 2-3 persons? What about cargo space so you can pack along gear for a road trip to Grandma's? How much space do you really need?
2. **Family Budget.** How much can you afford to spend? Can you get a loan from your bank or will you need help from various government agencies or private programs? Or a combination? Do you have money set aside for a down payment?
3. **The Safety and Efficiency of your new vehicle.** Who will install the lift system in your new vehicle? Do they really know what they are doing? It is vitally important that the right equipment is attached to the right vehicle by the right installer. Regardless of what sales people will tell you not every type of lift can go with every type of vehicle. The safety of the vehicle and the safety of the seating system the disabled family member will be using must be preserved. Do nothing to the vehicle that hinders its performance or decreases over all safety after the adaptations have been completed.

****Note: Do your homework! Be sure to check with your state Consumer Protection Agency for complaints before choosing an installation vendor.** Work with a vendor who exercises good business practices and has the highest safety record to ensure the safety of your family while driving. We recommend finding a National Mobility Equipment Dealer Association (NMEDA) Quality Assurance Program (QAP) certified dealer/installer. (See www.nmeda.org for industry safety standards and a list of QAP Certified Dealers.)

Figuring Out What You Need – Get an Evaluation

It is important to first evaluate your current vehicle, your child (and his/her physical condition), and their wheelchair for "transportation change" requirements. There are several specific steps for this process. You'll need to:

1. Acquire a referral from your child's pediatrician for a "transportation change evaluation" by a transportation specialist.
2. Contact your medical insurance company and get a pre-authorization for a "transportation change evaluation" to be performed by a trained Occupational Therapist. Preferably meet with one that is transportation certified. Look for someone that has experience in evaluating both vehicles and equipment for safe operation.
3. Make your appointment and keep it.
4. During this evaluation appointment you need to discuss with the therapist the following:
 - Type of vehicle you currently own versus the vehicle you are thinking of purchasing.
 - Will the current vehicle accommodate the lift conversion you are considering for purchase?
 - Family size. Who else will be in the vehicle besides the wheelchair occupant? Be sure to count the MAXIMUM number of persons who would travel with you, even if only on occasion. Space for friends, extended family, respite providers, etc. is very important. Every person who rides in the vehicle must be in a seat belt. Often children with physical handicaps will travel in a bucket seat outfitted with a seatbelt or harness rather than their wheelchair. This provides a safer, more supported mode of travel for many. The wheelchair is secured by a wheelchair tie-down system ideally directly next to them leaving room for an attendant to assist them in transferring to and from the wheelchair. Be sure to leave space for the wheelchair when making your seat count.
 - Towing or not towing?
 - Cargo needs. Will you need space for extra gear and equipment? How about groceries?
 - Seating configuration? THE MOST IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION WHEN EVALUATING A VEHICLE IS WHERE YOUR CHILD WILL BE SEATED AND WHERE THE WHEELCHAIR NEEDS TO GO.

If you need to purchase a larger van remember that the maximum "bounce force" is in the back area behind the rear axle of the vehicle. Persons sitting in that zone generally get tossed around quite a bit. Any individual needing to remain in their wheelchair during travel should be seated BETWEEN the front and rear axles as this zone of the vehicle is the most stable and produces the least amount of "bounce" when going over bumps and road hazards. Whiplash is a common injury seen in individuals with either increased or decreased muscle tone. We recommend the individual be in the FORWARD-FACING position in the forward passenger area for travel. (See www.nmeda.org for industry safety standards.)

Upon completion of the evaluation, the therapist will provide you with a letter of recommendation. Be sure to make several copies of this letter, keeping the original on file. It will be helpful at this stage to acquire a doctor's prescription for the equipment as specified by the Occupational Therapist in their report/letter as well. This documentation will be necessary for insurance coverage of the occupational therapist's evaluation bill and help establish medical necessity when applying for financial assistance through various state and private organizations.

The next step is purchasing your vehicle. *See the November 2015 newsletter entitled, "Wheelchair Vans part 2: Purchasing"*

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