

The High Cost (and Danger) of Improperly Installed Vehicles for the Disabled

By Bob Nunn, NMEDA President

When Carol Hawkins needed a rear-entry wheelchair van to transport her 37-year-old daughter, Joella, from Rhode Island to Florida, Hawkins turned to eBay. Joella, a paraplegic who suffers from spina bifida and hydrocephalus, still functions at a pre-teen level. Her wheelchair was too big to fit in a side-entry vehicle.

Late last year, Hawkins paid \$13,500 for a used van from someone in Kentucky and immediately noticed problems with the vehicle upon delivery. A discrepancy with the odometer hampered her getting permanent license plates and the “check air bags” and “check engine” lights were on. The repair shop she took it to found problems with the catalytic converter and brake line.

After speaking to the person who sold her the van, she took it to a dealer who specialized in wheelchair van conversions. They found structural support problems as well as an issue with the fuel tank-the fuel smell coming from under the van meant it wasn't safe to drive, she was advised.

Hawkins then turned to the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association (NMEDA), an international non-profit trade association committed to ensuring quality and professionalism in the manufacturing and installation of safe and reliable mobility equipment in vehicles for drivers and passengers with disabilities.

“When I spoke to a NMEDA dealer over the phone, they were so concerned, they came from their location in Tampa to my home in South Pasadena, Florida,” Hawkins recalls. “They were horrified by what they found.”

The front exhaust and muffler on the vehicle Hawkins purchased was too close to the fuel tank, there was no structural bracing under the floor (the floor flexed when stepped on), the rear axle was hitting the lower rear of the vehicle, the tie-downs for the wheelchair were incorrectly positioned, the brake line was rubbing on the exhaust, and the rear door didn't close properly.

It was immediately clear a less-than-qualified dealer improperly installed the van's wheelchair adaptations. Not unusual in the “anyone-can-do-it” world of customized vehicle modifications for the disabled.

Even though Hawkins contacted the FTC and Kentucky's Attorney General, nothing is resolved. She is stuck with a van she cannot drive, out quite a bit of money, and her daughter remains in Rhode Island.

“The obvious lesson is never buying a van from any person or dealer who does not solely do wheelchair van adaptations. I wish I found NMEDA and bought from one of their dealers. This has been a nightmare, and I want people to know that this does not need to happen to them, says Hawkins about her misfortune.

As the National Equipment Dealers Association's President and someone in the business for more than 20 years, I hear all too often stories similar to Carol's. For all of the companies that have passed the rigorous independent inspection requirements of NMEDA's QAP accreditation, the subject of quality, safety and customer satisfactions is top priority. Just as important is educating the public that going to a mobility equipment company not recognized by NMEDA can have unsatisfactory results.

Designed to promote quality, safety and reliability measured against the highest standards available, the Quality Assurance Program (QAP) is the only one of its kind within the mobility equipment industry. A NMEDA QAP dealer understands the needs of the disabled consumer, what that person needs now as well as any modifications that might be required down the road. For instance, those with degenerative conditions such as multiple sclerosis will have changing needs in the future. The QAP dealer recognizes this and can readily adapt the vehicle's mobility equipment requirements to the individual's situations.

Changing or adapting a vehicle may seem simple, but it is complicated in terms of safety issues, which is the number one concern in making sure all mobility equipment is installed correctly. Modifying a seat so it pivots and can be removed from the vehicle requires special attention when considering the seat belt system or proper air bag deployment.

NMEDA QAP dealers work closely with the OEM's (Original Equipment Manufacturers) engineers and must have a clear understanding of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards. There are thousands of options and adapted devices, so this knowledge is critical in meeting regulations and keeping the vehicle safe to drive.

While mainstream automobile dealerships are sales satellites for the manufacturers, adaptive vehicle dealerships function as secondary OEM's, if you will. We are responsible for altering the vehicle and bringing it back into safety compliance.

In the past, small town garages or local mechanics retrofitted the vehicles – not to NMEDA Guidelines or OEM specifications. Today, the consumer who uses a QAP dealer is assured that their vehicle will pass all federal safety standards. How do I know this? Because of the independent audit conducted on all QAP dealers, to make certain all modifications are done with full Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards compliance.

In addition to meeting these safety standards, a critical part of the QAP is working with the National Highway Transportation and Safety Agency, "NHTSA", to ensure the newly installed adaptive equipment can pass crash tests. For example, when we change the fuel system or the chassis is modified significantly, we participate in crash testing the vehicle from every direction – front, back, and side- to make sure it does not lose even one tablespoon of gasoline.

Participating in these crash tests is not without a significant cost. It costs about \$200,000 to design, build and test one of these tests. QAP dealers do not take safety compliance lightly, and we make every effort to work with post-adaptation crash test results and research to ensure our customers' vehicles are the safest on the road.

While we focus on safety compliance issues when we adapt a vehicle, we also know how to service the vehicle when something needs attention outside the scope of the mobility equipment aspect. A QAP technician is trained and qualified to help with other problems and most have adapted rental/loaner vehicles available during service downtime.

Do not expect to stop at the repair shop down the road if you have an adapted vehicle with, say, a lowered floor. Instead, seek out a qualified QAP dealership to help with all your adapted vehicle needs. Your vehicle will be safer, and that in turn will make you – and us – happier.

Bob Nunn is the president of Creative Carriage and the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association (NMEDA). Creative Carriage serves a specialized market, with many of its customers using wheelchairs, and all are mobility challenged. Through its diverse membership, NMEDA advocates and supports excellence in providing safe, reliable vehicles and modifications to enhance accessibility for people with special needs.