

Transporting People with Special Needs and Wheelchair Securement

Social Service agencies often provide services to consumers that have special needs and or use a wheelchair. These two situations represent another layer of challenges to the service provider when they must transport these consumers. When people with special needs are not afforded the respect and dignity that all people deserve, the negative effects can be devastating. During transport, serious and sometimes fatal injuries can occur during sudden stops, acceleration, turns and accidents if proper wheelchair securement practices are not followed.

Training the staff of agencies that transport people with special needs is one of the best tools available for safeguarding the health, safety, and well being of these passengers as well assisting in protecting the organization and its assets. While the high rate of employee turnover is generally accepted as normal for many social service organizations, the lack of providing the proper training for employees who are engaged in the transportation of people with special needs is unacceptable.

Who are People with special needs?

People who use wheelchairs are the most identifiable members of the special needs community but there are others that must be included. People with hearing impairments and people who are visually impaired are also people / passengers with special needs. People that are mentally confused at any age or for any reason should also be considered as people /passengers with special needs.

Key items you should know *BEFORE* you transport people with special needs?

Effective and efficient communication plays a key role in the process of transporting members of the special need community. Always treat the passenger with respect and dignity. Make certain that you have the full attention of the passenger when you are communicating. Be clear and to the point when communicating verbally or visually.

The person transporting people with special needs should be fully briefed about ALL the passengers' challenges. Never assume that someone can or can not see or hear or is completely cognitive of their situation.

When assisting people who are visually impaired always speak in a normal tone of voice. Never touch a visually impaired person before speaking and introducing yourself to them. Once initial communication is made it should be maintained. Visually impaired people often have a better developed auditory sense

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and rely heavily upon that sense. Always ask the person how they would like to be led. Make certain that when you are leading the person that you scan the area ahead for obstructions, impediments or turns and relay this information to the person being led. Scanning ahead will also protect you from an accidental trip or fall.

When assisting people with hearing impairments approach the person from the front. Use universal signs and gestures to indicate directions. Speak in a normal tone of voice. Do not shout as it may cause distortion for people with hearing devices. Refrain from using exaggerated mouth movements as it may impede someone's ability to lip read. Identify yourself by pointing at a name tag or I.D. badge. Use a pen or pencil and paper to communicate.

When assisting people who are mentally confused make certain to speak with the person who turns the passenger over to you about what behaviors to expect and ask about how to recognize indications of discomfort or displeasure. Ask the responsible person how much the passenger will understand and how you should speak to the passenger. (I.E. firmly or softly)

When assisting a passenger with special needs to stand, practice good body mechanics. Keep your back straight, brace your footing by keeping your feet shoulder width apart, bend your knees and use your own body weight to lift the passenger. Ask the person about their strong or weak side and ask them on which side they prefer to be assisted. Always assist a person using a cane on the opposite side.

How can I safely and effectively handle a wheelchair?

Always maintain solid control of the wheelchair.

Make sure the passengers feet are on the foot rest supports before moving the chair. Advise the person to keep their hands on their lap and their elbows in to avoid injury. Scan the area ahead for barriers, obstacles and impediments. Wheelchairs

are designed to operate on smooth, solid surfaces. Avoid sand, gravel and grass where possible. The person in a wheelchair is vulnerable so be sensitive to their needs. Advise the person when you are going to lift, tilt or maneuver the wheelchair.

When negotiating obstacles use good body mechanics to protect yourself and the person in the wheelchair. Use the foot tilt bar if one is available. Never attempt to lift the wheelchair by the arm rests or wheels.



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How can I safely and effectively use a vehicle equipped with a lift?

In order to load your passenger you will have to use the lift. Familiarize yourself and receive proper training with this equipment BEFORE you attempt to use it. Make certain that the vehicle parking brake is set. Secure the lift doors so that neither you nor your passenger can be hit with swinging doors. Be certain to have a clear area for the lift to contact the ground. Watch your feet! Place the wheelchair on the lift and set both brakes on the chair. Fasten or secure any safety belts that are part of the lift. Never ride the lift. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on operating the lift.

How can I safely and effectively secure a wheelchair in vehicle equipped with a lift?

It is imperative that you understand how the securement equipment operates. Most equipment has the name of the manufacturer and a model number on the device. Please be advised that KineDyne is now SureLok. Most manufacturers will provide training tapes and material for a nominal fee. A typical training tape costs about \$25.00. It should be a mandatory policy that anyone using a lift van receives this training prior to operating the van. All belts and securement devices should be inspected for wear and broken parts before every use. Bad equipment should be removed from service, appropriately labeled and discarded. Belts should not touch each other or cross. Make certain that you are using the equipment the way it was designed to be used. Always secure the chair at four points. Attach the securement to structural members of the wheelchair only. Never secure the chair by the arm rests or the wheels. Keep the belts as close to a 45 degree angle as is possible. After securing the wheelchair set the wheelchair parking brake. Move the chair forwards and sideways. If the wheelchair moves more than 2 inches in any direction it is not properly secured.

What else do I need to do before I take to the road?

Once the wheelchair is secured you need to secure the passenger. It is best to use both a shoulder belt and a lap belt. Refer to the manufactures instruction on use. Always perform a pre-trip vehicle inspection both inside and out. Never operate a vehicle you know to be unsafe or overdue for maintenance. Make sure the vehicle is equipped with a first aid kit, a fire extinguisher, a spare tire and at least three reflective triangles. It is your responsibility to know the breakdown procedures of your organization before you breakdown. When you do get on the road, make certain that you know, understand and practice defensive driving techniques.