

Improving Transportation for Ohioans with Disabilities: Workforce Development

Gaining access to community activities is crucial to everyone's sense of belonging. Transportation is the key to access—access to a job, to family and friends, to adequate health care, to shopping, to fun. It is as true for people with significant disabilities as it is for anyone else, regardless of whether the disability is cognitive, physical, sensory, psychiatric, behavioral, neurological, or aging-related.

THE PROBLEM

The lack of reliable, accessible, affordable transportation has been and continues to be the most often cited barrier to independent living for people with disabilities and seniors. Transportation for Ohioans with disabilities has historically been fairly limited, especially in rural and small urban areas. For those persons who require wheelchair-accessible transportation (vehicles with lifts, ramps, low floors, and/or adapted seating areas), choices are even more limited, even in the urban environment.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) will result in the coordination of most federally-funded job training programs. WIA requires that state legislation be created to implement such coordination in Ohio. The Act also mandates the development of a state-level Workforce Investment Board as well as local investment boards.

Coordination of job training programs, at either the state or the local level, may result in increased access to transportation services. More and more, transportation is being recognized as a key factor in workforce development. Increased job opportunities, after all, are

of little use if employees cannot get to them. Even Ohioans who are not targeted specifically by the legislation could benefit from improvements in transportation services.

A COURSE OF ACTION

It is a fundamental principle of advocacy that those who are affected by policy decisions should be able to participate in making the policy. The Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council (ODDC) recommends that the disability community actively participate in shaping the upcoming Ohio workforce development legislation. In particular:

- A work group should be formed immediately to help frame the content of the legislation.

It is possible to add a transportation component to a bill relatively late in the drafting process, as was done with House Bill 408 (state welfare reform legislation known as Ohio Works First). But now is an even better time to ensure that disability-related transportation concerns are taken into account as part of workforce development.

- The disability community should support the funding of staff positions under the county commissions to deal with transportation issues.

Separate funding should be made available for each commission, through the workforce development legislation, for at least one full-time staff person to serve as liaison to the county's various transit authorities and providers, agencies, and organizations in matters of local transportation coordination.



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