

Transportation for People with Disabilities in PA (8.4.10)

Good morning. My name is Jeff Iseman, Public Policy Analyst for the Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (PA SILC). I am filling in for Zainab Jama, our Executive Director, who could not attend today due to a previously scheduled commitment. I may be familiar to some committee members or their staff due to our work on behalf of the Centers for Independent Livings (CILs) and Independent Living (IL) as a whole. We also partner with the Transportation Alliance of Pennsylvania; some members that you may be familiar with include John Lorence of TRIPIL, and Bob Schmidt and John Tassone.

First, we thank both Governor Ed Rendell and the Pennsylvania Legislature, particularly Senators Rafferty and Stout, for having venues to provide opportunities for public input on transportation needs in our Commonwealth. **Both PA SILC and the Transportation Alliance of Pennsylvania support** transportation efforts on behalf of people with disabilities, particularly the Persons With Disabilities (PWD) *Shared Ride* program for those under age 60 with disabilities and Senior Shared Ride for elderly populations. PENNDOT staff recently attended our July 14th PA SILC board meeting to provide updates on related matters, including use of Federal Stimulus (commonly referred to as “ARRA funds”) Funds, PWD Shared Ride Funding, and driver training programs. As well, there was discussion around ways to improve transportation for people with disabilities.

For the disability community, there have been some milestones both nationally and in Pennsylvania. Last week marked the 20 year-anniversary celebrating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. In 1999, we had the U.S. Supreme Court Olmstead case, which noted that an individual had a right to live in the most integrated setting possible and not merely an institution. In 2007, Act 44 was passed in Pennsylvania which included funding for all 65 counties outside Philadelphia and Allegheny for the PWD *Shared Ride* program. In 2008, we celebrated here at the State Capitol the one millionth rider of the PWD *Shared Ride*. We have made some strides on both the national and state levels.

Let's move forward to mid 2010 - today. While things have somewhat improved, there is still much work to be done. Among the challenges:

- **While unemployment is high for all population (over 9% in PA and close to 10% nationally), low estimates for people with disabilities range to higher double digits (upper teens) and some would state much higher, depending on criteria used and economic climate. This is the highest rate of any minority group. Part of the challenge here, particularly in rural areas, is the lack of reliable transportation.** Prospective employees cannot fill the “help wanted” slots for employers if they do not have accessible and reliable transportation. For the record, we will note here that rules for individuals in the *Welfare to Work* program differ from those employees with disabilities. While we realize that *Welfare to Work* efforts are transitional, perhaps there could be some discussions

related to provide greater transportation supports for the disability community to address employment issues. We heard more in depth about this problem in early 2010 when PA SILC conducted hearings for our next State Plan for Independent Living or SPIL (for your information, the current version is on our website; next one is being reviewed by the Federal Department of Education/RSA division as we speak). Some regions that we heard about transportation challenges from various regions during our SPIL outreach including Washington, Reading, Allentown, Scranton, Erie, Philadelphia and Harrisburg areas. As you can see, these challenges exist statewide.

- **Lack of accessible and reliable transportation limits access to medical and dental care.** This hearing focuses on transportation, and the lack thereof in rural areas has several effects. One consequence is that many folks miss appointments that impede their progress toward better health. Obtaining medical and dental appointments can often involve crossing county lines and several hours of travel to find a medical or dental provider who accepts Medicaid or their other health coverage, as well as a provider who has a physically- accessible office. By not addressing these issues, some individuals wind up in nursing homes or other institutional settings at a greater cost to families and taxpayers...at a time that our Commonwealth is experiencing financial hardship. While we noted employment earlier, having proper access to medical and dental care also empowers people with disabilities to work and be tax-paying citizens.
- **Unavailable transportation limits volunteer efforts for people with disabilities.** This hurts local community organizations in a time where funds and other supports are sorely needed more than ever before.
- **Inadequate transportation limits a person's options to attend a local venue of worship, such as church, synagogue and other public forms of religious expression.**
- **Limited transportation limits one's ability to fully participate in an integrated community setting.** This also relates to the U.S. Supreme Court Olmstead decision.
- **Many Direct Supports Professionals (staff) also use public supported transportation options to assist individuals in remaining in the community.**
- **Such supports also benefit the increasing numbers of veterans with disabilities, particularly those who are here now and will be coming home in the near future.**
- **There is a need for greater promotion and public support for driver training, hand controls, and vehicle adaptations** by PENNDOT, OVR, DPW, Education, Aging/OLTL and other state agencies involved in transportation and other programs for people with disabilities. There are a number of individuals who

could be gainfully employed if they were provided the opportunity to learn driving skills with additional supports, such as hand controls for vehicles and adaptive vehicle features such as chair lifts.

- Increased driver training locations and support will afford more people with disabilities the opportunity to be gainfully employed.
- Greater support from OVR, DPW, and other state agencies for accessible vehicles, including hand controls and vehicle modifications. Vehicles with modifications for people with disabilities enable them to become tax-paying citizens as well to live, work, and play in our communities to the greatest degree possible.

- **While the PWD *Shared Ride* program in most counties has improved transportation for those with disabilities, these challenges remain:**

- **Few companies cross county lines.** This makes it tougher to both increase employment for this population and fill the existing needs of private, public, and non-profit employers. This needs to change.
- **There is a need for increased evening and weekend hours for this program across Pennsylvania.** Most transportation providers operate during standard daytime work hours. Many employers have hours outside the times during which PWD *Shared Ride* program operates. There are also time restrictions by a number of employers; for example, some state that one cannot be on the premises too early or too late (usually 30 minutes - 1 hour). In addition, it may take longer for someone with a disability to prepare and arrive for work, so increased flexibility on transportation is essential.

- **Add more accessible taxis in urban areas and related supports.** We have heard, for example, that if one taxi is in the shop the service may be out of commission at that point.

- **Improve accessible communication and other features for travel and physical accessibility: airports, train stations, bus routes, ports, and other venues.**

- We have heard complaints from the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities regarding inadequate signage and displays.
- Improving communication for passengers with disabilities, such as use of microphones.
- Increasing driver training for all public transportation and *Shared Ride* programs related to ADA accommodations. We have heard some complaints on drivers not being properly trained or securing wheelchairs of riders with disabilities during trips.

- **Increase transportation staff trainings for other venues, including airports and water venues.** A number of folks could tell stories of how transportation staff for bus companies and airports was either not properly trained to handle motorized wheelchairs and assistive technology or handled traveler issues for

people with disabilities in a haphazard manner. This leads to wasted time and funds related to repair and replacement of damaged equipment.

In summary, thank you for the time to testify and we would be glad to answer questions.

JJ/MD