

Mind the Gap: A Reference Guide for People with Disabilities Riding Trains

Final Report

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Introduction

Reliable and accessible transportation is key to many activities in our daily lives, including work, grocery shopping, participating in religious and community activities, and obtaining medical care. While inadequate transportation is a problem that affects many people, according to the Harris Poll Survey of Americans with Disabilities (2000), it is much more likely to affect people with disabilities. The Harris Poll reported that 30% of people with disabilities have a problem with inadequate transportation compared to only 10% of people without disabilities. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics survey (2003) reported similar findings: Of the 15 million people nationally that have difficulties getting transportation, 6 million (40 percent) are people with disabilities. For Connecticut, the numbers are on par with the national average. This means that over half a million citizens with disabilities in Connecticut do not have adequate transportation, and they are joined by the rapidly increasing number of older adults as the average age in Connecticut continues to increase.

A routine mode of transportation in many areas of the country is the use of trains. Many people access metro trains on a daily basis to commute to work. Other people use trains to attend special events or for vacations. Although there is little discussion in the media about the safety of riding trains, every now and again a story makes national headlines that draws attention to a significant issue that people with physical disabilities who ride trains are intimately aware of: “the gap” (the space between the station platform and the train car). In August of 2006 a young woman slipped into the gap while stepping off the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) train. She attempted to cross under the platform and was struck and killed by a train on the other side. The local paper, *Newsday*, reported that at least 60 LIRR passengers a year fall into the gap, and that this type of accident is the second-highest cause of injury on the rail line (Mallia, 2006). The risk of injury related to “the gap” is not unique to the LIRR line, but is a common feature of most rail systems.

Most train and metro stations provide a verbal prompting to passengers to “mind the gap,” but for riders with physical disabilities the ability to safely access and ride trains requires much more than a simple verbal prompt. The issue of safe access across the gap when entering and exiting a train is only one of the barriers that people with physical disabilities face when attempting to access trains. Other obstacles include environmental barriers within train stations, lack of allotted physical space available for wheelchairs on train cars, inconsistent accessibility of stations along train routes, need to make reservations (even on typically “unreserved” trains), accessibility within the train car, and for many riders, the high costs associated with train fares.

In 2005, under a grant from the Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities, the University of Connecticut Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) embarked on the first step of meaningfully involving consumers in assessing the state of transportation for people with disabilities in Connecticut. The grant, entitled “The Plan for the Achievement of Transportation Coordination in Human Services”, sponsored and facilitated a series of forums on transportation with consumers across Connecticut. The

seven forums were attended by 145 individuals representing a broad range of ages, disabilities, experiences and affiliations. Many forum participants raised issues regarding the accessibility and safety of train use. The documented concerns of self-advocates with physical disabilities about riding trains, as well as the public record of serious train accidents and injuries, makes this research project a relevant and valuable tool to in addressing the barriers to train ridership.

The purpose of the *Mind the Gap* study was to identify the barriers that people with physical disabilities experience when riding trains through a literature review and review of formalized policy driven solutions, a focus group with current train riders who have physical disabilities, and through field research riding local and regional rail systems to observe and experience gap safety practices. And based on the research findings, to create a tip sheet for people with physical disabilities who are potential train riders in an effort to increase ridership and thereby increase community access and integration.

The study emphasized three primary areas of concern, the first being the gap between the transit train and platform and how the gap affects both boarding and deboarding. Second, the study identified accessibility barriers both on the train and in the immediate pedestrian environment of the train station and focus group participants offered suggestions for overcoming those barriers. And finally, the study reviewed information on how customer to customer assistance occurs and its role in the boarding and deboarding process.

Methodology

The first phase of the study involved review of the published literature on train ridership barriers for people with physical disabilities. Additionally, a review of on-line resources and information about formalized policy driven solutions that address accessibility barriers to train travel for people with physical disabilities was conducted. The review of the literature, on-line resources and formalized policy drive solutions were used to create a list of key barriers to train travel that guided the development of the questions to be used in the focus group discussion (see Appendix A).

The next phase of the project was a focus group with adults with physical disabilities who have experience riding trains. This phase started with an application to the University of Connecticut Health Center Institutional Review Board (IRB), seeking permission to conduct research with human subjects. The IRB application process required the development of a general research protocol, a detailed research protocol, an informed consent form, a HIPAA release form, a recruitment flyer, and a telephone screening instrument. The IRB application was approved on March 15, 2007 (IRB Number: 07-185).

Using the UCEDD's already established pool of self-advocates who are interested in transportation issues (created in the 2005 UCEDD grant for transportation coordination), as well as local provider agencies contacts, a database of 540 email address contacts was created. The recruitment flyer was distributed to all 540 email contacts. The goal

was to recruit six to eight focus group participants, as that group size is traditionally considered ideal for focus group research (Morgan, 1988). Approximately thirty calls were received from people seeking more information about the study. A total of seven people were screened and agreed to participate. Due to scheduling issues, only five of those seven people participated in the focus group. Although the focus group was open to people with any type of physical disability, all five focus group participants happened to use electric wheelchairs.

The focus group meeting was two hours in length. The focus group questions were addressed and participants spontaneously suggested a number of additional research topics they thought might be important to address in the future. The focus group was audio taped and transcribed. The transcript was themed and coded, with data organized around the three main areas of emphasis for this study: managing the gap during the boarding and deboarding process, accessibility in the pedestrian and on the train environments, and the role of customer to customer assistance. In addition to the main areas of emphasis for this study, focus group participants identified other areas of interest and that information was also included in this report.

During the final phase of the project, the researcher conducted field research on several different regional rail systems to gather information and observe gap safety practices. Rail systems observed in field research included: Amtrak routes from Hartford, Connecticut to Washington D.C.; Metro North Railroad commuter lines in southern Connecticut and along the Hudson River Valley in New York; New York City subway lines; and Washington D.C. Metrorail subway lines. Finally, the researcher and a self-advocate with a physical disability (who uses a wheelchair and has with a service animal) traveled on the Amtrak regional line from New Haven, CT to New York City and returned on the Amtrak Acela line, both observing and experiencing the issues related to accessibility and safety during the experience. The field research results section refers to the self-advocate as being named "Suzie", which is a pseudonym to protect the participant's confidentiality.

Data from the focus group and observations from the field research were used to create a tip sheet for first time train users with physical disabilities. The hope is that the tip sheet will encourage an increase in train ridership and thereby an increase in community access and integration. Photos taken during the field research were used in the creation of tip sheet document. The tip sheet has been disseminated via email to the database of self-advocates interested in transportation issues and provider agencies created during the recruitment process for the focus group. It will also be made available to others upon request.

Results

Literature Review

An extensive search online databases and electronic journals produced very few articles related accessibility barriers to train travel for people with physical disabilities.

The databases searched included EBSCO Host, Academic Search Premier, Scopus, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, PsychINFO, and ERIC. Of the articles found, there were no research articles related to this special topic, making this study an important addition to the literature.

Of the published literature found, most were papers reporting on the status of current railway projects towards improving levels of accessibility and the need for even more accessibility features to be included in future planning (Fielding, 2005; Stanbury & Scott, 2005; West, 2004). Some of the accessibility issues discussed included the need for color, lighting and design to be considered in creating socially inclusive environments, the need for audible indication of train doors opening or closing, the need for accessible toilets, the need for more dedicated spaces on the train in which passengers with disabilities can travel with safety and dignity, and the need for passengers with disabilities to be able to book assistance from railway providers prior to travel.

Information about formal policy driven solutions to accessibility barriers was gathered from the websites of local and regional railway providers, including Amtrak, Metro North Railroad, New York City subways, and Washington, DC Metrorail. The information gathered from those sites is organized around the three main areas of emphasis for this study: managing the gap during the boarding and deboarding process, accessibility in the pedestrian and on the train environments, and the role of customer to customer assistance. Other important information related to accessibility was also included.

1. MANAGING THE GAP: BOARDING & DEBOARDING

The Amtrak website page on boarding and deboarding (“detraining”) is specifically directed towards people using wheelchairs. It states that assistance can be provided to people in wheelchairs in the form of bridge plates, ramps, or lifts that span the gap between platform and train car. Wheelchair sizes restrictions are noted.

The Metro North Railroad website provides a number of specific tips to ensure a safe and comfortable boarding and leaving the train experience. Recommendations include notifying the conductor if you need help boarding or leaving the train, stationing of wheelchairs at least five feet from the platforms edge when waiting for a train, backing on or off the train so that larger rear wheels lead, asking the conductor to set a bridge plate to span the gap if needed, and asking the conductor for assistance in making alternate travel plans if you miss your train station. It is noted that conductors will check the platform to identify passengers in need of assistance.

The New York City Subways website provides a number of specific tips to ensure a safe and comfortable boarding and leaving the train experience. Recommendations include waiting for the train near the center of the platform where the car with the conductor normally stops, staying behind the yellow tactile edge-warning strips, and positioning wheelchairs about three feet from the edge of the platform facing the tracks with brakes locked when waiting for the train. “At most stations there is gap, about four inches wide and two inches high, between the platform edge and the subway car; on curved

platforms the space can be wider. Please be extra careful when crossing these gaps. (The vertical gap on accessible subway station platforms is lower only near the center of the platform, near the conductor's position)" (MTA, 2007). The website indicates that the conductor can keep the doors open while you board.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority website indicates that boarding Metrorail cars is easier and safer due to rubber gap reducers that decrease the gap between the platform and the train by 1.5 inches. Door chimes and audio announcements indicate when the train doors are closing.

2. ACCESSIBILITY: PEDESTRIAN & ON THE TRAIN ENVIRONMENTS

The Amtrak website page on station accessibility reports most Amtrak stations are accessible, and that goal is that by 2010 that every station in America will be in full compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. No specific information is provided about accessibility features. A phone number is provided for travelers to call to get the most up to date information on station accessibility. In order to ensure adequate time for assistance, Amtrak suggests that "special needs" passengers arrive at least one hour prior to the train departure. "At stations staffed by Amtrak employees, our personnel will be happy to provide assistance to and from the restrooms or help with stairs. Courtesy wheelchairs and wheelchair lifts are available at most of our staff stations, and our larger stations have a customer service office to ensure that you receive the assistance you require" (Amtrak, 2007).

Once on the train, Amtrak notes that passengers traveling in wheelchairs can remain in their chair or transfer to seat. "When wheelchair lockdowns are not available, we request that you apply your wheelchair brakes" (Amtrak, 2007). On all trains with meal service, Amtrak reports that personnel will be "pleased" to provide in-room or in-seat meal delivery, or on long-distance trains customers in wheelchairs may transfer to the Lounge car at appropriate station stops. "Please ask your onboard service attendant to make the necessary arrangements" (Amtrak, 2007).

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) website, which includes the Metro North Railroad and New York City subways, identifies a number of train station features that are designed to improve accessibility for customers with visual, hearing, and mobility impairments. Their features include: elevators and ramps, handrails on ramps and stairs, large-print and tactile-Braille signs, audio and visual information systems, accessible station booth windows, vending machines & service entry gates, platform-edge warning strips, platform gap modifications or bridge plates to reduce or eliminate the gap, accessible height telephones with volume control and accessible restrooms. Not all train stations in the MTA system meet ADA compliance requirements, but at least 75 stations are considered fully accessible. The website provides links to individual web pages for each train station that list accessibility features for that station.

The Metro North Railroad train cars have designated seating for individuals with disabilities, as well as wheelchair areas where seats fold up to allow adequate floor

space. Riders using a wheelchair are asked to station their wheelchair in the designated wheelchair area or in the vestibule areas with wheels locked. The New York City Subway train cars do not have designated seating areas for wheelchairs. It is recommended that travelers position their wheelchairs close to either end of the car and near but not blocking the doors, with brakes locked.

The New York City Subways website provides information about elevators and escalators. “We work hard to keep elevators/escalators in good repair, but sometimes they are not operating. Call the special hotline... to find out in advance whether the elevator/escalator at your accessible subway station is working” (MTA, 2007).

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority website reports that Metrorail offers customers with disabilities an “ideal way to travel throughout the Washington, DC area” (WMATA, 2007). All trains and stations are accessible, and all station managers and rail station employees have received “ADA Customer Service Training and are ready to assist people with disabilities” (WMATA, 2007). Some of the accessibility features of Metrorail stations include extra-wide faregates offering easy access for wheelchair users, TTY-equipped telephones, bumpy domes along the platforms that indicate the edge is near, large electronic signs on each platform announcing train arrivals and delays, directional signage, and priority parking. The Metrorail website also provides information about working status of elevators and escalators, with updated lists of outages on their site. There is also an email alert service called ELLEN (electronic elevator notification service) which notifies travelers via email about outages, allowing passengers to plan accessible routes ahead of time.

Once on board, Metrorail cars provide priority seating for travelers with disabilities located near the doors. There are emergency intercoms in every car with low level call buttons for those using wheelchairs. Some of the newer train cars have visual displays of upcoming station stops and arrows indicating the side of the train that the door will open on.

3. CUSTOMER TO CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE

There is no mention of the need for customer to customer assistance on any of the rail provider websites.

4. OTHER ACCESSIBILITY FEATURES

Reservations:

Amtrak requires that people needing accessible space make reservations either by telephone or at an Amtrak ticket counter. Reservations are required for wheelchair space, transfer seats, and accessible sleeper accommodations. “We require that you make reservations for such accommodations on all trains, including on ‘unreserved trains’ (on which reservations for ordinary seats are not required). Accessible space is limited. Please make your reservation as far in advance of travel as possible” (Amtrak,

2007). Tickets can be picked up at the ticket counter or mailed if purchased as least one week prior to departure.

When making reservations for accessible seating, Amtrak requests that special needs passengers identify assistance needs. “The best way to make sure that you receive the assistance you require at a station is to specifically request assistance when you make your reservation” (Amtrak, 2007).

Reduced Fares:

Amtrak offers a discount to passengers with disabilities, but the website does not indicate the specific fare reduction. The discount requires that passengers provide written documentation of their disability at the ticket counter and when boarding the train.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) website, which includes the Metro North Railroad and New York City subways, indicated that a reduced-fare MetroCard is available for individuals with qualifying disabilities who have required identification, but the website does not indicate the specific fare reduction. Reduced-fare benefits are available for all single-ticket purchases except on certain lines during peak travel periods. It is possible to purchase reduced-fare tickets at ticket windows or on the train (higher on-board fares do not apply to reduced-fare customers). Personal care attendants are eligible to ride free when accompanying a passenger with a disability, provided they carry identification that shows that she or he is employed by an agency that provides services to people with disabilities.

Metrorail in Washington, DC provides a reduced fare program for people with disabilities of 50% off regular fare costs, at all times of day, not to exceed \$1.95. People with disabilities must have a valid Metro ID or Medicare card and photo identification to participate in this program.

Service Animals:

The Amtrak website has a page dedication to information about traveling with a service animal. It states that trained service animals accompanying passengers with disabilities are allowed in all stations and trains, but that the owner must keep control of their animal at all times. Service animals can be walked at station stops, but Amtrak asks that you notify the conductor of such plans when boarding the train, stay within a reasonable proximity to the train, and re-board promptly when notified by a conductor.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) website, which includes the Metro North Railroad and New York City subways, indicates that customers with disabilities are permitted to bring service animals into all transit facilities, provided the animals are securely leashed.

Advocacy & Policy:

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority has a public outreach campaign called *Metro is Accessible*, which seeks to explain existing and coming improvements making Metrorail and Metrobus more accessible to people with disabilities. Some of the features of this campaign include a speaker's bureau, bus and rail orientation sessions, a poster campaign, an advisory committee, and an ombudsman program. "Metro's Elderly & Disabled Transportation Advisory Committee addresses the needs of senior citizens and customers with disabilities. Their efforts have resulted in numerous service upgrades including the addition of safety barriers between rail cars and gap reducers between rail cars and the platform edge, which makes it easier for customers in wheelchairs to board Metrorail trains" (WMATA, 2007).

Focus Group

Summary

Although focus group participants identified a number of significant barriers to train travel, overall they all reported positive experiences riding trains and they strongly encouraged other people with physical disabilities to consider train travel as a viable option for transportation. The most significant barrier to train travel was identified as managing the gap between the train car and the platform, with attitudinal barriers and poor training of railway staff and missing or inaccessible bridge plates identified as the biggest factors contributing to the accessibility barrier. Other significant barriers in the pedestrian and on the train environments included lack of accessible restrooms, out of service elevators, steep ramps, and lack of accessible seating. In most situations, participants were able to overcome barriers by planning ahead, being assertive, and by maintaining frequent communication with railway staff. Additionally, focus group participants provided a number of practical suggestions to first time train users as well as suggestions for future research projects.

1. MANAGING THE GAP: BOARDING & DEBOARDING PROCESS

Participants described the key to board & deboarding as finding the right person to help you. Typically, the right person was described as "the person with the key to the bridge plate". When riding Amtrak, it is the Red Cap personnel who are responsible for handling the bridge plate. On other rail lines, there might be railway staff at the station that can assist with the bridge or it might be that on-board railway personnel must exit the train and manage the bridge plate.

Finding the right person to help you with placing the bridge plate was described as the greatest barrier to train travel. Even when using Red Cap services, there is often on-going discussion between staff as to whose responsibility it is provide assistance, and the person needing assistance is often made to wait while staff negotiate with each other. "The big problems before you get to the bridge plate are employee problems".

Once participants found the “right person” to assist them with boarding, the next greatest barrier was actually physically finding and accessing the bridge plate. Sometimes the bridge plates are missing or sometimes they are locked up and staff have a difficult time locating the key.

The boarding and deboarding process of actually using the bridge plate and crossing the gap was described by many of the participants as being the most frightening aspect of train ridership. One participant said that she always feels nervous during this process, even though she has a lot of experience. “Because the bridge [plate] is not real secure... I go real fast. You just pray you get across”. Other participants agreed with this sentiment. Another participant responded, saying, “You pray a lot!”, which got a round of laughter around the room.

Different stations use different types of bridge plates and have varying gap sizes, and different types of train cars having varying door width and aisle width, so there really is little opportunity to become very comfortable in terms of a consistent boarding and deboarding process. Depending on the type of train, the bridge plates can be at a steep angle, making it difficult to manage independently, even with an electric wheelchair.

Participants discussed several different railway systems that they had used and their accessibility challenges. The Washington D.C. subway, Boston metro, and New Jersey transit were described as being easily accessible at most stops. The South Eastern Pennsylvania Transit and Long Island Railroad were described as the worst rails in terms of accessibility. And all of the participants agreed that the New York City subway system is “terrifying” and inaccessible to wheelchair users, due to differing size gaps at each station and no access to bridge plates at all. The Amtrak rails were described as accessible, especially the elite Acela line that has wide doors, wide aisles, and specialized seating.

Another barrier to managing the gap mentioned by some participants is that there are no arm rails on the bridge plate. “Somebody who walks... say somebody with CP, that may walk with a bad gait, okay. It’s almost frightening for them to try to get on a train because there are no arm rails. They could fall so easily. They could fall right off the train; you know what I am saying. So it’s really dangerous, alright, for somebody that has bad gait. Blind people – same problem, you know”.

Another challenge in the boarding and deboarding process is managing your adaptive equipment. For people who use wheelchairs, protecting your chair is very important and the person using the chair knows how to manage it best. One participant pointed out that wheelchairs are very different, noting that each of 5 different focus group participants had a different type of power chair. Participants all agreed that it is important to be assertive with railway staff in terms of touching one’s chair in the process of “helping” them to board and deboard the train. “You have to be very, very careful who you let put their paws on your chair. And if they don’t want to do things the way you tell them to do it, don’t let them touch it. You know your own equipment. You know what they can do and what they can’t do”.

“And you have to tell people to stand back, including sometimes the conductors, because people think that they are going to help you with the power chair but all they are going to do is distract you, frustrate you, get in the way... and possibly destroy your chair”.

“You have to tell them to stay away from your joy stick, because they will go to grab your chair and they will go near the joy stick and that could be extremely dangerous because there is not a whole lot of space to go from the bridge plate into the train. And it could be steep. So, one wrong move and you are in trouble”.

“I usually tell them, “It’s your feet. If you want them flat, I will be happy to make them flat”.

In smaller stations, especially commuter rail station, it is often more of a challenge to board or deboard a train. Several participants reported that it is more difficult to find conductor on Metro North. You must be prepared to search or have someone search for you. One participant reported that she has had a number problems with Metro North crews. On two occasions she was left on the platform and not assisted to board because of cold weather and the conductor not wanting to get off the train to assist her.

In order to deboard the train, you need to get the conductors attention and remind them where it is you plan to exit the train. “I keep telling them every time they walk by, ‘Don’t forget I need the bridge plate’. And I may say it ten times”. You must get the conductors attention because there is no system to page them, like on a bus where you can hit a button. One participant said that she has blocked the door from closing in order to exit at the appropriate station. She stuck her cane in the door.

“Getting on the train is not the main concern – it is being able to get off. You can’t predict if the bridge plate will be available at the station you are going to and there is only a short time that the train is typically stopped for passengers to deboard. You need every minute you have to get off, even when the bridge plate is made immediately available”.

One participant described a situation where she was not able to deboard at her desired location. “I had a case once where I was going to Fairfield for a commissioned public hearing and all 3 conductors (the conductor and 2 assistance conductors) knew that I needed to get out at Fairfield. When they finally let me out, it was in South Norwalk. And fortunately, I was early enough where I could catch another train back to Fairfield. But the conductor, he offered to pay my cab fare back to Norwalk. What I had to explain to him was that taxi cabs don’t take power wheelchairs”. In this case the conductor gave the participant a voucher to return to the appropriate stop on the train.

In order to overcome these potential barriers to boarding and deboarding, participants recommended several strategies: Check out the train stations you will be using. Call ahead to see if stations are accessible – both where you are starting and ending. Some stations have no staff to assist with boarding and in those cases you must rely on on-

board staff to notice you on the platform if boarding, so be prepared to wave and yell if necessary. “Make friends” with the railway personnel because it is often easier to receive needed supports when you start off “on the right foot”. Communicate regularly with the conductors while on the train to remind them of where you wish to exit. And be brave about crossing the bridge plate, asking for assistance when needed and being clear about exactly what type of assistance you want.

Additionally, participants noted that at some older train stations that a crank lift is required rather than just a bridge plate. Like bridge plates, the crank lifts are often locked and staff don’t have the key. Crank lifts are typically very small and it is difficult to maneuver a wheelchair in and out of lift. One participant referred to the crank lift at the Hartford train station as the “crank lift of death”. One participant reported that she has to remove her footplates on the wheelchair in order to safely use the crank lift. Another participant reported that he often “wrecks his hands” when having to use the crank lift because the space is so small that he can’t maneuver his chair control knob safely in the space provided.

2. ACCESSIBILITY: PEDESTRIAN & ON THE TRAIN ENVIRONMENTS

Accessibility Outside the Train Station Environment

Parking:

Participants reported that parking is always a problem in Connecticut, whether or not you have a disability. If you are a regular commuter and want to use the subscription parking at the train stations, you have to get on a waiting list that is minimum wait of 4 to 5 years, but some are up to 25 years. If you just want to use daily parking, some stations are better than others. The New Haven train station has nice parking lot that is directly linked to the train station, but that lot is very busy and is often full. Hartford’s train station parking is described by the participants as “horrible”. There are not enough parking spaces and you must cross a busy street to get to the train station. The group recommended that travelers arrive at the train station early to address parking issues.

Sidewalks:

Participants reported that sidewalks are often not present or not accessible because they don’t have curb cuts. Participants overcome that barrier by using the street and “hoping for the best”.

Accessibility Inside the Train Station Environment

Restrooms:

The lack of accessible restrooms is a significant issue identified by this group. Grand Central Station in New York City is mentioned as one of the worst train station bathrooms in terms of accessibility. There is no unisex or family bathroom, so if you need a personal assistance to use the restroom and that personal assistant is of another gender “...then you’re in really big trouble”. If traveling in a group of people

with disabilities and there is only one accessible stall then you are looking at a lengthy wait. Focus group participants recommended calling ahead or visiting train stations to review availability of accessible restrooms before traveling.

Ramps:

Many train stations have ramps and they advertise that the station is accessible via ramp. But having a ramp does not make the station accessible if the ramp is so steep that it is a danger to use. One participant reported that there is a huge ramp in Grand Central Station to access the bottom floor where the bathrooms and food court are located. "There is a HUGE ramp – I am not talking a little ramp, I am mean a huge ramp and then another ramp to get down there. So, if you don't have really, really, really good machine, you can burn out your motor". In stations where they are also working elevators, steep ramps can be avoided. In stations where the ramp is the only option, then focus group participants suggest proceeding down the ramp with caution and with the assistance of others.

Elevators:

Many railway stations are only accessible through the use of elevators, but it is typical for one or more elevators in each station to be out of working order. Many stations have very old elevators that are quite small and there is often not room for you and your luggage. Many stations require taking an elevator to reach the needed platform, which can sometime present a barrier to travel when elevators are out of order. Elevator outages can be a major issue when there is bad weather, such as rising tides causing flooding in coastal regions or excessive rain in Washington D.C. which tends to put elevators out of order.

In some train stations, the elevators are closed after a certain time of night (which is before the trains stop running). One participant stayed in New York City late one night and discovered that the elevators were closed after 11pm, so he ended up taking his electric wheelchair down an escalator with help from friends. Another participant came up with another creative solution for addressing out of order elevators: "So, what you had to do was we had to go through a train to the middle track, and wait for the train to come the other way, and then go through that train to the far side so that we could use the elevator on the other side to get out". Participants recommended that travelers call train stations prior to travel to determine the working status of elevators.

Ticket Counters:

The ticket counters are typically high and require upper body mobility to access. One participant said that he never tries to attempt accessing the ticket counter by himself because he just can't do it; instead he seeks out the customer service office where they do have an accessible ticket counter. Many larger train stations have a customer service counter that has an accessible ticket counter. Customer service counters can also often handle your luggage for you. When accessible ticket windows are not available, participants recommended asking the railway staff to come out from behind the window to assist you.

Ticketing Machines:

Ticketing machines were described by the group as being easy to use, accessible, and convenient. There are good for commuter rails but not with Amtrak because Amtrak requires reservations for accessible seats that can't be made at ticket machines. It is also not possible to get discounted tickets for travelers with disabilities at most ticket machines.

Amtrak's Red Cap Services:

Amtrak offers what is called Red Cap services. These staff are able to handle luggage, assist passengers to and from the boarding platform, place the bridge plate when needed, and assist as needed in helping the passenger on and off the rail car. Red Cap railway personnel are easily identified as they actually wear red caps and official Amtrak uniforms. Most participants reported having very positive interactions with Red Cap staff.

One participant reported that the Red Cap staff at the New Haven stations are particularly well trained to work with people with disabilities. That participant is a volunteer that works with Amtrak to train their staff on how to best support people with disabilities. She reported that one particular Amtrak administrator is very committed to supporting people with disabilities and for that reason the New Haven train station typically provides excellent Red Cap services. Another participant reported that he also routinely has positive experiences with the Red Cap services in New Haven.

Purchasing Tickets:

When you call railways to learn more information about purchasing accessible seating, participants report that most railway ticketing agents do not know much about the accessibility of their own rail systems. They usually don't know how many accessible seats there are available on each train. One participant said she was quite sure that most railway ticketing agents taking calls have "never even seen a train" and that they certainly have never see the wheelchair location.

Participants reported that railway ticketing agents often refer to the wheelchair accessible seating area as the "securement location" or the "lockdown location", even though trains don't use any type of lock down system. "Just the other day when I called this woman called it the wheel chair lock down location. And I corrected them, I said, well there is a wheelchair location but there is no lockdown system. A lockdown system means that you attach the chair – they do have lock down securements on buses and on vans, but they don't have them on trains. So you do not have a wheelchair lock down location".

Railway ticketing agents often refuse to sell more than one ticket for accessible seating, so people traveling in groups just have to show up at the station and hope for the best. It's cheaper to purchase the tickets ahead of time on the phone, so not only does it cost travelers more when railway staff refuse to sell multiple accessible seats, but there is also the inconvenience of showing up at the train station without knowing for sure that

you will have a seat available. One participant stated that when the railway staff don't know how many accessible seats are available that they are putting a "squeeze" on people with physical disabilities. "True, sometimes the train itself is very full. But sometimes we are the only ones being squeezed out, being told there is no room for you. No more wheelchair securement locations. And I will ask them then, how many spaces do you have for people with wheelchairs on this train, and they won't know. They can't answer your question. But they can tell you that there is no space for you".

Amtrak requires that people with disabilities make reservations for accessible seating, even on trains that don't typically require advance reservations. To make reservations on Amtrak, you first have to deal with "Julie" the automated teller. The options that Julie offers do not include service for people with disabilities, so you must gain access to a live agent by either pushing the right number or by voicing the word "agent". Amtrak staff typically don't offer you the discounted rate when you ask for accessible seating, so you must ask. Amtrak reservation can be made on-line, but it is not possible to reserve accessible seating through the online system.

Accessibility of the On the Train Environment

Communication with Railway Personnel:

Participants described positive and frequent communication with railway personnel on-board the train as being critical to successful travel. "Once you're on the train you immediately, even before the train takes off, find the conductor who punches your ticket and explain to him that he has got to make sure that I am going to Key West or wherever I am going, and make sure that they call ahead. You have got to make sure well in advance and remind them throughout the whole trip".

"So, if you are going to take a long trip, you want to become great friends with the staff on the train. You get to know them. You're just as friendly as you can be, because they are going to have to be the ones that bring you your food. Cause you can't go through the train to get it. Now, if you are traveling with somebody who can, now that is one thing. But I have taken several trips where I was the least disabled of the crew, and walking through the train and bringing food back for everyone else, I wasn't going to attempt that".

Seating:

The accessible space for wheelchairs is often the space that is typically used for luggage. There is often no space in that area for a traveling companion to sit with you, so be prepared to sit alone. Also, travelers will sometimes complain that you are sitting in the space for their luggage. "And they say, but I have always put my luggage there, well, you are not going to this time". For people traveling with more than one person who uses a wheelchair, you should be prepared to have to fight for the right to have more than one wheelchair per train car. One participant who frequently travels in groups says that two chairs can easily be accommodated on most trains, but that conductors discourage it and would rather spread out your group.

Many trains offer wheelchair locations that can be used facing forward or back, or facing sideways. If you face sideways you are perpendicular to the line of travel, so with G-forces you are rocking back and forth a lot, which can be uncomfortable. The stop and go traffic on commuter rail lines can also be uncomfortable. Participants recommend facing forward or backward with the line of travel for the greatest level of comfort.

Sometimes they are not accessible seats. One participant said she took a train from New Haven, CT to Springfield, MA riding in the vestibule the entire time because there were no accessible seats. She said she had to be forceful with the conductor about her right to ride the train, even if it might be hazardous and crowded to ride in the vestibule. "Know your rights. You have to learn. And there is a federal law that states you can not be forced to sit apart in any particular location, even though that location may be the designation location. You have the right to sit or park anywhere you can get to".

Restrooms:

There is a great variance in size and accessibility of restrooms on board trains. Typically the restrooms on trains are very tight spaces, with the exception being the Acela Amtrak trains which are quite spacious throughout. In some of the older train cars the bathrooms are not wheelchair accessible.

One participant reported that there are sometimes issues when restrooms toilets overflow, which happened to her when riding a Metro North train. A toilet overflowed and everyone else got up and moved to another car, but she had to wait for the conductor to come by and then she asked to be moved to another car when the train stopped next. The conductor ignored her request and she had to remain in the car with "effluent running down the aisle". That participant wrote a letter of complaint to Metro North about the conductor's behavior.

Dining Cars:

Many trains have dining cars or "club cars". There is often accessible seating there and you can sit with a traveling companion. Participants wanted to remind travelers in wheelchairs that once you are that car than you can't move cars until stopped at a station and then you must find the conductor to help you transfer. Some are congenial about that process, but not always, so if you choose to travel in the club car you should be prepared to remain in that car for some time.

Electrical Outlets:

Some train cars, especially the newer ones, have electrical outlets. This is great if you need to plug in your electric chair to charge it. Several of the participants thought it would be important for someone who uses an electric chair to always carry their charger with them when they travel, because you never know what type of emergency you might face.

3. CUSTOMER TO CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE

When asked about customer to customer assistance, all of the study participants said that they would not ask another customer for assistance unless it was an emergency situation. “No, never. I don’t want them helping. If they want to go find a conductor, okay. But other than that, they are not indemnified”. One participant mentioned that sometimes the people who offer to help are drunk, and that they are more dangerous than they are helpful. Many participants mentioned that they routinely travel on trains with paid personal care attendants, family, and/or friends, rather than traveling alone, so they have not been in a situation where they needed to seek out assistance from other customers.

“It’s really not a good practice, especially for the first time user. The first time user might want to do it, because they are naïve to train travel and they are scared...”, but group agreed that train travelers with disabilities should look for the conductor to help them with any needs, rather than asking another customer.

“Someone may appear to be helpful, and you may be desperate at that point, but all that said, get the conductor. They are paid to do it. You might have to hunt them down and harass them to do it. You can go tell people (who are offering to help) to do that”.

One participant mentioned that she and other friends have gotten help from other customers when trying to use wheelchairs on the New York Subways. “I would just like to reiterate that the subway trains in NYC are terrifying. There is no ramp. And the gaps and totally unpredictable, so you don’t know how wide it is going to be. If it is going to be up or down. If it’s from the train car to the platform and it’s down, if you go fast enough you might be able to get over there. But if it’s up, you are liable to get... well, it’s pretty hard to go uphill. Okay, and a lot of times, this is when you say when do other passengers help? Well, when we have tried to use the subway for a trip to New York, and there were a couple of us, people got hung up between the platform and the train car and other customers had to literally push and pull us over the gap”. That participant said that in any emergency situation, like that described, that help for anyone is appreciated.

4. TIPS FOR FIRST TIME TRAIN TRAVELERS

- “Right from the start you need to think about what you need”. Even in the registration process and getting tickets, you need to be clear about what types of supports you will need.
- You need to know your rights. “Now as far as a recommendation for a first time train rider, if you can not be accompanied by a well-oriented disability rights lawyer, then learn what the laws are, what your rights are under those laws, and make sure that you hold the train staff to the letter of those laws”.
- Arrive early. You need to make sure that what you ask for is going to be available when you get to your destination. Add lead time. Don’t cut it too close.

- Talk to others who have used the system. “I think it is absolutely essential to take the time to talk with people who have used the system, because if you try to depend on this person that you are going to call on the phone with Amtrak – most of them I don’t think have ever seen a train. They certainly haven’t seen the wheelchair location.”
- Best thing to do is a trial run. Ask for a tour. Ride with an experienced train traveler.
- Check accessibility of stations and find out if staff are available to assist at each station. This is more of an issue with commuter rail systems.
- Be prepared to be assertive. Know your rights.
- “Don’t be afraid. Go out and do it. The more users we have out there, the more we are going to get what we want, okay”.
- Travel with a friend. “I think it’s important not to be afraid, at the same time, I think, especially for the first time user, you can’t do it alone. I have gotten to the point that I can do it alone now but even at that I really prefer traveling with somebody in case something happens, and I am a seasoned traveler. So for the first time person, especially dealing with all that we have to deal with sometimes, doing it alone is not a good idea”.
- Ask about bathrooms on board train and in the train station.
- Avoid sitting in bar car because people tend to get drunk and they can pose a threat to you. “Really, I know it sounds funny, but I don’t even get within two cars of the bar car. I don’t want to because I have had drunks stumbling over me, going back and forth”.
- Come prepared. “About your chair, not only make sure that you have the charger, but make sure that if you are in the station you have a place to charge, but make sure you have flashlights with reflectors, things on your chair, especially if you are traveling at night”. Pack a tool kit for chair repairs. “One piece of advice. Bring whatever equipment you ever, ever need. Bring the extra stuff, in case there is, you know... bring any kind of tools that you ever use because things do get bumped and then you got to tighten it up and you got to have the tools”.

5. OTHER TOPICS OF DISCUSSION IN FOCUS GROUP

Benefits of Riding Trains Compared to Other Modes of Transportation:

Several focus group participants mentioned that for long distance travel, riding trains is their only real option. One participant mentioned that he refuses to fly ever again. He said that the greatest benefit of train travel is that you get to stay in your own chair. “I flew once and they did a spill with my legs and broke my hip. I refuse to fly anymore. I can not fly and not sit in my own chair, it won’t happen. So I am forced to use the train or a bus”. But he felt that most places he wanted to go were accessible by train, so his ability of travel was only limited by the time it took to travel by train versus the quickness of flying. This participant was planning to travel across the country soon to Arizona, and he mentioned that it was going to take him several days by train rather than 4-5 hours that a plane trip would take.

Several of the focus group participants discussed the benefits of train ridership over using private vehicles. “Well, I have got news for them, -- that your own vehicle is nightmare. Not just in repair and other upkeep, insurance, license, the whole bit, but also, I would say 80% of people driving on the roads today should not be there”. Participants mentioned that trains are typically much safer route of transportation than personal vehicles. Another issue is the price of gasoline. It is expensive to own and operate your own vehicle, and so compared to those costs, riding the train is pretty cost efficient.

Quality of Train Tracks:

“One thing I noticed too, you know, the long trip down to Florida... the tracks are really nice through Virginia. After that, you really start bouncing. The tracks are terrible down south. You just bounce – at one point, (my wife) actually took a tie, a men’s tie, and tied it around the headrest here on my head. My head was moving so much, she thought it was going to snap right off. I had to tie my head against pillow because I was bouncing so much. The tracks going south after Virginia get real... they are not like the tracks up here. And that is sad. They should all be the same tracks”.

Cost of Train Tickets:

Although there are reduced priced fares available on most train systems, the focus group participants reported that you must know to ask for their fares because they will not be offered to you. “And that’s why I wanted to bring that up, because it is isn’t all that well known and it is not advertised”. Focus group participants reported that Amtrak will give a reduced priced fare for personal assistants and 15% off regularly priced tickets for travelers with a disability. Metro North offers 50% discount as a person with a disability but your assistant does not get a discount.

Within the Amtrak railway system, there are different costs associated with different train types and if traveling during peak or non-peak hours. The elite Amtrak train is known as the Acela, and depending on time of travel, it can cost up to 50% more than travel on regular Amtrak train cars. “And also, just one more thing before some of us have to go, the Acela trains are very nice, especially for long distance travel, but the fares are cost prohibitive. And that needs to be worked out. That is a significant barrier, especially for people with disabilities who are on a fixed income. You should have the option to travel in a nicer environment, especially if you have a disability and need, or not necessarily need but want to travel across country”.

Traveling with Adaptive Equipment:

For passengers traveling on long-distance trips using Amtrak, there is the option to checking adaptive equipment with your luggage. “One convenient thing that I learned is that if you take Amtrak a long distance, they always have a [train] car that is for cargo. So I bought my lift and I didn’t have to have it in the passenger area – they put it in the luggage area as cargo in three or four cars down. And it’s a huge car. They put all the stuff on. I got to bring my lift and anything I needed I could bring down to Florida with me”. This participant brought a normal sized hooyer lift on the train with him.” If it’s

medical, and keep this in mind for any travels, if it's something that you need medically it is not counted as luggage”.

Traveling with a Service Animal:

“Well, I definitely wouldn't travel by myself with a service animal. I don't really have so much a problem with them allowing a service animal on the train, it's more if I need assistance handling her. I can't, you know, take her on the train – if I were by myself, I would need assistant to take (the dog) on the train first before I get on. There is no space for both of us to get on at the same time. And I have never tried it, because I have been with people, but I don't think they would handle (the dog) either, if I needed help getting on and off the train and I were by myself. Then once I am on the train, there is not a whole lot of space, especially in the Acela trains, to put (the dog), because you can't really sit out in the aisle but yet there is not enough space. I kind of force my way out, but there is not a whole lot of space there for her. Especially if it were a long trip”.

“And as far as a guide dog, because it is so narrow and everything, they may go across the gap of the train without the bridge plate, but you better really tell them”.

“Yeah, they are scared. But I think with any dog, whether it's a guide dog or it's a service dog, they really should have some area at the station. There should be a designated area for service dogs, and it's not there. You know, then you are going to refuse to bring the dog. And you have to have your dog to travel”. If traveling with a service animal, they need to access to places to walk and go to the bathroom. There are generally no grassy areas around major train stations, making it difficult for travelers with service animals.

Outreach Necessary to Encourage Train Ridership:

“But I think that is one of the things. Those of us who are competent and confident in using public transportation, we have a responsibility, I believe, to keep reaching out to people and to try to start. Start with the young ones. Like other kids get to take trips. Why don't our kids with disabilities get to do more trips independently? Why don't we have some systems where we could start small, and not the group groups, but one or two, you know. And take these trips. And teach kids so that they can use and have that independence, because you know, if you wait until they are in high school they are already so far behind their peers in terms of their social development and independence. How to move in this world independently. You know, I feel really passionate about this, you might have noticed, but it is just really important that we get out there”.

Issues for People with Hidden Disabilities:

“I would like to address some of that because I have had both the personal experience and then known so many people with different levels of disability, but personally I have gone from acquiring a spinal cord injury almost 30 years ago, initially I couldn't walk at all, and then gradually started using a manual wheelchair and then I walked most of the time with this cane. Then my knee gave out and now I use a power chair most of the

time. I mean, so I have had those different levels of traveling around and doing various things. And using, always, by the way, using public transportation. I have never owned a car. I know it's odd, but it's true. So, and I also travel with people who have quite a range of disabilities. And one of the things, for example, those of us who have power chairs, it's obvious we have disabilities. We don't get questioned, are we disabled enough to get the disability discount. But friends of mine who are disabled, have very definite disabilities, but are not so visibly disabled, you know, get questioned all the time. And they are just as poor as I am. And they have disabilities. And they may have more complicated disabilities than I do, they are just not as visible”.

“I have been on a train, traveling with a friend of mine, who sitting down you can't see that she has a brace on her leg. She had a stroke. If she was walking you could tell she was disabled, but sitting down you couldn't tell. And they came to take her ticket and she had her ticket with the reduced fare, and they questioned her. The conductor was questioning her, ‘what's your disability?’ They are not supposed to ask you that. That's horrible. Prove to me your disability. No”. One participant reported, “And by law you can't ask what somebody's disability is”, but she reported that railway staff ask anyhow.

Ideas for Future Research Projects:

- Recommendation that someone write a handbook entitled “Rights for Dummies” about ADA rights and regulations related to train travel. Many focus group participants reported feeling like they did know how much they should or could ask for railway personnel or railway providers, so they felt like a handbook would be helpful.
- Outreach to youth about the benefits of public transportation.
- Mentoring programs to connect experienced train riders who have a disability with first time train riders.
- Create a video on how to make train travel accessible to show to people who might be nervous about riding trains.
- Training programs for railway staff on disability sensitivity and when & how to offer help or support to travelers with disabilities.
- Field research on the experiences of traveling long-distances by train.

Field Research

Summary

The field research on local and regional railway lines found that most railway staff and travelers with physical disability are managing the gap between the platform and the rail car in a safe manner. The biggest barrier noted to smooth transitioning across the gap was attitudinal barriers of staff interacting in a less than professional manner with travelers with disabilities. Most train stations were accessible enough to allow persons with disabilities to travel safely. There were very few instances of customer to customer assistance witnessed during these observations.

1. MANAGING THE GAP: BOARDING & DEBOARDING

The boarding and deboarding process observed during the field research varied only slightly depending on the train station, type of railcar, and type of bridge plate being used. With the exception of the New York City subway system, all railway lines had bridge plates available and they were typically readily accessible for use. The most significant difference observed during boarding and deboarding was the level of interaction between the railway staff and the traveler with a disability. There were exceptionally helpful and courteous staff observed all rail lines, just as there were rude and unpleasant railway staff observed on each rail line as well.

The process of boarding and deboarding appeared to go most smoothly when the railway staff were interactive, asked what they could do to support the person with the disability, and directed other train travelers out of line of travel of the passenger with the physical disability. The boarding and deboarding process seemed to most difficult when railway personnel talked very little to traveler and simply set the bridge plate in place, with no offer of further help and no redirecting of other passengers.

While riding on the Amtrak, Metro North, and Metrorail lines, passengers with a variety of disabilities were observed boarding and deboarding the train. Electric wheelchairs, manual wheelchairs, canes, and one scooter were observed in use on the rail ways. All adaptive equipment appeared to be handled with care. When riding on the New York City subway lines, a few passengers with unsteady gait were observed, but there were no other passengers with obvious physical disabilities observed traveling on the subway lines. Those passenger with unsteady gait had at least a moderate amount of difficulty boarding and deboarding the train, often relying on traveling companions to provide extra support during the transition.

The only real problem observed with the boarding process was witnessed when traveling on Metro North along the Hudson River Valley commuter line. At one station a traveler with a physical disability needed assistance boarding but there was no conductor to be found on the train at that time. One customer went looking for the conductor, and several other customers offered to assist the person to board, but eventually the gentleman decided he wanted to board independently and he nearly tripped when stepping over the gap. The conductor arrived just in time to see the gentleman stumbling into the train, but he offered no physical assistance, he simply asked if the man if he needed help finding a seat. This event prompted an interesting discussion about gap safety issues among the group of customers that had attempted to help the man with a disabilities board the train. There were several stories brought up about injuries and death related to gap accidents and one customer mentioned that she has also seen several near accidents involving young children riding in strollers that tipped over when crossing the gap.

During the field research with Suzie, the boarding process at the New Haven station went very smoothly. The Amtrak Red Cap staff was helpful, friendly and courteous. He boarded the train first and asked other travelers to move out of the accessible seating

area and he moved luggage that was blocking the space. He asked Suzie how she would like to board, backwards or forwards, and then guided her chair up the bridge plate ramp. Once on the train, he guided us to our seats and asked if he needed any other help. He made sure there was ample room for the service dog by moving even more luggage. He quickly left the train after helping us to board, so we did not have the opportunity to offer him a tip, which Suzie says she typically does for all Red Cap staff who assist her. Once we arrived at Penn Station in New York City, we waited for the other passengers to deboard and then another Red Cap staff placed the bridge plate in place. It was tight turn from the aisle of the train to the door, but Suzie was able to easily exit. The Red Cap staff then escorted us to the accessible elevator, along with another train traveler with a physical disability.

The boarding process leaving out of Penn Station did not go as smoothly as the earlier boarding. We changed our tickets to leave at an earlier time, so we made it down to the platform with only 5 minutes to spare. The conductor did not have keys to bridge plate, so he had to call up to the Red Cap office and have a staff person come down to assist us. Once the bridge plate was in place, it was a little challenging for Suzie to cross because it was a much steeper grade up to the train. The conductor did not offer to help in any manner, he simply watched as Suzie and discussed the issue. I ended up pushing Suzie from behind as she charged her chair forward up the ramp. Once inside the train, we made our way independently to the accessible seating location. When the conductor came by later to take our tickets, he told us that we “must” arrive earlier if we need special assistance with boarding. When deboarding the train, we again waited until the other passengers had exited and then I exited the train with the service dog. The Red Cap staff put the bridge plate in place, but he did not speak with Suzie or I, he simply walked some distance away and watched. Suzie asked if it was okay to deboard and the Red Cap staff did not respond. I stepped on the bridge plate to see if it seemed secure, told Suzie I thought it was okay to exit, and she went ahead and deboarded.

On both legs of the trip, Suzie informed the conductor of where she planned to exit the train. Several stops prior to our arrival at the desired location, Suzie again got the attention of the conductor and reminded him of where we planned to exit. The conductors on both legs of trip said that they would “call ahead” to let Red Cap staff know to meet us at the platform.

2. ACCESSIBILITY: PEDESTRIAN & ON THE TRAIN ENVIRONMENTS

The accessibility of the immediate pedestrian environment in and around the train stations varied greatly. The majority of the train stations in southern Connecticut and along the Amtrak route to Washington, DC were fully accessible (as long as the elevators were in working order), as well as all of Metrorail stations visited in the Washington, DC area. Many of the smaller commuter rail stations along the Hudson River Valley route of the Metro North rail provided minimal accessibility features. One station that reported to be accessible had no staff and an elevator that was out of service, so had a person with a physical disability exited the train at that station, they would have been stuck on the platform (which offered no protection from the weather).

The most regularly noted accessibility barrier within the train stations were the restrooms. Many train stations noted that their restrooms were accessible, but the location and design of many of the restrooms made them very difficult to access in a wheelchair. In many of the busier train stations, there were simply not enough restrooms. People were waiting in a lines that were sometimes 20-30 people long, and once inside the restroom area it was very crowded. And some of the smaller stations simply did not have accessible restrooms period. The accessibility of restrooms was also an issue on board the train. The Acela trains had wonderfully roomy and accessible restrooms that would allow a wheelchair to do a complete 360 degree turn, but all the other train cars had very limited space.

During the field research with Suzie, we started our trip at the New Haven train station. The accessible parking lot connected with the train station was full, so we had to park across the street. The sidewalks leading to the train station were accessible. The main ticket counters were not accessible to Suzie. I approached the ticket counter and retrieved our tickets. We were then directed to the customer service office to seek out the Red Cap staff. The customer service office did have an accessible ticket counter, but it was not staffed. After waiting for over 10 minutes, I returned to the main ticket counters and asked to have Red Cap staff paged to the customer service office. The Red Cap staff arrived in another 5 minutes, and he was friendly and engaging. He escorted us through the station, down one elevator and up another to the platform, and then told us where to wait for the accessible train car. The elevators were small but in working order and able to accommodate Suzie, myself, and her service animal. The Red Cap staff had to take another elevator.

We rode an Amtrak regional train into New York City and the Amtrak Acela train back to New Haven. The Acela train was quite a bit roomier, with wider doors, wider aisles, truly accessible restrooms, and accessible seating available that faced a fold down table with a seat across for a companion passenger. The regional trains had much smaller doors, very narrow aisles, walk ways that were quite narrow, small bathrooms that were difficult to negotiate in a wheelchair, and the accessible seating was the luggage area.

Upon arriving in New York City, we found Penn Station to be accessible in terms of readily available bridge plates, working elevators, moderately sloped ramps, and accessible eating areas. The main floor restroom did have an accessible stall, but it was out of order and would have been quite difficult to access in a wheelchair given the narrow walkways and doors in the restroom. The immediate environment around Penn station was accessible, with elevators exiting the station, sidewalks in good repair, curb cuts, and cross walk signals.

3. CUSTOMER TO CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE

There was very little customer to customer assistance observed during the field research. There was the one incident described above where customers attempted to help a traveler with a disability, but he ultimately refused their help and boarded the train independently. Most travelers with obvious physical disabilities were traveling with a

companion, what appeared to be paid staff in some situations and family or friends in others. Those travelers relied on traveling companions to get food, find accessible seating, manage baggage, and seek out the conductor or Red Cap staff when boarding or deboarding.

Discussion

People with physical disabilities who ride trains face a number of significant barriers to travel. Policy-driven solutions aimed at meeting ADA requirements and increasing accessibility are typically aimed at changes to the physical environment, such as keeping elevators in working order, make bridge plates available, and lowering the level of ticket counters. While these physical modifications are critical to making train travel accessible, train customers with physical disabilities report that attitudinal barriers of railway personnel are just as important to address in making train travel both accessible and enjoyable. Railway providers, such as Amtrak, report that their employees are “pleased” and “happy” to provide supports to special needs travelers, but focus group participants report that at least half the time Amtrak employees are difficult to work with, making accessibility of train travel more challenging.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority was the only railway provider reviewed in this study that had written policies (made publicly available) that addressed the training of railway staff to work with people with disabilities. This study would suggest that all railway providers would benefit from having such a training place as a means of reducing attitudinal barriers to travel as identified by the focus group participants and as experienced during the field research. Focus group participants felt that it would be important for railway providers to include self-advocates with physical disabilities in those trainings in order to allow for hands on training on working with wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment.

The formal policy-driven solutions identified by railway providers and made available to the public on their websites typically provided only minimal information needed by people with physical disabilities who are planning to travel by train. Most of the websites recommend that travelers with special needs call ahead to determine the accessibility of train stations, but only a few websites provide specific details about accessibility features that might be located in train stations and therefore inquired about during calls. As the focus group participants identified, first time travelers really need to do more than just call railway providers – they need to visit the stations and take a test run to really understand what the barriers are to travel and how to overcome those barriers. Although some railway websites report that certain stations are accessible, focus group participants report that, in their experience, many of those stations are not accessible, especially to people who use a wheelchair. For example, there are a number of New York City subway stations that are listed as accessible, but focus group participants report that the entire subway system as inaccessible to wheelchair users because there are no bridge plates and the gaps are too wide to cross.

All of the railway provider websites indicated that travelers with disabilities are eligible for reduced-fare tickets and programs, but only one site actually posted the specific fare reduction. The focus group participants reported that reduced-fare ticket options are “not all that well known... and not advertised”. Better media outreach to travelers with disabilities about reduced-fare tickets is a recommendation of the focus group, as well as better training for ticketing agents in terms of the need to offer the reduced-fare prices when customers call asking for accessible seating reservations.

The data clearly showed that there are attitudinal barriers to accessibility when railway personnel are not well trained to work with customers with disabilities, but there is also some suggestion that the attitudes of the travelers with disabilities themselves around accessibility might also be a barrier to train travel. Several focus group members reported that they feel many people with disabilities have likely not attempted to travel by train because of fear of the unknown or anxiety about potential barriers. One woman contacted the research office seeking more information about this study, and reported the following: “I just thought I should let you know that I have never taken a train in my chair. I am too intimidated to even try it. I use my cane. Nor do I know of anyone that is in a chair that uses the train because of the possibly barriers that one may face. Driving or alternative transportation is simply easier than the uncertainty of the train! That is my two cents! Good luck with your study!”. Much of the advice that the focus group participants had for first time train travels involved admonitions to be brave, to be courageous, to be assertive, and to take chances. This area of psycho-social or interpersonal level barriers to accessibility is an area that deserves further study.

Conclusion

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the public and private railway systems in this country have made great strides in reducing accessibility barriers to train travel for people with physical disabilities. While most railway providers report having a plan in place to reach full ADA compliance within the near future, there is still a need to look beyond physical environmental modifications and to consider the potential attitudinal barriers that might be limiting accessibility. People with physical disabilities who have experience riding trains, such as those that participated in this research, are often eager and willing to help railway providers better train their employees. Self-advocates with experience riding trains are also willing to serve as mentors to first time train riders to show them the ropes of making train travel accessible, with the goal of increasing community access and integration.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Mind the Gap:
A Reference Guide for People with Physical Disabilities Riding Trains

Focus Group Questions

1. What accessibility barriers have you faced in riding trains?
 - Outside the train station environment (parking lot, neighborhood, etc.)
 - Inside the train station (lobby, restrooms, platforms, elevators, etc.)
 - Purchasing tickets / ticket counters
 - Boarding / Managing “the gap” (space between platform and rail car)
 - On the train environment (availability of accessible seating, restrooms, food cars, sleeper cars, car to car movement, etc.)
 - Deboarding
2. How did you overcome those accessibility barriers?
3. What are the differences, if any, between the different types of trains (local metros, subway trains, Amtrak Acela or regular Amtrak trains)?
4. What role do paid personnel of the railways take in reducing accessibility barriers and/or ensuring your health and safety during your train riding experience?
5. What role, if any, do other people (support staff, family & friends, or other train riders unknown to you) play in reducing accessibility barriers?
6. What role do service animals play in reducing accessibility barriers? What are the challenges of riding trains with service animals?
7. Do you use any adaptive equipment that you would take with you on a train? If yes, how have you handled storage of equipment? Have you used equipment during a train travel?
8. Based on your understanding of the ADA regulations, what are the responsibilities of railway providers in ensuring accessibility to people with physical disabilities?
9. Are you aware of reduced-price tickets for support staff? Have you ever purchased such a ticket? If yes, what steps did you need to take to access this reduced-price? If you have not used this service, why not?
10. What are the benefits of riding the trains compared with other forms of public or private transportation (automobiles, buses, airplane, etc.)?
11. What are some recommendations you would make to first time train users?

Appendix B: Tip Sheet for First Time Train Riders

Mind the Gap: A Reference Guide for People with Physical Disabilities Riding Trains

Tips for First Time Train Users

Be Courageous

Trying something new can be daunting – be brave and take the risk!

Plan Ahead

Find a seasoned traveler to show you the ropes or consider a travel training program (if available in your area).

Take a tour of the train station & train car.

Take a short trip on the train prior to any longer travel.

Make reservations for accessible seats.

Ask about reduced priced fares for people with disabilities (and support staff).

Plan your route of travel. Check departure and arrival times.

Research Train Station Accessibility

Check that planned station stops are accessible by calling or visiting the stations.

Specific features to ask about: availability of accessible restrooms, steepness of ramps, working order of elevators, accessibility of ticket counters or ticket machines, whether station is staff by railway personnel that can provide assistance, and parking availability.

Plan to be Assertive

You should be prepared to ask for what you need.

Be aware that most train staff are not well trained in supporting people with disabilities, so don't assume that they will know what supports you might need.

Remember that you have the right to accessible transportation and that railway staff are required to provide needed supports to make the train accessible.

Be Prepared

Arrive early. Plan extra time in your travel schedule to accommodate delays.

If you use adaptive equipment, pack a small tool kit for repairs.

If you use an electric wheelchair, pack your charger. There are often electrical outlets on trains and you can charge your chair while you ride.

Boarding & Deboarding the Train

Find the railway personnel that is responsible for assisting you to safely board the train

Find the railcar with the universal symbol of accessibility.

If needed, ask railway personnel to find and position the bridge plate.

Many people with disabilities who require the use of a bridge plate describe the boarding and deboarding process as the most challenging and sometimes frightening part of train travel. Be prepared to be anxious but take the challenge and cross the gap.

If you use adaptive equipment, tell railway staff exactly how they should handle your

equipment during the boarding and deboarding process. Remember that no one knows how to manage your equipment better than you, so be assertive and direct with staff about what is and what is not acceptable.

On the Train Environment

Once on board the train, find the seating area designated for travelers with disabilities

On most railways, the conductor will come around to punch your ticket. At that time, make it known when you plan to deboard the train and what assistance you will require to do so. Remind the conductor frequently throughout the trip of your destination.

If the train has a meal car /club car, you can ask the railway personnel to make a purchase for you and bring it to your seat.

Accessible restrooms are typically available in accessible railcars, but be aware it is often difficult to maneuver wheelchairs in those tight spaces.

If you haven't seen the conductor in awhile and you are close to your final destination, ask another traveler on the train to please find the conductor for you.

And most importantly, HAVE FUN!

Train travel is a mode of transportation enjoyed by many people. So sit back and enjoy the ride.