



Customer Focus on Loss Control

Innovative Safety and Health SolutionsSM

Wheelchair Transportation

Transporting individuals in wheelchairs requires special vehicles and special consideration. Individuals who use wheelchairs must be easily and safely loaded and unloaded, and special consideration must be given to their safe transport once they are inside the vehicle.

Seat belts, when worn properly, definitely reduce the frequency and extent of injuries if a vehicle is involved in a sudden stop or a collision. Seat belts cut medical costs for auto accidents by more than 80 percent, and have been shown to be more than 50 percent effective in reducing deaths and serious injuries to passengers of vehicles involved in crashes. But even with these highly publicized statistics and with every state having laws requiring their use, about one-third of vehicle passengers still do not wear seat belts. Even though 75 percent of all collisions happen within 25 miles of a driver's home, and 80 percent of all accidents resulting in injury or death occur at speeds under 40 mph, many people still do not take advantage of the safety offered by wearing seat belts.

People being transported in wheelchairs are no exception. When the vehicle they are riding in comes to a sudden stop, the only thing that can prevent them from being thrown around inside the vehicle and striking hard metal objects is the seat belt. Seat belts must be used to keep passengers in their wheelchairs where they are less likely to sustain serious injuries. Naturally, the wheelchair must be securely attached to the vehicle with restraining straps or devices so it remains in place and away from injury-causing objects. Failing to secure the wheelchair to the vehicle, or the passenger to the wheelchair, will almost certainly increase the severity of injury sustained if the vehicle is involved in severe evasive maneuvers, sudden stops, or collisions. The driver or an attendant should take the responsibility to ensure that restraining devices are properly secured.

Wheelchairs must be constructed to withstand the force of a collision. Most wheelchairs are designed to be used just as mobile chairs, not as rigid structures able to withstand the severe forces involved in collisions. The structure needs to be able to accept the stress placed on it by the restraining straps or devices during a collision, as well as the tremendous forces exerted by the weight of the passenger (this is especially critical for larger passengers). Some wheelchair manufacturers have labeled their wheelchairs, "not to be used as a seat in motor-vehicle transportation". Wheelchairs that are designed to withstand the forces involved in automotive crashes are often referred to as "transit wheelchairs".

Load wheelchairs so they are "front-facing" and have sufficient space between them to permit easy securing of adjacent wheelchairs, as well as a "space cushion" for passengers as they flex forward during a crash. Failing to implement any of the above risk management controls will almost surely increase liability exposure resulting from passenger injury which is likely to occur at some point in time. Remember, *Prevention is the Best Protection.*

