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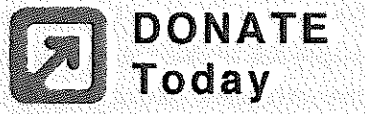
Self-Serve Advocacy: Fighting to Improve Gas Station Access

What's more American than our love affair with driving? Roll the windows down, jack up the volume of a favorite song, hit the back roads and hit the gas ... it's all good.

There are entire industries devoted to getting wheelchair-using drivers behind the wheel. We've got hand controls, lockdowns for power chairs, steering wheel donuts, layers of mirrors and even apparatus to adjust for quad hands. We've got full-sized or mini-vans, old cars with benches and seats that move back or forward electronically and even lift-equipped pick-up trucks.

But we don't have an easy means for wheelers to fill up at the gas station.

In reality, fueling up has actually gotten more difficult. Full-service gas stations are being phased out in favor of self-service everywhere except two states. In Oregon and New Jersey, the law requires that attendants pump the gas. Everywhere else, drivers who need assistance are stuck trying to call the number on the blue sign or honking away in hopes of getting an attendant's attention. If that doesn't work, most drivers with physical disabilities just get out and pump it themselves, although it can



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We Reached Over 5000
Individuals With A Spinal Cord

take up to half an hour longer and can be frustratingly inconvenient — if not impossible.

Injury Or Disease In 2015. But
We Need To Reach More In
2016!



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Well, There is a Law

The Americans with Disabilities Act did try to help drivers with disabilities by outlining a protocol for station assistance and pump specifications, but the results have been far from ideal.

“The Americans with Disabilities Act says that when two or more people are working at a self-service station, if you’re able to get their attention, one of them is obligated to come out and assist you,” says Paul Tobin, president of United Spinal and also a quadriplegic. “This is antithetical to how it’s done today.” After all, stations are designed to be self-serve.

The ADA Accessibility Guidelines state that pumps are to be no higher than 54 inches, but that presupposes you can reach the pump to begin with and safely get to it. Tobin can pump gas by himself, but it takes about half an hour. “It’s two transfers, struggling with the pump, making sure there’s no one in the oncoming lane when I drop my lift ... it’s an ordeal. Then the manual dexterity of putting a credit card into a pump is a challenge. Meanwhile, the Department of Justice goes, ‘well, there’s a law, honk your horn.’ It’s undignified and you have to hope they take notice. And if they are there, they either wave you off or ignore you. It becomes this almost adversarial relationship with someone inside the booth just figuring out if I can get some gas,” says Tobin. “It’s somewhat unreasonable to think they’ll always have two employees on duty, but if they had it posted when there were two or more working, that would help,” he says.

Patrick Hughes, founder of Inclusion Solutions, a provider of access tools for businesses, agrees. “The full service business was left

behind for financial and labor reasons, but what we're asking for is a clear plan so that when a consumer comes to a gas station they'll know how to get gas in their car. The responsibility is on the gas station on how to provide that, not the consumer."

Hughes' company offers a product called the Fuel Call, an accessible pump-side button drivers can activate to let station attendants know they need assistance. The button is accompanied by a sign with a phone number and the hours an attendant should be on hand. "That wireless system rings inside and there's a flashing strobe. So it's a clear plan for both consumer and operator," he says. But there are over 159,000 self-serve gas stations in the United States, and only 400 participating stations, mostly clustered in Des Moines, Iowa, or near Detroit.

Still, calling does seem to be part of a workable solution. But many wheelchair users say it is best if the station knows the customer, which isn't always possible.

"They never know why I'm honking," says Doug Maurer, a para from North Charleston, S.C. He drives 17 miles to and from work and has his local station fully trained to help him out when he pulls up. "I try to always go to the same place because they've got a good price and have been real cooperative," he says.

If Maurer's traveling alone, he finds pumps are usually accessible enough that he can pump his own gas, although it takes longer. "Every once in a while I get everything out of the car, get ready to go to the pump and they have one of those islands with the pumps and I can't reach it with my card, so I have to go in the store," he says.

Buttons don't always work, either, says Lisa Lanier, 39, a wheelchair user with osteogenesis imperfecta from Mocksville, N.C. "Getting gas usually means I end up doing some crazy acrobatics in my wheelchair, propped up on one wheel or leaning on the edge," says the former Paralympic fencer. "These days I try to time getting gas with when I have an AB riding shotgun."



So What Works?

In 2010, Florida advocates gathered in Tampa to discuss how to best get their gas pumped at self-serve stations where they may not personally know the attendants. The meeting included disability groups and representatives of local oil companies and was hosted by Ben Ritter, the government relations director for the Florida Gulf Coast Paralyzed Veterans of America. “The placing of phone numbers on gas pumps was the choice solution of everyone who attended,” says Ritter, a paraplegic.

A participating oil company decided to do a test run, placing signs with the station’s phone number and the wording, “Assistance Available Upon Request” on four gas pumps at a Tampa station. “As the word spread, the station’s business from customers with disabilities increased, and he did not receive any complaints from his employees. So he put phone numbers on all his pumps,” says Ritter.

That success motivated advocates to wage a successful fight for ordinances requiring signs with the gas station’s number to be placed on pumps at larger chains in Broward, Pinellas and Dade counties in Florida. “If it’s going so well here in Florida, why can’t this go to all the states? We don’t have to open up the ADA, just go county to county, state to state,” he suggests.

Solutions like this are bubbling up, but often fail to address all the issues involved, while offering only regional relief. Honking usually doesn’t work. Buttons by themselves also have a low success rate. Calling seems like a great idea, but works best when you go to the same station or when the attendants know you. Plus, you must have a cell phone.

So what's next?

Enter the Disability Gas Coalition

National and state groups, ranging from the United Spinal Association to Paralyzed Veterans of America - Michigan, have collaborated to devise a national solution: the Disability Gas Coalition. The DGC is committed to reclaiming service at the pump for drivers with disabilities via a simple blueprint built on existing models.

1. A well-identified pump designated for drivers with disabilities.
2. Clear signage at the pump posting hours when there is more than one employee on duty.
3. An oversized touch pad easily reached from the driver's seat to ask for assistance.
4. A nationally accessible database showing where and when these services are available.

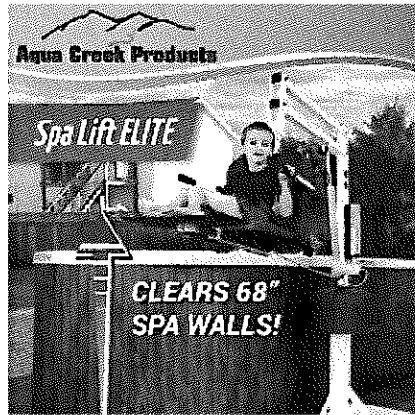
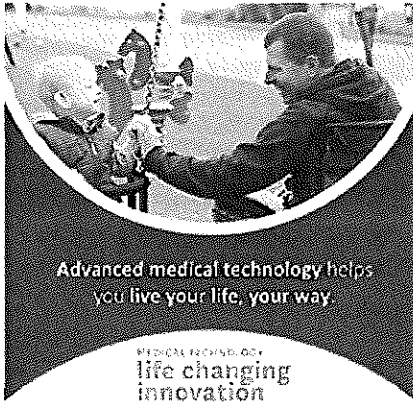
For that plan to work, the Disability Gas Coalition needs to hear from more people like Maurer and Lanier, since it is vital to get the word out that wheelchair users aren't able to easily access gasoline. Much of the organizing will be done online at www.disabilitygas.org, where everyone who's tried and failed to easily gas up is invited to work toward a solution. "We want you to join with us in making this problem known," says Tobin, in the Disability Gas website's welcome. "At this portal we hope you will add your story, add your voice to this coalition."

There is no good reason for people who use wheelchairs to be the only drivers left frustrated and inconvenienced at the gas pump in a society that prides itself on all services being provided quicker! Better! Faster! If each NSCIA member joined the Disability Gas Coalition at www.disabilitygas.org and shared his or her experience, it would go a long way toward all wheelchair users gaining access at the pump.

Accessibility, All Articles, Life in Action

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