



# CONSUMER GUIDE

TO PURCHASING WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE VEHICLES AND EQUIPMENT



**NMEDA**

NATIONAL MOBILITY  
EQUIPMENT DEALERS  
ASSOCIATION





NMEDA is a non-profit association that supports nearly 600 manufacturers, dealers and driver rehabilitation specialists that work together to improve the transportation options for people with disabilities. NMEDA is the only organization for the adaptive mobility industry that monitors its members to ensure they abide by the safety standards of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, and NMEDA's Quality Assurance Program (QAP) – the only program in the industry that promotes quality, safety, and reliability.



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Making an educated purchase of adaptive equipment requires you to understand the industry, its players and the relationship between them. Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) make the vehicles. Then, based on the type of modification needed, the vehicle will either be sent directly to a mobility dealer for consumer purchase or to a mobility manufacturer where structural and mechanical alterations will be made, such as installing a wheelchair ramp, or lowering the floor, etc. Once completed, the vehicle is shipped to a dealer that provides customized mobility solutions for your specific needs. The mobility dealer is not only the person you will be working with to purchase the vehicle but they will also install equipment in your OEM vehicle, such as hand controls, steering aids, pedal extensions, etc. As a consumer, you must understand that these businesses are not all members of NMEDA.

The industry is growing rapidly and mobility options are more accessible to consumers. Online options that don't require a proper evaluation can be a danger to you, your family and others on the road. This guide, along with the help of your local NMEDA dealer, will provide you with the tools to make the buying process safe, seamless and professional. Ensuring your vehicle was built safely with the equipment specific to meet your mobility needs takes time and resources and the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association can help.

### **When searching for an adaptive mobility specialist, NMEDA should serve as your stamp of approval because all NMEDA dealers offer:**

- Individual in-person equipment evaluations
- Brand name and quality products
- On-site local support for sales and service
- Quality Assurance Program (QAP) accreditation
- 24-hour local emergency service

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, is sitting in the driver's seat of a car. She is smiling and looking towards the right. In the background, a man in a dark suit and a blue and white striped tie is leaning into the car, also smiling. The car's interior, including the headrest and seat, is visible. A green banner with white text is overlaid in the top right corner.

# HOW TO BUY

Very few people with disabilities require identical modifications. If you are a person with a disability and don't yet have an accessible vehicle, it's difficult to know where to start. These next steps will help you get on the road to independence:



### **one** | **Contact a NMEDA dealer.**

Whether you are a driver or a passenger with a disability, NMEDA dealers should be your first stop in the buying process. To locate a dealer go to [www.nmeda.com](http://www.nmeda.com) and click on “Dealer Locator” for an expert in accessible mobility needs nearest you. A NMEDA dealer provides in-depth knowledge of the different types of equipment available, will recommend the best vehicles for the equipment you need, help you find a local Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist (CDRS) for an evaluation and will provide you with financing options. Unlike an automotive dealer, their emphasis is on mobility equipment and wheelchair accessible vehicles — matching the right solution with the right person.

### **two** | **If you are a driver with a disability, set up an appointment to get evaluated by a certified driver rehabilitation specialist (CDRS).**

During the evaluation, you will be tested on motor skills, strength, coordination, perception and cognitive skills. These assessments will help determine the equipment needs for your specific disability and you will be provided a written prescription. Visit the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED), [www.driver-ed.org](http://www.driver-ed.org), to find a CDRS near you or ask your NMEDA mobility dealer.

# three

## Do your homework.

Here are some additional steps you may want to discuss with your Mobility Dealer and/or CDRS:

- **Consider your needs** – What are the dimensions and features of your wheelchair? Will you be driving the vehicle independently or are you looking for a vehicle that you can be a passenger in and someone else will be driving you? Do you want a transfer seat or will you be driving while in your wheelchair? Each of these questions must be evaluated before you can determine whether you need a side or rear-entry vehicle as well as any structural modifications.
- **Evaluate your lifestyle and daily routine** – How much parking space is available at home for a ramp or lift to deploy? How often do you leave your home? What are your most visited destinations and is there handicap parking available? Is there more than one wheelchair user in your household? These answers will help you determine the type of vehicle and equipment that will be best suited for your lifestyle, such as a minivan, SUV, truck, car, ramp, lift, etc.
- **Establish a budget** – How much can you afford to pay? Remember to consider a down payment, monthly payments, insurance, gas and an estimate for yearly maintenance. Your budget will play a large role in deciding whether to buy a new or used vehicle, or whether to adapt your current vehicle. There are rebates, grants, loans and other financial aids available for people with disabilities – take advantage of them. See page 15 for more information.
- **Educate yourself** – Research your mobility options and have an idea of the type of equipment you are looking for. See page 7 for more information on what to buy.

# four

### Make your purchase.

After your initial consultation, you may decide to purchase your wheelchair accessible van or car directly from a NMEDA dealer. When making your purchase, if you decide to buy a vehicle from an automotive dealer and then have it adapted with mobility equipment from a NMEDA dealer, keep in mind the recommended vehicle guidelines set by your NMEDA dealer during your original consultation. Be sure to test-drive the vehicle or one that is similar before you make a purchase.

# five

### Get driver training.

Once your vehicle and equipment is purchased, your NMEDA dealer will be available to give you a quick tutorial on how to properly use your new equipment. If special mobility equipment is used for driving, it may require a few training sessions with your CDRS to effectively and safely drive a modified vehicle.

# six

### Get reimbursed.

When available, submit your Mobility Assistance Reimbursement Application to the appropriate vehicle manufacturer. The step-by-step process may differ from company to company, so it's best to visit the website for your particular vehicle manufacturer and download the correct forms before your purchase.



# WHAT TO BUY



## VEHICLES

These days it seems just about anything can be converted from pickup trucks, vans, cars, SUV's to motorcycles. When choosing which vehicle would be best suited for your lifestyle and physical condition, consider the following:

**Minivans** have economical gas mileage, are easy to park and permit quick transfers in and out of the driver seat. There are also a variety of minivan manufacturers and models to choose from.

- **Side entry** minivans are typically for people in wheelchairs who intend on being the primary driver.
- **Rear entry** vehicles are more commonly used for caregivers of a person with a disability. The caregiver being the primary driver.

**Full-size vans** are more spacious vehicles, which are recommended for larger families with multiple members in a wheelchair or for an individual using a large power wheelchair that would not traditionally fit in a minivan.

**Trucks and specialty vehicles** are available for people with disabilities who would prefer a more unique mode of transportation. Typically, power lifts will hoist and store wheelchairs in the bed of the truck from either the side door or tailgate. Specialty vehicles such as motorcycles are also available for modification.





## EQUIPMENT

There is adaptive equipment to meet the physical needs of all types of disabilities. Below is an overview of some of the options available:

### Hand Controls

For seniors and those with progressive muscle weakness, hand controls can compensate for decreasing strength and range of motion in the driver's hands and legs. Driver evaluators and occupational therapists often recommend such devices:

- **Push/pull controls** require the most arm strength. The control must be pushed to brake; pulled and held to accelerate.
- **Push/right angle** controls are the most popular because they're less fatiguing than push/pull. The user must push the control forward to brake and down toward the thigh with a slight pull to the torso for acceleration.
- **Push/twist** controls are very similar to a motorcycle. The vehicle will accelerate with a twist of the handle and will brake with a push on the hand control lever.
- **Push/rock** controls are similar to slot machines. The driver must rock his or her hand on the top of the handle – rocking back to accelerate and forward to apply the brakes.

## EQUIPMENT (continued)

### Steering Aids

There are many types of steering aids available that only require the drivers to use minimal effort for steering or are designed specifically for quadriplegics:

- **Steering column extensions** bring the steering wheel 2" to 6" closer to the wheelchair driver. It provides extra legroom and compensates for reduced range of movement.
- **Deep-dish steering wheels** bring the steering wheel rim approximately 4" closer to the wheelchair driver and are normally used with a low-effort steering system. It improves wheelchair accessibility and lessens the range of steering motion.
- **Foot steering controls** transfer hand control to foot operation. Auxiliary and secondary vehicle controls are also adapted to foot operation.
- **Horizontal steering columns** are motorized, telescoping steering columns customized for those who experience limited arm strength and range of motion, and those who cannot use a conventional steering wheel.
- **Low effort steering** reduces the strength needed to steer by about 40 percent.
- **Zero effort steering** reduces the strength needed to steer by about 70 percent.
- **One-hand drive control systems** are designed for people with limited or no use of lower extremities but good strength in one arm and hand. Its main component is a knob through which the steering, brake and throttle are activated.
- **Steering spinners** are designed for drivers who must steer with one hand. They come in a variety of configurations including an amputee ring, knob, "quad-steering cuff," palm grip, tri-pin and v-grip.
- **Steering forks** support people with reduced grip function. The hand stays safely in place with support of the back of the hand and enables secure control of the vehicle.



## EQUIPMENT (continued)

### Ramps

There are a variety of ramps available and your NMEDA dealer can help identify which type is right for you. There are fold up ramps that fold in half and stow upright and in-floor ramps that slide in a hidden area underneath the vehicle floor. Typically fold-up ramps tend to be less expensive but the in-floor ramps are nicer as they store out of the way. Some additional styles of ramps include:

- **Basic ramps** are lightweight enough to be used with little exertion by a caregiver or attendant. They are not mechanical, so they do not break down easily and rarely need expensive repairs. They take up a minimum of space when folded.
- **Roll-up ramps** allow you to easily roll up the ramp, put it in a bag and store it in the back of a van, trunk of a car or under a seat.
- **Channel or track wheelchair ramps** are two thin ramps that provide a channel for each side of the wheelchair. Bumpers on each one prevent the wheelchair from falling off. These ramps can hold up to 600 pounds or more depending on the brand.

## EQUIPMENT (continued)

### Lifts

Wheelchair lifts for your accessible vehicle are available with a variety of features such as whisper-quiet operation and remote controls, depending on what you need and what you can afford. Although their automation makes them more convenient than ramps, they are more expensive. Other features include:

- **Automatic or electric roll stops** assure the wheelchair stays in place during operation.
- **Threshold sensor mats** are installed inside the van to warn users against exiting if the lift is not level with the floor of the van.
- **Integrated manual backup systems** provide a manual backup pump within the drivers reach and allow the platform to be raised and lowered manually in case of a power failure.
- **Bridging mechanisms** allow users to safely board the lift from sidewalks or inclines.
- **Standard hand-held control, on-lift controls and remote controls** assist with lift operations.



# MOBILITY TERMS



## MOBILITY TERMS

If you have recently become a person with a disability or if you are a senior with reduced strength that makes driving difficult, the jargon of the mobility industry can be confusing. Terms like “accessible van” and “side entry wheelchair ramp” are self explanatory, but words like “adaptive,” “conversion” and others may be a little blurry to newcomers.

- **WAV** – Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle
- **QAP** – Quality Assurance Program – the only program in the industry that promotes quality, safety, and reliability.
- **Adaptive** means something that has been changed or modified to suit a new or different purpose. If a vehicle is adapted for wheelchair users, the floor may be lowered, a lift or ramp installed, doors widened and more.
- **Conversion** is what they do to a van or other vehicle to make it accessible and driveable for those with disabilities. A vehicle rolls off the assembly line at a manufacturing plant as a passenger van without ramps or lifts or other wheelchair or accessible equipment. The van is modified by a separate company – a NMEDA manufacturer installs accessible and adaptive equipment. It is then called a conversion van.
- **Kneeling** refers to the van which actually “kneels” by lowering itself closer to the ground for easy ramp loading and unloading. (Air suspension puts the magic in kneeling.) It makes it easier to get a wheelchair into and out of the vehicle.



# SAFETY AND FUNDING



## SAFETY FIRST

To ensure safety, the National Highway Traffic & Safety Administration (NHTSA) and Transport Canada issues specific safety regulations that all motor vehicle and mobility manufacturers must follow. Although manufacturers are required to abide by the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) and Canadian Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (CMVSS), as a consumer it is difficult to identify which manufacturers are in compliance with these regulations. To address this issue, NMEDA has developed the Compliance Review Program, which ensures that manufacturers' products meet critical FMVSS/CMVSS. For a list of these manufacturers or for more information, please go to [www.nmeda.com/fmvss-compliance-review-program/](http://www.nmeda.com/fmvss-compliance-review-program/).

## FUNDING

Although purchasing a wheelchair accessible vehicle can be expensive, your NMEDA dealer can guide you to programs that may help you. Below are a few general options to research:

- **State/Provincial Agencies** – Every state has a Vocational Rehabilitation Program. These are state funded programs that assist people with disabilities to get back into or remain in the workplace. In some cases they provide funding for vehicle modifications. Check with your local program for qualifications. Check with your mobility dealer to help find local programs and third party funders in your state or province.
- **Veterans Administration** – The US Veterans Administration funds up to \$18,900 for adaptive equipment for qualifying veterans. For more information visit [www.prosthetics.va.gov/AAE.asp](http://www.prosthetics.va.gov/AAE.asp) or [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca) in Canada.
- **Charitable Organizations/Churches** – The options here can be extensive. Research what is available in your local market.
- **Mobility Rebate Programs** – Several OEM manufacturers (Chrysler, Ford, GM, Toyota, etc.) provide rebates to purchasers of new vehicles that require modifications for disabilities. Before you purchase a new vehicle for modifications, inquire with the dealer about applicable rebates or go to [www.nmeda.com/how-to-buy/rebates/](http://www.nmeda.com/how-to-buy/rebates/).

- **Special Finance Programs** – A variety of programs are available for financing mobility vehicles including loans with extended terms, leasing packages and more. Please ask your NMEDA dealer for more information about special financing programs offered.
- **Fundraising** – Contact all the people in your life and turn your need for a mobility solution into an outlet for socializing and creativity that can bring your whole community together. Get local news agencies involved by explaining what you're trying to do and ask if they'd be interested in covering your story.
- **Public Assistance** – Depending on your disability and if you are on Social Security, you may be eligible for the PASS program (USA only). If you need an accessible vehicle to go to school or your job, they may be able to help you.
- **Grants** – There are several different organizations for different disabilities that provide information, support and resources to help assist those with specific conditions. For example, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society might help if you have MS or United Cerebral Palsy may be able to help if you have CP. Reach out to the local chapter and see if they can provide assistance or guidance.



## YOUR NEAREST NMEDA DEALER



[www.nmeda.com](http://www.nmeda.com)

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