



Independent Living Resource Centre

ILRC Focus Group - Transportation (2008)



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ILRC Focus Groups
TRANSPORTATION - ILRC Focus Group -2008

The **Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC)** is a resource centre designed by and for people with disabilities.

We are...

- Located in St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada
- A not-for-profit community based organization
- Managed by a consumer controlled volunteer board of directors
- Open to people who have any type(s) of disability
- A member of Independent Living Canada (IL Canada)

As well, we offer a wide range of disability related information, services and resources. Our goal is to support people in making informed decisions about their lives.

Independent Living is about:

- Having choices
- Making informed decisions
- Finding solutions that work for you
- Choosing where and how you want to live
- Taking risks
- Taking responsibility
- Managing your resources

- Controlling your own supports
- Learning from each other

A *consumer* is a person with a disability. Instead of being "patients" or "clients" we see ourselves as active and informed consumers of products, programs and services.



TRANSPORTATION

Marine Atlantic is an excellent example as to how a fully accessible service can be offered to all people with disabilities. In 2007 administrators of Marine Atlantic invited a wide cross section of people with disabilities to join the staff in a return trip from Port Aux Basques to North Sidney. Throughout the trip issues of accessibility, or ability to take advantage of all of the services offered on board the Ferry, were identified and discussed with participants. Consumers talked to staff about what worked for them and what did not work for them.

This marked the beginning of a Marine Atlantic *employee- training tool*, a video called **“How Can I Help You? Passengers with Disabilities.”** Recently the video won the 2008 *World Festivals Golden Award* and the 2008 *New York Film Festival’s Finalist Award*.

The Marine Atlantic Accessibility Advisory Committee continues to meet with architects to ensure a new vessel, which will start construction this fall, will be cross disability- accessible [persons with all types of disability will be able to use].

This type of effort clarifies the requirements that people with disabilities ask for when receiving a service and promotes the notion that accessibility to all of its customers is important to Marine Atlantic.

This is certainly an example of Best Practice - which could be replicated throughout all modes of transportation.

In a series of focus groups scheduled over the next year the ILRC invites interested consumers within the local area served by the organization, to meet and discuss their experiences about specific areas of interest.

April 22, 2008 a group of twenty-seven met and discussed issues they had regarding all types of public transportation; air, boat, bus, taxi and the St. John's public 'accessible' Para-transit. Limited to the greater St John's and surrounding areas, consumer comments are not necessarily intended to reflect a provincial perspective.

However, we have found, from provincial forums hosted during this time frame, that with the exception of a service offered in one area and not the other, the experiences expressed within local consumer focus groups are similar to those expressed throughout the province.

The purpose of this report is to provide grassroots information concerning issues of transportation to those who regulate government services, policy, and programs, and to other interested groups. The following is a summary of the transportation focus group session.



FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Consumers stated:

1. Consumers, or people with disabilities, feel they have little or no control over their transportation requirements.
 - Inability to find consistent and reliable transportation to work, to job interviews, to do daily tasks, and to social events contributes to the perception that people with disabilities are less capable than those living without disabilities.
 - That individuals' disability compromises their choices for access to adequate transportation.
 - Individuals feel this inability to get around within society is one way systems control consumers' 'options' in life; inability to control where you need to be at a given time is an insurmountable barrier to full citizenship.
 - Policy restraints concerning transportation within income support programs impacts some consumers in a negative manner.

2. The public Para-transit system, set up to service consumers within the community, has less time to offer services to individuals with disabilities because government funded agencies now use the service to transport patients back and forth to medical

appointments. Publicly funded agencies [including but not limited to Personal Care Homes and Nursing Homes, hospitals, and other] use this service to transport patients/clients back and forth to medical appointments therefore increasing the total demand on the service by 47%.

Information gathered from the St John's Para-Transit Accessibility Advisory Committee indicates the City of St John's is the primary financial contributor for this service (71.9%). Share cost for the provincial government is 6.6%, the City of Mount Pearl is 2.3% and the users of the system contribute 17.2%. Even agencies with accessible busses/vans are now parking the vans and using Para - transit transportation.

3. Too frequently transportation service providers are unaware of proper Disability Etiquette.

Air travel

4. Wheelchair users coming into the province via St John's International Airport have no access to public ground transportation.
5. Numerous consumers detail a difficulty getting disability related equipment such as wheelchairs or walkers through air travel with the equipment in tact. At times the destruction of equipment is so

pronounced that the trip has to be cancelled and the equipment must be repaired.

6. Consumers report difficulty obtaining seating that best meets their individual needs on airplanes.
7. Bathroom access in airplanes is frequently challenging if not impossible.
8. Seat belts maybe too short requiring the passenger to request a belt extension. This is an embarrassing request for consumers to make and must be handled discreetly.

Marine Travel

9. Marine Atlantic has made substantial consultation with people with disabilities and as a result offers a respectful and accessible service on its gulf crossings.
10. Other Ferry services offered throughout the province are less accessible or inaccessible. Participants in this focus group spoke specifically of the Bell Island Ferry service.
 - There exists a **two-tiered transportation policy operating** in Newfoundland and Labrador; one for people without mobility disabilities and one for people with mobility disabilities.
 - Passengers are required, for safety reasons, to leave the car area during Ferry travel. However, individuals with some types of disabilities, unable to navigate steep steps, have no

options available to them through which they can leave the car area and must remain in the area deemed 'unsafe' for the general public.

Bus Travel

11. For passengers wishing to travel the island portion of our province, there is one, accessible, cross-the-province DRL bus available that must be booked in advance.
12. Consumers report booking the accessible DRL in advance, but upon arrival to the bus stop find the bus is not in service. The person, if dropped off, is left at the bus stop with no option but to try to arrange another ride home and to cancel the trip.
13. There is no other alternate public bus system or other mode of transportation if the accessible DRL bus is not available.
14. Other public buses [excluding DRL] serving the province are inaccessible to people with mobility disabilities. This lack of choice is in part why consumers feel little control over their transportation requirements.
15. An accessible St. John's and surrounding area public bus system would assist many consumers to perform multiple tasks or spontaneous activities. For example, accessible public busses

could make a difference for people trying to arrange a sequence of stops; such as getting a haircut, banking, going to a social or recreational activity. These types of stop and go activities are rarely achievable within the present Para-transit system.

16. Accessible bussing within the St John's area can not replace the Para-transit system as it currently exists. Consumers may be unable to get to a bus stop or may wish to travel outside of the bus routes.
17. Public bus travel is exceedingly hazardous within winter months as it is dangerous to ride or wait on the city streets in a (standard or motorized) wheelchair or scooter.

Taxi travel

18. Taxi cabs within St John's and surrounding areas are inaccessible to people using motorized wheelchairs or scooters or consumers with for example a walker/wheelchair and suitcases.
19. There is often difficulty getting a taxi to stop for individuals using wheelchairs. While some wheelchairs can fold to fit into the trunks of cabs there seems to be, at times, reluctance to stop, perhaps because of the extra work involved. Most consumers reported

difficulty getting taxi's to stop spontaneously when using a wheelchair.

20. Despite the offering of a free licence for accessible taxis within the St. John's area no companies have taken up the challenge. Wheelchair accessible taxi-cabs would provide people with disabilities more options when planning how to get to events in a timely manner.

21. Accessible taxi service would allow for greater spontaneity.

22. Taxi's are much more expensive than other forms of public transportation and therefore are not an option for everyone.

St. John's Public 'Accessible' Transit

*******Many consumers report the local Para-transit system is their only or primary option for local travel. While there are serious problems with this system, focus group participants feel the service is valuable and must continue.***

23. Advanced booking of 1-2 weeks, generally required for use of this system, means people with disabilities reliant on this form of transportation have no spontaneity in their lives.

24. There are times, even with advanced booking, that services for times requested are unavailable, as too many people are requesting transportation during the same timeframe.
25. Confidentiality is not a consideration when information is dispatched to Para-transit drivers. Consumers' names, addresses, pick-up place and destination is given to the driver over an intercom system that can be heard by all people on all of the buses. This lack of privacy is unacceptable.
26. University schedules for Para-transit users are made more complex. This is because students must take into account, not only required university courses, but times Wheelway may be available to pick-up and drop off students to their class locations.
27. Advanced bookings get lost within the Para-transit organizing system and result in no pick-up.
28. Consumers report a 'priority of passenger' and there is some uncertainty as to how this is equitably applied to all passengers.
29. Booking time policies are inconsistent.
30. There are frequently early or late pick-ups [beyond the plus or minus fifteen minutes accepted booking time].

For example:

- Late pick-up for work in the morning is exceedingly problematic, especially when combined with early pick-up at the end of the day.
- Early pick-up for work can mean an employee is at the workplace well before the doors are open. Consumers describe difficulties while waiting in the winter months or during rainy periods.
- Early pick-up times at the end of the day may necessitate a person ask her/his manager permission to leave work before the agreed upon time. Besides being unfair to the employer, the expectation that one staff person expects to leave the work place early increases the public perception that individuals with disabilities are not capable of working the same as others.
- Late pick-up times lengthens consumer wait times which are difficult for someone who has fatigue.
- Consumers' booking an appointment whereby the individual must reach their destination at a specific time, report booking very early to ensure the interview is not missed. This conflicts with employment advice given to consumers by the ILRC. When prompting consumers as to how succeed in job interviews, staff caution people not to show up too early for the interview. This is not really practical when using the Para-transit system.
- Late pick-up times may result in missed appointments.

31. Policies re: assistance with management of groceries or packages are inconsistent and/or poorly understood by some consumers.
32. Consumers report difficulty making appointments or confirming pick-up times due to busy telephone lines at the dispatch area.
33. Consumers report misplaced bookings and/or exceptionally long times on this bus, such as 1-2 hours.
34. Day-to-day activities that require multiple stops are difficult or impossible when using the Para-transit system because of the heavy demand on the system.
35. Consumers report difficulty with the billing system, lack of receipts and therefore have no way to contest disputes with billing.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Re-imagine provincially funded public transportation systems to be fully accessible to all individuals using the service. This can be achieved by supporting the following:

- 1. Develop a comprehensive transportation plan so that people with disabilities become full participants within Newfoundland and Labrador society.** It is essential consumers regain a sense of control over their lives through affordable and accessible options to adequate transportation.

We must re-imagine accessible transportation that is not based on an 'either' 'or' scenario. In other words, there is no *one* quick fix. It is essential that all forms of transportation have options that increases services specifically designed to provide people with disabilities a life with choice, spontaneity, and accountability.

- Recognize and use the efforts and policy changes made by Marine Atlantic as a *Best Practices* when designing accessible modes of travel.
- Stop the two-tiered policy operating in Newfoundland and Labrador, whereby people with disabilities abide by a lower safety standard than others travelling the Ferry system. Ferry

services within Newfoundland and Labrador must be safe and accessible to all passengers.

- Legislate specific timelines so that public transportation, such as wheelchair lifts, are options in all transportation systems within the province. The provincial government must recognize its leadership role in providing services and to support funding so that change happens.
- Support Para-transit services for people with disabilities who are unable to get to bus stops or wish to travel to areas outside of bus routes. Accessible public buses will reduce Para-transit demand; however, public bussing can not eliminate the need for accessible services for all consumers.
- Acknowledge that the present local snow clearing policies and general winter weather conditions make it hazardous for consumers to access city streets in the winter to get to and wait for busses.
- Promote the concept and feasibility of wheelchair accessible taxi-cabs. This recommendation need not be limited only to the metropolitan area, as it is a service that should be available to people with disabilities that live in more rural areas as well.
- Acknowledge that there are many factors within the label 'disabled' that limits one's income and therefore lowers one's options in regards to many issues, specifically transportation.

2. Increase the number of local Para-transit [Wheelway] buses and drivers available immediately to respond to the increased demand created by government funded agencies. Publicly funded agencies [including but not limited to Personal Care Homes and Nursing Homes agencies, hospitals and other] use this service to transport patients/clients back and forth to medical appointments therefore increasing the total demand on the service by 47%.

This demand removes service directly away from people with disabilities living within their own home, who have few options available to meet their transportation requirements. It is the *perception of consumers* that bookings with government funded agencies take priority over their transportation need.

3. Accessible bus transportation should not cost more than non-accessible public bus transportation.
4. Be aware of the added complexity of managing one's life in a non-accessible world. The impact of this through transportation even influences the courses a student takes in post secondary education. If courses are offered during peak transit times the student knows s/he will have to be inventive or not take the course because s/he will often be late or miss the class completely.

5. Mandate disability etiquette training for those providing a public service. There are consumer-based groups, such as the ILRC, that offer this service.
6. Make provision at St. John's International Airport that ensures ground transportation that meets the needs of all its customers.
7. Encourage a more consumer friendly Para-transit system within the St. John's and surrounding areas. Problems exist within this system and the ILRC is more than willing to work with the agency to enhance its services to consumers and to educate consumers about using the system.

Consumers identified the following areas of particular interest in regards specifically to the Wheelway system:

- Acknowledge consumers have a right to privacy, even when accessing public transit.
- Address privacy issues when relaying private information about an individual along public airways, i.e. use headphones, or some form of electronic communication.
- Provide more affordable choices for transportation payment similar to the city bus systems, such as a month pass, student rates, or student semester passes.

- Permit email bookings, this will decrease congestion on telephone lines.
 - Ensure accountability for booked times, so that dispatchers can no longer arbitrarily change booking times of passengers.
 - Encourage the use of air ride suspension, which increases safety and comfort for riders.
 - Discuss with consumers issues with record keeping and invoice payment.
 - Introduce a 24 hour Para-transit system.
 - Further develop the Para Transit committee to include provincial government representatives.
8. Examine policies concerning Income Support and non-eligible transportation. Consumers are denied a specific request for transportation, even via a bus pass, when transportation is essential for treatment. One example is the lack of income support available to go to a pharmacy to pick-up medications. This is problematic for consumers requiring medication such as Methadone that must be picked up daily, and in person at the pharmacy.
9. Include people with disabilities in conversations that impact their transportation requirements.



The Black Spruce, which proudly we display as our logo, is an emblem of strength, which thrives even when the odds weigh heavily against it. Like the Black Spruce the ILRC gains strength with each new consumer and each new barrier that is removed. We know that each time we share our voice and our experience; each time we speak up and challenge inequity; each time we make our own choice, we grow in strength because we are living the Independent Living Philosophy.