

# The Disability Rights Movement and Transportation

People with disabilities have encountered discrimination, lack of accessibility, and a host of other social ills for millennia. The Disability Rights Movement has successfully fought for inclusion in many fields, such as accessible architecture for housing and public buildings, access to transportation and telecommunications, employment opportunities, integration into education at all levels, access to the arts and media, provision of personal assistance, appropriate healthcare and access to the full range of public accommodations like restaurants and retail stores (Longmore and Umansky 2001).<sup>1</sup> Each of these arenas had once served as a bastion of disability exclusion. With creation and enforcement of disability inclusive policies and law, these bastions are being challenged and overcome.

Accessible, workable transportation is a unique aspect of disability inclusion as it is intended to meet the essential goals of community inclusion which would enable full participation in social, economic, political and other spheres. This is a point worth emphasizing: that in order to participate in education, employment, recreation, and all

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<sup>1</sup> Longmore, P. K., and L. Umansky, eds. 2001. *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.



other aspects of the life of the community, people must be able to get to where community resources and activities happen. Getting there is essential to participation. Historically, traditional means of transportation for this diverse constituency has been held back by stereotyped notions that people with disabilities don't leave home very much, aren't likely to be employed, don't socialize much, or don't live lives with spontaneity, as do others in the community. These oppressive notions have constrained planning and development for full inclusion in transportation. For example, initial efforts at transportation resources in the 1960s forward, attempted to address the need to get to medical appointments, with ambulance-type vans, as if that was the primary justifiable destination for this population. (Harlan Hahn.)

Until the 1970s, there were little efforts toward disability accessible transportation other than private vans operated by services agencies for their own clients, such as medical transport and senior centers for shopping.

This changed dramatically with the activist-minded disability rights movement of the late 1970s and 80s. A grass-roots disability rights organization, ADAPT, Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit\* founded by Rev. Wade Blank in 1983, in Denver, Colorado, began using protests, including blocking traffic, and filing lawsuits, to move this issue forward. They were very successful--by the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, accessible transportation, Title II, became federal law.



With these new laws, communities all over the U.S. are required to provide the full range of accessible transportation modalities, such as fixed route busses with lifts, paratransit, accessible trains, etc. Major cities around the U.S. have complied with these requirements, over these four decades, but we are still fighting for full compliance with our laws and regulations, especially in suburban and rural areas, and in quality, full service paratransit.

In 1991, this group changed their name to American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today, in order to focus on community integration, and fighting nursing home and other restrictive placement.

Availability of inclusive transportation “sends a message,” as well as facilitates the reality that our society wants, expects and creates the resources for people with disabilities to get there and be there to participate in everything – not just “disability-related” activities, e.g. medical and social service agency appointments. Similar efforts at transportation-focused availability, community access, etc. are also growing for seniors. Times have changed and disability inclusion is gradually becoming a reality. Limits that present themselves are to be challenged.

Widespread efforts to reduce the environmental footprint of the transportation system will affect the availability and reliability of assorted transportation methods, while natural disasters and climate change impacts may constrain transportation systems or



bring them off-line entirely (in both short- and long-term time frames). We will need to continually expand our imagining of fully inclusive transportation to meet these and other growing challenges, such as disaster preparedness, climate change impact, and transformations toward more sustainable infrastructure.

## **Disability History and Community in the Bay Area**

Sections of the Bay Area feature vibrant networks and organizations representing people with disabilities, and active disability communities in general. Berkeley, located in Alameda County in the East Bay, is widely recognized as the birthplace of the modern Independent Living (IL) movement, which advocates for people with disabilities' ability to reside in the community with full access to housing, employment, public spaces, and the services and accommodations necessary to achieve independence. The IL movement and related advocacy reached many milestones to increase access and government services, including: publicly-funded healthcare, financial supports and personal attendant services; physically-accessible public spaces, businesses, and transportation systems; non-discrimination and reasonable accommodations in employment; and more. These achievements have been reinforced through laws and regulations, most notably Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (requiring that federally-funded infrastructure, programs and services be fully accessible) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (which



expanded requirements of accessibility to nearly all public accommodations, buildings, transportation, etc., along with guidelines for doing so). The progress of the IL movement has taken decades of navigating political spaces, engaging media, holding direct-action protests (e.g. blocking inaccessible buses with wheelchairs or crawling up the steps of Washington’s capitol building), filing lawsuits, and more. Results have been truly transformative, as people with disabilities’ quality-of-life are undoubtedly better than before IL advocacy. However, there is much more to be done to reach full “universal accessibility” and non-discrimination, and advocates are continually pursuing legislation, regulation, and litigation to reach these goals.

The many organizations serving people with disabilities in the Bay Area is an asset to transportation planners. Berkeley is home to the first center for independent living (CIL) in the country, which provides an array of community supports such as assistance finding housing, hiring caregivers, navigating transportation, managing government benefits, as well as hosting forums, outings, and support groups. These supports have since spread nation-wide and there are more than 400 Independent Living Centers (ILCs) across the country. Similar organizations exist to serve specific disability groups, such as San Francisco’s Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired and Oakland’s Deaf Counseling, Advocacy & Referral Agency (DCARA). ILCs and other disability-focused organizations can serve as a “go-to” partners and sources of information for



any organizations and agencies looking to understand the disability community and meet their needs.

