

Using and Maintaining Mobility Equipment

Disability-Competent Care Webinar Roundtable Series

All devices should be optimally maintained because inadequate mobility can lead to a decrease in health status, function, and community participation. Assessing and obtaining the proper equipment for an individual with a disability, or “participant,” is only the first step.¹ Once delivered, the equipment should be properly fitted and the participant trained in its use and care. Preventive maintenance and timely repairs will help keep it functional for years to come, may prevent greater repair/replacement costs, and improve ease of use.

The following recommended steps can help optimize the use and maintenance of wheelchairs:

1. Training in the use of the wheelchair

- Key adjustments will likely be required upon delivery (e.g., postural supports, pressure relieving cushions, rear wheels of a manual chair, and programming for a power chair).
- Participants and caregivers should be trained on the chair’s features and functions (e.g., brakes, removable parts, positioning straps, and batteries; propulsion techniques; mobility skills; joystick operation; and safe driving and stopping).
- Participants should be instructed on maintenance and provided the owner’s manual, general product information from the supplier, and contact information on who and when to call for repairs.
- Participants and caregivers should be trained on wheelchair transport (e.g., folding and securing safely in accessible transport vehicles).

2. Routine and preventive wheelchair maintenance

- Riders and caretakers are encouraged to regularly clean the chair and tighten nuts and bolts to circumvent avoidable repairs or injury.
- Power wheel chairs should be routinely maintained by the supplier.

3. Wheel chair repair

- Suppliers can generally provide on-site support (e.g., brake tightening, footrests and armrests repairs, or positioning belts and upholstery replacements).
- When more involved repairs are required, the supplier will need to pick up the wheelchair and arrange for a loaner wheelchair.

Independence Care System (ICS) (*see insert for profile*) offers insights on how participants, care teams, and caregivers can better use, maintain, and repair the device. They have a set of consumer-centered policies for persons relying on wheeled mobility:

1. Establish preferred provider contracts with suppliers specializing in complex rehabilitation technology.

Profile: Independence Care System

- Nonprofit, Medicaid managed long-term care plan that was organized in 2000 to serve adults with physical disabilities in New York City
- Includes about 6,000 members, half of whom are dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid
- Serves members who live with moderate to severe disabilities, primarily due to injury or degenerative neurological and muscular diseases

¹ See “Mobility and Seating Assessments and Wheelchair Procurement” to learn more about obtaining mobility support equipment.

Suppliers who specialize in complex rehabilitation technology understand functional needs and can work closely with the participant and therapist to cater solutions.

2. **Establish “pre-approved” levels for repairs.** Suppliers are able to replace devices, up to a pre-approved level of repairs, without pre-authorization. At ICS, this level is \$250 for manual chairs and \$500 for power chairs within a six-month period.
3. **Support a primary and a backup wheelchair.** Knowing a backup is available provides great peace of mind to participants whose ability to function in their home and community decrease drastically without their primary wheelchair.
4. **Support a short-term rental policy when a wheelchair is in need of extensive repairs.** Those who rely on individually configured chairs need an “interim rental” option, as opposed to only a “rent-to-purchase” option.

Additional Resources

Please visit the *Resources for Integrated Care* website (www.resourcesforintegratedcare.com) for the “Training in Disability-Competent Care and Supports” webinar series, which served as the basis for this brief and for other Disability-Competent Care-related resources including an interactive self-assessment tool.

Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America, “RESNA Wheelchair Service Provision Guide.” <http://www.resna.org/dotAsset/22485.pdf> (Accessed June 2014)

Dalhousie University Faculty of Medicine, “Wheelchair Skills Training Program.” <http://www.wheelchairskillsprogram.ca/eng/index.php> (Accessed June 2014)