

### **Transportation, or Lack There Of for the Disabled**

The public transportation system for the physically/mentally challenged individuals in many places in the United States is lacking, big time, especially Albuquerque, New Mexico. If you are physically/mentally challenged, live in Albuquerque, New Mexico as I do, and aren't wealthy or lucky enough to have your own personalized chauffeur or drive yourself, you have to take Sun Van, the public van service for people who are dependent on others for transportation, yet choose to participate in the community. Sun Van is a state and federally funded operation that monopolizes the system that serves the handicap person. Three main issues that I am going to touch upon that will improve the transportation problem in Albuquerque are scheduling, drivers view toward passengers and the need to buy more vans.

Mini Ride is a curb to curb public van service, with a fifteen minute window on both sides of the scheduled time. This means you may have to wait 15 minutes before or after your scheduled time. What usually happens is you get out there early; just to be sure they don't leave without you. You end up waiting until the scheduled time, and then you have to wait through 15 more minutes, for the late window, rain or shine. They will only wait 5 minutes for you. What's wrong with this picture? You can't leave and go call them because they might show up while you are making your call. All you can do is wait and you might have to wait longer than two hours to have the van pick you up. If they do show up while you're gone, they give you a no show. A no show is a penalty given for missing a scheduled pick-up. After three missed scheduled pickups, your riding privileges are revoked for a minimum of three days.

Scheduling the rides is another pain in the butt. All rides must be made at least one day in advance. Very rarely do they have same day service. If you want a ride, you have to make a reservation one week in advance. People don't plan out their lives a week in advance, unless they're totally anal. Not that being anal is bad, but you are on hold forever and a day. They are so busy that when they do answer all the good time slots are taken. When you do get an operator you might get hung up on, depending on the operator that takes your call. Needless to say, the operation of Sun Van is very crude because of how they make the passenger comply. For example, they nonverbally say, "hey, whenever we arrive to pick you up, be happy." Most people have no other choices. Sun Van can treat their customers however they want.

According to several drivers, Sun Van has many immobilized vans, consequently, unproductive drivers. The use of all available vans is imperative. There are a growing number of disabled and older people wanting to stay fit and healthy, resulting in both living longer lives. Additionally, disabled people are becoming more confident, and are active participants in society. Meaning, the way the transportation system implements services has to change also. For example, the purchase of more vans could lighten the load; hence, the riders can be taken to their jobs or places of preference in a quicker fashion. Also, more vans would make it possible to maintain the regular schedule when vehicles are in need of repair.

Changes in the system as indicated above will broaden the level of acceptance and quality of service. Drivers need training on how to interact with disabled people. For example, Sun Van should educate their drivers by teaching them the different modes of communication utilized by disabled passengers. Hence, the level of interaction between the drivers (mobile in most cases), and the passengers (immobile in many cases), would be enhanced. Passengers need to be treated as individuals and customers, whose opinion matter. Why not have handicapped people in management, supervisory positions or on the Board of Directors? Such individuals would know firsthand the problematic issues and how they should be resolved.

Overall, increased sensitivity, broadened consumer friendly scheduling and the purchasing of additional vans are key factors to improving the quality of services provided by Sun Van. There is no way this current system would be found acceptable by mobile, non disabled people. Why should disabled people have to live with it? Don't we have enough to deal with? I say, it is 2006, things have got to change!