

Accommodating Hidden Mobility Disabilities

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The Canadian Human Rights Act is quite specific about the importance of ensuring that all individuals should be able to live with dignity, including having:

an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated, consistent with their duties and obligations as members of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices (Section 2).

Because mobility disabilities are included in the grounds on which discrimination is prohibited under the Human Rights Act, urban building codes have become increasingly detailed with regard to accommodation for persons using mobility aids such as wheelchairs or scooters. Statistics Canada's 2012 *Canadian Survey on Disability*¹ found that 81 percent of persons with disabilities use such mobility aids.

What about the other nineteen percent, which would comprise at a minimum of almost a million Canadians? These are persons with health conditions such as arthritis or other joint problems, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or chronic pain who wish to remain independently mobile but can only walk short distances without serious health consequences. These are individuals with a "hidden" (or "invisible") mobility disability because it is not immediately obvious that they have any mobility limitation.

Perceptions regarding persons with hidden mobility limitations are complicated by the fact that an individual's ability to walk unaided varies from day to day. Stickman Communications in the U.K.² has launched a line of pins and keyring cards to raise awareness regarding hidden mobility disabilities, with messages such as the following:

"My disability is not always visible."

"Mobility problems aren't always obvious. There are many symptoms that can make walking difficult – and most of them aren't easy to see."

"My disability is variable."

Individuals may have a "good" day when they are well-rested and able to walk a reasonable distance, or they may have a "bad" day when every step is excruciating and walking even ten feet seems impossible. There is also the unfortunate stigma attached to having a mobility disability, with many well-meaning members of society assuming that mobility disabilities are accompanied by mental disabilities.

¹ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2013002-eng.htm>

² http://stickmancommunications.co.uk/epages/747384.sf/en_GB/?ObjectPath=/Shops/747384/Products/PKHID01.

The Social Planning and Research Council (SPARC) of British Columbia, as the arbiter of handicapped parking permits, is aware of this group. SPARC states on its website, under a definition of who qualifies for designated parking permits:

Designated parking allows people with disabilities to have access to buildings and services in the community. People who qualify for parking permits either need the extra width of the designated spaces to get in and out of their vehicles when using a wheelchair, crutches, a cane or other mobility aid, **or need to park close to a building entrance because their health prevents them from walking very far** [emphasis added].³

In SPARC's booklet, *Making Space for Everyone*, it states on page 9: "People whose disability affects their mobility may use wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, crutches, or canes. **Others have hidden mobility impairments that impede their ability to move quickly, climb stairs, or walk more than a short distance** [emphasis added]."

Until recently there has been no research conducted on what types of accommodation are needed to support this group with hidden mobility disabilities in living "the lives that they are able and wish to have." The following discussion is meant to stimulate such research and launch policy initiatives to appropriately accommodate those with hidden mobility limitations.

What Are the Key Elements for Accommodation?

There are three primary challenges for persons with hidden mobility disabilities: (a) distance to be walked, (b) length of time standing, and (c) the ability to sit and rest before pain or spasms or difficulty breathing become too severe.

Distance to be walked. Most individuals with mobility limitations have difficulty estimating the distance they can comfortably walk and so a recognizable measure is needed. In a U.S. Supreme Court debate on distance, the measure of a standard school bus was used. Most people have seen such buses, and their standard length is 35 feet. Informal interviews, using the reference of a school bus, indicate that most persons with a hidden mobility disability can walk 30-35 feet even when experiencing a moderate level of pain and that 50 feet represents the maximum distance such persons can walk before experiencing severe health consequences.

Juxtaposed to the distance that persons with hidden mobility disabilities can walk is what persons with full mobility consider to be a "short distance." That "short distance" to "just over there" is typically 100-200 feet, or well beyond the capability of the typical individual with a hidden mobility disability. What is confusing to the onlooker is that there might be a "good" day when that individual *can* walk 100 feet, but there might also be a "bad" day when the individual can walk no more than 20 feet without serious health consequences.

Also to be considered is the context. If the person is walking only one direction, the distance that the person can walk comfortably will be longer than if the person needs to walk there and immediately back. For example, if a person is walking from a parking lot into a restaurant where they will be seated immediately and can rest, they might be able

³ <http://www.sparc.bc.ca/parking-permit>

to walk up to 70 feet without an undue hardship. However, if that person had to walk even 35 feet from a car to a parking ticket vending machine and then back 35 feet to the car to display the parking ticket, the likelihood that they could then walk comfortably over to an elevator another 35 feet away and on into an office is very low.

Another factor in managing distance is the variability in use of a mobility aid. Being able to lean on support – e.g., a cane, a shopping cart – may increase the distance that the individual can walk. Persons with hidden mobility disabilities may walk without a cane on “good” days or if the distance appears to be within their “comfort range,” while using a cane on “bad” days or when forced to walk longer distances. This is also true of some individuals who usually use wheelchairs. On “good” days they may elect to walk 20-30 feet although normally that would not be feasible. This variability can be confusing to the onlooker and result in that onlooker judging the individual as faking a disability.

Length of time standing. For persons with joint disorders, like arthritis, any time spent standing puts pressure on painful joints. Standing waiting for an elevator or other forms of transportation is a commonly overlooked issue. Similarly there is the requirement to wait standing in line to access a number of public services, including voting. Providing seating for persons waiting is very helpful, especially if it is marked (at least in part) as being for persons with disabilities.

The option to sit and rest. When a person with a hidden mobility limitation begins to experience a deterioration, it can accelerate quickly and ultimately result in staggering or virtual immobilization due to extreme joint pain. For example, an individual may be part way across a lobby or down a corridor and suddenly be slowed by pain and spasms to a virtual halt. What options does that person have if there is no immediate seating available? If an individual is able to sit down before they are beyond their comfort zone, often they are able to continue within a minute or two. However, if the pain or spasms or breathing difficulty become too severe, only a more lengthy rest will offset those negative consequences. Here is a comment by one person with a hidden mobility disability:

On a “good” day I can walk about 30 feet (a little less than the length of a school bus) before I run into trouble. Then I tire rapidly, have noticeable trouble breathing, and begin staggering. If I have to walk much further without sitting down and resting, I come to a standstill, immobilized by pain.

What Are the Potential Barriers in Focusing on Persons with Hidden Mobility Disabilities?

While persons who use wheelchairs or scooters need accommodation in terms of their ability to maneuver that mobility aid, distance is not always an issue. For those with hidden mobility limitations, however, distance is *absolutely* an issue. There are several trends that are creating or accelerating barriers for persons with hidden mobility limitations.

Emphasis on alternate mobility options. Walking, cycling, ridesharing, and public transit are all being promoted as critical to reducing congestion, the cost of construction,

and carbon/greenhouse gas emissions. However, each of these modes poses challenges for persons with hidden mobility limitations. Walking as a primary mode of transportation is not feasible. Cycling is often not an option. Both ridesharing and public transit usually involve more walking and standing waiting than is realistic. For those focused on remaining independently mobile, cars are usually key to that mobility.

Reduction and centralization of parking options. If one accepts that cars are essential to many with hidden mobility limitations, then parking within a comfortable walking distance is also essential. The focus on alternate mobility options unfortunately is heading in the opposite direction. On-street parking is being replaced by bike lanes or stands for bike share rental companies like Mobi, decreasing the likelihood that individuals with mobility limitations can find parking near doctors' offices and other services.

Off-street parking is becoming more centralized and thus often further from likely destinations. The City of Vancouver's Parking Regulations,⁴ for example, stipulate that off-street parking for non-resident use of a facility may be 140 feet (or four school buses) to 500 feet (or over 14 school buses) away from the site. Clearly these distances are far beyond the walking ability of individuals with hidden mobility disabilities.

Movement towards the "walkable" city. Jeff Speck's 2013 book *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* has focused attention on making urban areas walkable, focusing on utility, safety, comfort, and interest. While this is a laudable movement from the perspective of neighbourliness, the Walk Score algorithm awards maximum point to having amenities no more than 1,315 feet away – significantly further than an individual with a hidden mobility limitation could walk.

This general movement is unfortunately being cited as a rationale for reducing the need for direct vehicular access to public services as well as the required number of parking spaces. While government services are typically housed in a building, many recreational activities as well as the enjoyment of nature are out of doors. If individuals with hidden mobility disabilities cannot drive to within 35 feet of these public services, the likelihood of relatively pain-free enjoyment is almost nil.

Limited awareness of invisible mobility disabilities. Ironically, those with hidden mobility disabilities are often doubly invisible – first within the general population, and second within the community of persons with disabilities. As one example, on the website Disabled World⁵ there is a statement that "those with joint problems or chronic pain may not use mobility aids on some days or at all"; however, the list of invisible disabilities given does not include either osteoarthritis or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which are two of the largest groups of individuals with hidden mobility limitations.

What Are Possible Policy Directives?

The greatest challenges faced by individuals with hidden mobility disabilities are posed by the built environment over which they have little or no control. Below are suggestions of regulations that could address the three main areas of challenge:

⁴ <http://former.vancouver.ca/commsvcs/BYLAWS/parking/Sec04.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/invisible/>

1. Distance to be walked – specify:
 - a. A maximum distance of 35 feet from a main entrance to on-street parking near that entrance.
 - b. A maximum distance of 50 feet from a main entrance to off-site lane parking.
 - c. At least one universal rest room within 35 feet of the main entrance.
 - d. The positioning of handicapped parking stalls so that the driver's door is within 20 feet of an elevator.
 - e. A maximum distance of 35 feet from a seated waiting area to the service window in a government service office.
 - f. A maximum distance of 35 feet from public parking to out-of-doors public amenities such as waterfronts, parks, viewing sites, etc.
2. Length of time standing – specify:
 - a. Where access to a public service requires standing in line, provide a ticket number dispenser at the entrance with seating for people waiting their turn.
 - b. Where individuals are expected to stand using service kiosks, provide a seated alternative.
 - c. Where possible, provide online alternatives for accessing public services from home.
3. The ability to sit and rest – specify the provision of (bench) seating:
 - a. For individuals waiting for elevators.
 - b. At intervals of least every 35 feet for:
 - i. Buildings with entrances set back from the street more than 35 feet.
 - ii. Corridors longer than 50 feet.
 - iii. Shopping malls.
 - iv. Public viewing sites

Conclusion

Research, policy regulations, and public awareness are all needed to help individuals with hidden mobility disabilities live with dignity. All too often such individuals are pressured to walk further than is healthy or are stranded in circumstances where they become virtually immobilized with pain or lack of breath. No one should have to beg to be assisted or die because a public employee forced them to walk further than they safely could.⁶ The policy suggestions outlined are intended to help municipal, provincial, and federal officials begin to address the needs of individuals with hidden mobility disabilities.

⁶ Sara Mojtehedzadeh and Alex Ballingall, "Airport workers flagged Pearson wheelchair concerns in July, letter reveals." *The Toronto Star*, 23 September 2016.