UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER RECEIVES NEW VAN SO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES CAN LEARN TO DRIVE AGAIN

COLUMBUS -- A new van, specially equipped to help people with disabilities learn to drive, has been added to the fleet of vehicles for the Driving Rehabilitation Services at The Ohio State University Medical Center, the only location in central Ohio where such services are offered.

This 1993 Ford Econo Van will be used by people with quadriplegia and paraplegia and who use wheelchairs, as well as people with other types of disabilities.

The Medical Center purchased this van after the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission provided $97,712 to help Ohio State update its program with the latest in technological equipment for people with disabilities, says Dan Cox, director of Driving Rehabilitation Services.

"We are very pleased that the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission has helped the Medical Center purchase this van," says Cox. "Driving is an important part of life for people with disabilities and marks the last stage in their quest for independence."

This new van replaces the 1984 model that has been used for several years. Two sedans adapted for people with disabilities are also in the fleet.

Special adaptations were made to the van so that Cox can offer instruction to drivers with various levels of mobility.

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New van for those with disabilities

The Driving Rehabilitation Services at OSU Medical Center has received a new high-tech training van for helping people with disabilities to learn how to drive.

Dan Cox, the program manager, said the new van is used for training people with spinal injuries who have limited movements of their legs and arms. Cox said the van can also be used to train people recovering from strokes or people with limited motor control. Cox said driving skills can allow greater independence for people with disabilities.

The van is the only training van in Ohio which has a horizontal steering wheel to accommodate people with limited arm movement. The amount of effort required to steer can be adjusted up or down, depending on the driver’s ability according to Cox.

Cox also said the van also has a headrest-mounted button system that allows the driver to operate controls, like the horn and lights, using only head movements. The van features an electronic accelerator and brake which responds better than the previous vacuum system.

Cox said drivers trained on their van are generally investing in their own vehicle. The typical cost of a customized van like this can be as high as $50,000. Cox said their van was made possible by a grant from the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation.

— Jeff Chamberlin
Dan Cox, left, shows Rick Morrison how to operate a steering device that will be part of Morrison's van. Modifications to Morrison's vehicle will be tailored to his needs to allow the quadriplegic to drive.

Van opens world for quadriplegic
OSU course teaches the disabled to drive adapted vehicles

By Holly Goodman
Dispatch Staff Reporter

Rick Morrison casually leaned his head back into the high-tech headrest, triggering the horn. With a nod to the left, a turn signal would be activated.

It has been nearly a decade since the 25-year-old Delaware, Ohio, man had been behind the wheel. And the van he is learning to drive now isn't quite like the vehicles he learned on the first time around.

Morrison is a student of Dan Cox in the Driving Rehabilitation Services program at Ohio State University Medical Center. As with many of Cox's students, Morrison has quadriplegia.

"It's kind of hard being young and having to depend on someone to drive you around," Morrison said. He was injured after losing control of a pickup in 1985. But after working with Cox in the altered 1993 van, he will be able to drive a van tailored to his needs.

He already has been assessed to determine the specific changes his van will need, Cox, who will spend at least 10 hours driving with Morrison, makes sure those adaptations are accurate.

Besides its van, one of three in the state, the medical center has two specially-adapted sedans, Cox said.

"To be part of the program, (patients) must have a doctor's prescription and a valid driver's license," Cox said. He works with 10 to 15 students a week.

The vans cost about $50,000. But Cox said the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation picks up the tab for alterations. The driver supplies the van.

Cox calls Ohio State's van "generic" because it can be adjusted to fit the needs of quadriplegics, paraplegics and folks with other disabilities.

Among its three steering wheels is one for the instructor and the only horizontal wheel in the state. The latter, a 7-inch disc, can be turned by people with very little strength.

An electronic panel provides control of every function from the horn to the defroster. The acceleration and brakes are electronic and "every system has a backup," Cox said.

For Morrison, all of the high-tech gadgetry will mean his freedom regained. It will allow him to live on his own and will increase employment opportunities.

He hopes to be on the road by summer.

"I'm real anxious to get back out and drive," he said. "I'm looking forward to getting my independence back."