Handicap Vans Report

How to determine what model of handicap van to buy, including the necessary adaptive equipment and van conversion options available, typically requires the assistance of others. In this report, we focus on the importance of using only reputable handicap accessible van dealers. We also provide important information about topics such as: van conversions, wheelchair lifts, local and national mobility dealers, why NMEDA is important, funding options, safety factors and the pros and cons of buying either a new or used handicap van.

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1. Introduction

Did you know that 85% of drivers or passengers with disability buy minivans as opposed to full-sized vans? It stands to reason since the minivan handles better, has better fuel efficiency and features a compact look. However, a full-sized van may be necessary and desirable especially when transporting several wheelchair users or when more space is needed. Today's handicap vans include newly converted vans, and a number of trusted equipment manufacturers such as Ricon, Braun, Eclipse, VMI, IMS and Viewpoint lead the industry with van conversions.

Handicap vans can be fully converted and include all of the bells and whistles. Take for example, the
Honda Odyssey with VMI Northstar Conversion featuring modifications and adaptive equipment such as lowered van floor, power door operators, transfer seat and power in floor ramp. This van can cost as much as $60,000, a lot of money when considering insurance typically doesn’t cover the cost of the vehicle. (See funding sources)

However, not all wheelchair drivers and passengers require the same modifications. Input from a physician, physical therapist, and CDRS, (Certified Driver Rehab Specialist) if planning to drive, is an essential first step. An individual "needs assessment" along with a person’s budget and how the van will be used are critical factors to help determine modification and adaptive equipment; a reputable NMEDA member or ADA member mobility dealer can help you with that.

To further understand the market of handicap vans, let’s take a more in depth look at van conversions, adaptive equipment, handicap accessible van dealers, NMEDA, funding, van accessible parking (video), and new and used wheelchair vans and the pros and cons of buying one over the other.

2. Handicap Van Conversions

In general, vans are converted to accommodate wheelchair users for personal, or, for commercial use. Standard vans are converted by installing adaptive equipment or by doing modifications such as raising roof height or lowering the van floor. In doing conversions, vans (both, mini or full-sized) can receive full conversions in which adaptability equipment and modifications include a host of features necessary and useful for the wheelchair user.

As mentioned, equipment manufacturers such as Ricon, Braun, Eclipse, VMI, IMS and Viewpoint lead the industry with van conversions and Braun is the largest supplier in the industry.

For full van conversions, equipment manufacturers have a conversion prototype assigned to a particular van make and Toyota, Honda, Chrysler/Dodge, GM, Ford and Chevrolet are typical candidates.

Costs: A standard conversion package includes lowered floor conversions on the mini van costing around $20,000. This factory installed conversion generally includes lowered floor height (10” on most makes; 12” on Chevrolet minivans), kneel system, ramp, removable seat and tie downs. Adaptive equipment such as driving controls, transfer seat, and EZ lock are not included.

Full-sized van conversions often include raising roof and door for more headroom. Lowered floor conversions are available only in Ford. Benefits to this conversion, as opposed to raising the roof in the full-sized van, can be that there is less wind resistance and some find it easier to park in parking garages with lower overheads. Full-sized vans offer wheelchair lifts as opposed to ramps, both in floor or fold out installed in minivans.

3. Adaptive Equipment

In addition to van conversions, necessary adaptive equipment can be installed by a mobility dealership. To determine what kinds of adaptive equipment is appropriate, a NMEDA mobility dealer should be contacted. If an individual plans to be a driver, a driver rehabilitation specialist can help determine which equipment is best as well as train an individual to use newly installed devices.

Vans can be equipped for commercial or personal use and a number of reputable equipment manufacturers provide the state-of-the-art parts that are then installed by authorized dealers using trained and certified technicians. Costs of adaptive equipment will vary; however, here are some examples of parts and labor for a few. (Note: These are ball park estimates only)
- EZ Lock - A means of securing an occupied wheelchair in a moving vehicle: Parts and labor - $1,900
  (Includes: being bolted to floor, release button and alarm)
- Transfer Seat in Mini van: Parts and Labor - $2,300
- Hand Controls: Left foot Gas Pedal: Parts and Labor - $330

For adaptive equipment, a number of organizations provide financial assistance for eligible drivers and passengers. For example, GM will reimburse up to $1,000 to an eligible customer, and other automobile manufacturers do the same. Adaptive equipment can include: Steering System, Vehicle Entry, Seats, Brake and Accelerator Systems and Driver Positions.

4. Handicap Accessible Van Dealer

What dealers offer - Handicap accessible van dealers are located throughout the country enabling the consumer to buy a handicap accessible van close to where they live. New handicap vans can be purchased by a dealer certified to sell conversions by a particular equipment manufacturer (eg: VMI or Braun). Additionally, handicap accessible van dealers may also sell used wheelchair vans, install adaptive equipment, and service and maintain handicap vans.

Are all handicap accessible van dealers the same? - No. And it is because of this fact that an individual needs to do some homework before choosing to work with a particular dealership. For one, exercise caution when using the Internet to shop for a handicap van. Although the Internet is a powerful resource, there is abuse that occurs in all industries, including dealerships that sell handicap vans. To keep away from the bad businesses, use only reputable handicap accessible van dealers. This can be done by searching for a local dealer through NMEDA’s website, where by typing in your zip code, one or several NMEDA member dealerships in your area will be listed. Also, Braun and VMI, provide a similar search tool on their websites. Ford and GM mobility also provide dealerships. Another resource is ADA.com a.k.a. Adaptive Driving Alliance. This organization is a nationwide group of vehicle modification dealers, each of which is certified through NMEDA’s QAP a.k.a. Quality Assurance Program.

Is it better to buy from a local dealership? - In general you will be better off buying a handicap van from a local dealership rather than, for example, one in another state. The reason is quite simple actually, and that is that you want to make sure that the vehicle you buy can be serviced and maintained locally. Warranties, which are typically 3 years or 36,000 miles, may not be validated by a local mobility dealership that did not sell you your van. This can mean that to do the work, you may be paying the shops’ hourly service fee, which can cost $100 or more. On the other hand, there are big mobility dealerships, (NMEDA members) that sell handicap vans both nationally and even internationally. What to consider is the network of local dealers.

What to look for in a handicap accessible van dealer? - Do they offer 24 hour service! This is extremely important for passengers or drivers of handicap vans especially because electrical problems do occur. And you don’t want to be left stranded.

5. NMEDA and Handicap Vans

NMEDA, otherwise known as the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association, is a professional association "committed to ensuring quality and professionalism in the manufacturing and installation of safe and reliable mobility equipment in vehicles for drivers and passengers with disabilities." Members of NMEDA include dealerships, automotive manufacturers, rehabilitation professionals, equipment manufacturers, and government agencies.

Founded in 1989 NMEDA strives to achieve quality; NMEDA member dealerships located internationally, thus, have to adhere to certain standards. These standards benefit the consumer (disabled driver or passenger) directly, as NMEDA member dealerships, have, or provide, the following:
- Are factory trained by the specific mobility manufacturer
- Will have proper insurance
- Are aware of all the Federal Safety Standards
- Are licensed to do business in your area
- Can service and repair your van

Helping with Selection - Also, when a dealer is a member, it assures you of important conversion and equipment standards that include: safety, selection and service. By working with a NMEDA mobility dealer, an individual can be properly guided to choose a handicap accessible van fitted to his or her needs. Since determining “needs” varies from one individual to the next, important questions should be asked to make determinations. A Question such as: "Can you ambulate", if answered, yes, for example, makes a quick determination that there is no need for a lowered floor conversion. Another question: "Height in chair", which is the wheelchair users measurement from floor to top of head, reveals perhaps a Honda or Toyota conversion suitably sized, or not, for that individual. By visiting NMEDA’s website you can find a reputable mobility dealer in your area.

6. Handicap Vans: Buying New

Buying a new handicap accessible van under warranty has its’ advantages. Equipment and safety standards improve all of the time, and by buying new, you are getting state-of-the art technology. Also, an effective warranty of 3 years or 36,000 miles for adaptive equipment/modification is pretty standard when buying new. The downside, however, can be the high cost along with off lot depreciation which is around 30%. (This is true of all new vehicles). Dealers report that more used handicap vans are sold compared to new. Funding for "just the vehicle" is basically out of pocket with no reimbursement. However, mobility financing is generally available through manufacturers and dealers.

Where to buy? As mentioned, a NMEDA mobility dealer or other reputable mobility dealer (see handicap van dealerships) is the safest choice for the consumer. Some large mobility dealerships like Ride-Away have a large, waiting fleet of new handicap vans and this can benefit an individual who is ready to purchase a particular make and conversion right away. In many cases, however, buying new at a dealer will require a wait-time. It is not uncommon to wait for a period of 4 to 6 weeks for a common conversion.

7. Used Handicap Vans

Buying a used handicapped van has the obvious price advantage over buying new. With affordability in mind a wheelchair user doesn’t want, however, to overlook the legitimacy of a too good to be true deal. As the adage goes, if it looks to good to be true, it probably is. So the question becomes how to find the good deals, and avoid the scams, especially if shopping remotely, online. Here is a checklist to follow.

Checklist:
- 1. Is the mobility dealer a NMEDA member?
- 2. Read testimonials or call referrals from those who have purchased a used wheelchair van from this mobility dealer. Are they positive?
- 3. Use Car Fax to check the history of your van before you buy. This will uncover if the van has been in any accidents, a flood, or had any insurance claims
- 4. Use Car Fax or an independent company to inspect your van for you to provide actual diagnostic before you buy
- 5. Be sure the van is the right size before you buy

People may be drawn to a handicap van based on the type (e.g., a person likes Toyota). However, for a wheelchair user, if buying a used handicap van, make sure that you know that you will fit into the van.
The measurement of your height in chair, (width also) must be known as well as the height of the van's interior to determine whether you will fit. Also, keep in mind that many adaptive equipment manufacturers such as Braun will not allow modifications to a regular van (chassis) more than 3 years old or 30,000 miles. To learn more about used handicap vans, Click Here.

8. Wheelchair Lifts

People looking to buy used vans... those "without" an already installed wheelchair lift don't need to fret. Why? Because there are options out there. To learn more about wheelchair lifts and options, Click Here.

9. Safety

In recent years government agencies and organizations have become more of a force, setting standards and requirements designed to protect handicap drivers and passengers. One such organization, NHTSA - National Highway Transportation Safety Authority, is the governing body pertaining to moving vehicles and the mission of the NHTSA is to "save lives, prevent injuries and reduce vehicle-related crashes." This agency has the authority to regulate the manufacturing of both adaptive equipment and modified vehicles used by persons with disabilities.

We suggest reading through their brochure: Adapting Motor Vehicles for People with Disabilities, which provides information to help you make safe decisions when purchasing and modifying a van with adaptive equipment.

Organizations like NMEDA, also seek to promote safety and do so by creating standards for NMEDA dealers to abide by. These standards have the best interests of the consumer in mind. One example: Factory trained technicians can provide safe installation of adaptive equipment (versus untrained technicians).

10. Handicapped Parking Signs

If your state's DMV has issued you a disabled person parking placard this enables you to park where there are handicapped parking signs. Fortunately, there is a good amount of reserved handicap parking on the streets of busy metropolitan areas and also within public and private parking lots.

11. Funding

The out of pocket expense for purchasing a handicapped van, that includes both buying the vehicle and the adaptive equipment, is costly. To help with the expense of purchasing a new or used handicap van it is important to explore all funding options available. Keep in mind that there are a number of organizations that if you qualify, can help to provide financial assistance for the adaptive equipment/modifications. Here is a list of some groups that get involved:

- Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (by state)
- Veterans Administration Agency - U.S. military veterans may by eligible for financial assistance through their benefits when equipping a vehicle with adaptive equipment.
- Many manufacturers have rebate or reimbursement plans for modified vehicles:
  - GM Mobility Reimbursement program
  - Toyota Mobility Assistance Program
  - Ford Mobility Program
  - Honda Mobility Program
- Daimler Chrysler Program

- 4. Medicaid
- 5. Knights of Columbus
- 6. Insurance Companies
- 7. Independent Living Centers

12. Conclusion

Less than a generation ago many people living with a physical disability had fewer transportation options. Today, factory installed conversions and adaptive equipment are helping to pave the way for greater independence for those who need it. Handicap vans have come of age, and by determining the needs of each individual, people can either continue driving with the help of adaptive equipment or ride with safety and comfort as a wheelchair passenger. Costs for buying a handicap van can be expensive and reviewing used and new van options as well as exploring all funding options is essential. It is also essential to deal only with reputable dealerships, like those that are members of NMEDA, and stay away from the "to good to be true deals," such as those mentioned in this report.