

BUREAU OF REHABILITATION SERVICES

State of Connecticut

Vehicle Modifications



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1-800-537-2549 (V); (860) 424-4839 TDD/TTY.

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WHAT ARE VEHICLE MODIFICATIONS?

Vehicle modifications are any mechanical or structural changes to a passenger car, van, or other motor vehicle that permits an individual with a disability to safely drive or ride as a passenger. Vehicle modifications also include wheelchair or scooter loaders which mount on the roof, in the passenger area, or in the trunk or other storage areas of a car, van, or other motor vehicle.

Automotive adaptive control devices (AACDs) are mechanical or electrical devices added to a standard motor vehicle to enable an individual with mobility restrictions to control the accelerator, foot brake, turn signals, dimmer switch, steering wheel, and/or parking brake.

If you have a disability and you require a vehicle modification in order to enter or maintain employment, the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) can help you determine:

- whether or not you can drive, or learn to drive
- what kind of modifications are needed so that you can drive or ride safely
- what type of vehicle you should purchase
- what financial assistance is available for vehicle modifications

Please read the following pages to explore information related to vehicle modifications and contact the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services for more information.



Determining Eligibility for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program



In order for the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) to provide you with vehicle modifications, the modification must be part of an Employment Plan that you and your vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor develop together. When you apply for vocational rehabilitation services at BRS, you will be asked to provide information about your disability and how it has affected your ability to find and/or keep a job. Your VR counselor will review your employment and educational history with you. This and other information you share will help your counselor determine if you are eligible for vocational rehabilitation services.

To be eligible for vocational rehabilitation services,

- (1) You must have a physical or mental impairment which prohibits or limits your ability to work; AND
- (2) You require VR services to prepare for, engage in, or retain gainful employment.

When resources are limited, the law requires that BRS first provide services to persons with the most significant disabilities. This is called the Order of Selection. The degree of your disability is determined by your areas of functional need. Based on your degree of disability, you may not receive services even though you meet the eligibility requirements. Ask a VR counselor for more information about this process.



THE VEHICLE MODIFICATION PROCESS

VR Counselor Can Help With Vehicle Modifications

The vehicle modification process through the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services is complex and involves an investment of time and money for you and BRS.

The BRS Counselor oversees and expedites the process and responds to consumer and vendor inquiries regarding vehicle modifications. The Counselor also coordinates with the driver training consultant, the driver rehabilitation specialist, and the automotive engineering consultant to review, prescribe, approve, and evaluate your vehicle modification.

Your Employment Plan

As a BRS consumer, you will work with your VR counselor in developing an Employment Plan to identify what you need in order to attain your specific vocational goals. Vehicle modification services may be a part of this plan if you need them to attain your vocational goal.

Your Driving Evaluation

If you and your counselor determine that driving will be essential to the completion of your Employment Plan, you will be referred to one or both of the following programs for a driving evaluation: Easter Seals Mobility Center (ESMC) or the Bureau of Rehabilitative Services Driver Training Program.



THE VEHICLE MODIFICATION PROCESS

Bids and Awards

Once you successfully complete the evaluation, receive your equipment prescription, and mutually agree to proceed with the vehicle modification with your counselor, a bidding process will begin to determine which vendor can meet your needs at the lowest cost. Bids are usually solicited from at least three qualified vendors. Only-BRS approved (*NMEDA, QAP Certified) – National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association QAP – Quality Assurance Program vendors are eligible to participate in the bidding process. Vendors must have a valid certificate of insurance and be licensed with the Dealers and Repairers Division of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Your Counselor will inform you when the bids are requested and awarded.

Vendors have three weeks to respond to the request for bids. Generally, the vendor with the lowest qualified bid is awarded the work. However, you can choose to go with a higher bid if you agree to pay the difference between the lowest qualified bid and that of the vendor you select. Once the job is awarded, you should contact the vendor to review the prescription with them and plan for the actual work to be done. At this point, after consultation with the vendor, you can purchase the recommended vehicle.



Vendor Responsibilities

The vehicle modification vendor must contact the automotive engineer to schedule a final inspection and must complete all work as listed in the prescription before releasing the vehicle to you or your representative. Payment to the vendor will occur after this inspection process.

The contractor must provide a preventive maintenance schedule to you for all equipment requiring such work and return to you any parts removed while performing the modification. In addition, the contractor must provide you with electrical and other appropriate diagrams to assist in emergency road repairs. Furthermore, the contractor is required to demonstrate to you and your representative the proper use of the equipment which has been installed or modified. The vendor must ensure that you have an adequate knowledge to properly activate all equipment installed.

The contractor also must provide you with a manual (if supplied by the manufacturer) **and** a written warranty specifying the terms. A one-year parts and service warranty on all conversion items is written into the BRS contract with the vendor; therefore, you should incur no repair charges on your conversion equipment and no transportation (pick-up and delivery) charges during the first year. Warranties for specific equipment may exceed one year, but in most cases there will still be a labor charge. If you encounter an equipment problem during the warranty period, contact the vendor. If the vendor does not correct the problem, contact your counselor.

The Conversion Fitting and Inspection

According to the terms of the BRS contract, the vendor will pick up your vehicle and return it to your home (or other mutually agreed-upon address) for modifications, adjustments, and/or warranty work.

Up to 350 miles may be placed on your vehicle during this process. When the work has progressed sufficiently, the vendor will contact you to arrange a “fitting,” to position the operating controls to best meet your needs. You are expected to make your own arrangements to attend each fitting. The wheelchair you use at all fittings must be the same one you will use when driving or riding as a passenger. A different-sized wheelchair may affect your ability to enter and exit the modified vehicle, lock down your wheelchair, and move freely when you are positioned for driving.

After the vehicle is inspected, the inspection report will provide you with the following information:

- (1) the vehicle passes checkout—it is then released to you;
- (2) the vehicle passes checkout, but some minor adjustments are needed—ordinarily the vehicle will still be released to you, but the vendor must provide for correction as soon as possible; or
- (3) the vehicle does not pass checkout because of a serious non-compliance with the bid specifications. In this event, the vendor must correct the problem and schedule another checkout before the vehicle can be released to you.

BRS will withhold payment until the vehicle passes inspection. Once it passes, you will be expected to pay your share, if any, of the cost before the vendor will release the vehicle to you. These inspections are provided by:

Harry C. Gough, P.E.
Vehicle Modification Engineer
Easter Seals Mobility Center
158 State Street Meriden, CT 06450-0182
Phone 203-630-2208; 203-634-0341 (Fax)



THE VEHICLE MODIFICATION PROCESS

Time Frame

The entire vehicle modification process from evaluation to final delivery generally takes three to seven months, but can take longer, depending upon the extent of the project.

The modification work usually takes up to 60 days from the time the vehicle modification vendor receives the vehicle. Modifications requiring a lowered floor may take up to 90 days; modifications requiring special driving packages may take up to 120 days. At times, vendors encounter unavoidable delays which set back the anticipated delivery time.



Consumer Responsibilities

You must notify your Counselor when your vehicle is available for modifications, when it is released to the vendor, and when it is returned to you. It is important for you to maintain contact with your BRS counselor throughout the modification process. Notify them of any changes in your personal situation that may require amending, revising, or canceling your vehicle modification or Employment Plan. You must contact the evaluation site (ESMC or DTP) and your Counselor if any changes are to be made in the original prescription.

When you receive your modified vehicle, contact the Driver Training Program (DTP) to provide training and certification for licensure.



It is strongly recommended that you do not take this vehicle on the road or attempt to use any of the new equipment until you have been properly trained and certified for licensure to drive through the DTP.

After receiving the vehicle, you and your insurance company will be responsible for repair of any damage due to accidents.

What Vehicle Modifications May the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services Provide?

BRS provides vehicle modifications for eligible individuals when required to enter or maintain employment. Modifications are limited to those which are necessary for safe operation of the vehicle. BRS will arrange modification for the minimum driving system you need to drive or ride in your vehicle. For example, if you use a manual wheelchair for mobility but you have the ability to transfer; BRS may equip an automobile with hand controls. If you cannot load your wheelchair by hand, a car top wheelchair carrier may be provided.

The following are examples of vehicle modifications which BRS may provide:

- Rooftop wheelchair carriers
- Wheelchair lifts
- Power door operators
- Adaptive control devices
- Electronic control consoles
- Modifications to the steering and braking systems to reduce the effort required to operate them
- Floor modifications for driving from a wheelchair
- Smooth floor covering over the standard van floor, for individuals who enter the van from a wheelchair
- Power transfer seat bases
- Raised roofs and raised door openings, when necessary for entry into the vehicle (vehicles with raised roofs must have roll bars installed)
- Lowered floors (full-size or minivans only)
- Wheelchair tie downs



What Should I Know Before I Buy a Vehicle That Will be Modified?

BRS does not buy or lease passenger cars or vans for consumers. The agency does not participate in the purchase of automobile devices which are available from the automobile manufacturer as factory-installed items.

Before you buy a car or van to be modified, keep in mind the other costs of having a vehicle, such as registration, licensing, insurance, and maintenance. The modification ITSELF also must be insured. You may want to forward a copy of the vehicle evaluation prescription on your vehicle to your insurance carrier. Although insurance rates differ, the insurance premium for a converted van can reach \$3,000 or more annually. After the first-year warranty period, maintenance of adaptive equipment will cost approximately \$500 per year, above and beyond regular vehicle maintenance costs.

DO NOT purchase your vehicle until your consultation, driver evaluation, vehicle modification prescription, employment plan, and the bidding process have been completed and the bids have been awarded. As a general rule, work in conjunction with your Counselor before you purchase your vehicle. The Bureau will not provide financial assistance for vehicles not appropriate for modifications.

Three Ways To Purchase A New Van

1. Buy a new van through the vehicle modification vendor who is awarded the bid. They will arrange to obtain the lowered floor van through their subcontractor, including Braun, Eldorado (previously called Ricon), IMS, VMI (previously called Vantage.) This is the fastest way to obtain a van.
2. Order the new van on paper, from a local automobile dealership, who, in turn, will issue a request for the van to be made by the automobile manufacturer. Obtain a drop shipping code number from the vehicle modification vendor who is awarded the bid and provide that number to your local dealer. Your local dealer will ship the van to the lowered floor manufacturer/sub-contractor. This is the least expensive way to obtain a van.
3. Buy the van off the lot from a local automobile dealer and take possession of the van. You will be responsible for the shipping costs to transport the van from your local dealer to the lowered floor manufacturer.
4. **For lowered floor conversions, new and used vehicles purchased locally will cost you an additional one-way shipping charge (typically between \$1,200.00 and \$1,600.00). In addition, used vans should have less than 30,000 miles. Lowered floor manufacturers will not modify vans with more than 50,000 miles. If the van has more than 30,000 miles the lowered floor manufacturer will charge more for the modification (typically between \$500.00 and \$600.00) which will also be your responsibility. So you should bear in mind that any monies saved by purchasing your vehicle locally will be offset by the additional costs noted above and it will take longer to get your van due to the extra shipping time.**

Shipping charges for transporting the van from the subcontractor to the primary vendor are included in BRS-contracted jobs. Vehicle modifications must comply with all applicable state and federal laws and regulations, in order to ensure their safety for highway operation. In addition, BRS QAP-certified vehicle modification vendors are required to modify vehicles in accordance with NMEDA guidelines.

A NMEDA-QAP label will be affixed to the vehicle indicating that it has been modified in accordance with NMEDA guidelines. In addition, another label (issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) may be affixed in accordance with 49 CFR 595.6, to indicate if modifications have caused any equipment to be no longer in compliance with federal motor vehicle safety standards in effect at the time of its original manufacture. Vans adapted or modified under BRS sponsorship are subject to a compliance examination by the ESMC automotive engineer. The compliance inspection will take place prior to release or return of the vehicle to the owner by the modifier or installer.

Should I Buy a Used Vehicle?

It may not be financially wise to make a substantial investment in a vehicle that has a limited life span. If possible, buy a new vehicle. If this is not feasible, try to obtain the best suitable used vehicle. You are financially responsible for any general repairs the vehicle may need before the start of the BRS-contracted vehicle modifications.

Used vehicles must be approved by the Bureau's automotive engineer to determine suitability for the particular adaptations. Before you purchase a used vehicle, you must contact the VR Counselor to make arrangements with the Automotive Engineer to inspect the vehicle. ONLY NEW vans can be used for high-tech driving systems.

BRS assumes no responsibility for maintenance costs. Also, BRS assumes no responsibility for maintenance or repair of any vehicle for which it has provided modified equipment. The vehicle to be modified must have power steering, power brakes and automatic transmission. For lowered floor mini vans, a load leveling suspension on Chrysler and Dodge and a towing or other heavy duty package on other mini vans will be necessary. Lowered floor conversions on full size Ford Vans (2010 and up) E-150 through E-350 will have an aft-of-axle gas tank installed which may be of less capacity than the original tank. A trailer towing package with trailer-hitch will be necessary. This will increase your cost to buy the van. Your prescription for modifications also will list other recommendations to consider.

Adaptive equipment/modifications will add weight to your vehicle. Your wheelchair or scooter will also decrease your vehicle's original weight carrying capacity. Your counselor can also review the vehicle modification prescription with you regarding the appropriate type, make, and year of the vehicle to be modified and the type of wheelchair or scooter you will use with the vehicle, if applicable.

Other Considerations in Buying a Vehicle

Some motor vehicles are not suitable for automotive adaptive control devices and/or vehicle modifications due to the nature of their chassis and/or vehicle body. Before you buy, make sure your vehicle can handle the modifications you need.

In general, do not buy vehicles with:

- All-wheel and four-wheel drive;
- Custom interiors, including sofa beds and appliances;
- Paneled ceilings for vans getting raised roofs
- Remote starters which interfere with the operation of a high-tech driving system. These special features make modifications difficult and may have to be eliminated. A vehicle which is mechanically and structurally sound, with minimal custom interior and exterior work, is recommended.

In the modification process, especially with lowered floors on vans, some original equipment manufacturer (OEM) parts may be replaced with after-market parts. These parts, which may include fuel tanks, exhaust systems, and rear air conditioning, may carry different specifications than the OEM parts, such as a reduced capacity fuel tank.

If you do not own the motor vehicle to be modified, you and the owner must sign an agreement giving you access to the vehicle for a period of at least five years from the date of the completion of the modification. Certain modification packages require that the vendor subcontract part of the job to another provider to complete a specialized part of the conversion.

What Equipment May Not Be Provided?

BRS may not pay for all recommendations (or items checked) in the vehicle evaluation prescription.

The following are examples of items which BRS will NOT provide:



Cosmetic customizing, such as carpeted or paneled side walls and ceilings (BRS specifications for floor modifications call for commercial-grade, flame-retardant carpeting to protect the sub-floor and to provide a non-skid surface for wheelchair traction).

CB radios, cellular telephones, remote starters, or anti-theft systems.

Air conditioning, automatic transmissions, power steering, power brakes, automatic speed controls, heavy-duty alternators.

Modification to the basic vehicle to prepare it for conversion (for example, if the vehicle's suspension system requires "strengthening" to accommodate a van conversion, this will be your responsibility).



What Will the Vehicle Modification Cost Me?

Your counselor will work with you to determine the overall cost of the vehicle modification and the extent to which BRS will provide financial assistance. You may be asked to contribute toward the cost of the vehicle modification. BRS will provide assistance within the following guidelines:

- **First modification:** BRS may provide up to 100 percent of the cost of modification.
- **Repeat jobs within three years following first modification:** BRS will not provide any financial assistance.
- **Repeat jobs (more than three years and at least 54,000 miles):** the Bureau may provide up to 50 percent of the cost of the equipment transfer or vehicle re-modifications. You will be responsible for the balance.
- **Repeat jobs (more than five years and at least 90,000 miles):** the Bureau may provide up to 100 percent of the cost of the modifications.

PLEASE NOTE: If you arrange for any work from the vendor other than that listed on the prescription that BRS agreed to pay, **YOU WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR PAYING THE ADDITIONAL COSTS.**



RESOURCES

Connecticut Tech Act Project/ Assistive Technology Loan Program

Assistive technology is any device or equipment which helps you develop, improve or maintain your ability to function independently. The goal of the Connecticut Tech Act Project is to provide access to assistive technology for all persons with disabilities who live in Connecticut. To help defray the cost of expensive devices, such as vehicle modifications, low-interest loans are available. You may apply for an assistive technology loan to help pay for the cost of a vehicle modification, even if you do not need the vehicle for work, and is not a BRS consumer.

For more information on the Assistive Technology Loan Program, call

1-800-537-2549, or 860-424-5619. You may also visit the

CT Tech Act Project website

www.CTTechAct.com/loan

for more resources and to download the application.

Easter Seals Mobility Center

Easter Seals Mobility Center (ESMC), 158 State Street, Meriden, CT 06450-0182

Telephone: 203-630-2208 Fax: 203-634-0341

E-Mail: tpassariello@eswct.com and apascucci@eswct.com

Coordinator: Tricia Coppola-Passariello, OTR/L, MS, CDRS

Driving Instructor: Anthony Pascucci, CDI Engineer: Harry Gough, PE

At the Easter Seals Mobility Center, a Driving Assessment is a medically based evaluation performed by experienced staff, including a licensed Occupational Therapist who is also a Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist. Testing is completed in the clinic, on a driving simulator, and on the road in a specially equipped vehicle with a Certified Driving Instructor. The test is completed in one day, and takes approximately 2 ½ to 3 hours. Recommendations are made that concern a person's safety and medical ability to operate a motor vehicle and what adaptations/equipment may be necessary.

Your vision (including screenings for minimum state requirements for driving, which are required for licensure in Connecticut), physical skills, perceptual, and cognitive abilities, will be assessed clinically using vision screeners, a driving simulator, and other methods. Your range of motion, strength, coordination, cognition, mobility and transfer skills will also be evaluated.

The ESMC evaluates and recommends appropriate equipment and vehicles for both drivers and passengers with disabilities. The evaluators will prepare prescriptions/written reports for vehicle modifications and driving equipment.

For individuals who use wheelchairs, the wheelchair you use during the evaluation must be the same chair you plan to use for driving. Changes in your seating or wheelchair will require a re-evaluation.

Bureau of Rehabilitative Services Driver Training Program

Consultant: Dino Toce

Telephone 1-800-537-2549 Fax: 860-424-4850 Email: dino.toce@ct.gov



The Driver Training Program works with you if you require adaptive equipment to drive. The process consists of evaluation, training, and certification. The state has established certain minimum visual standards for driving; if you do not meet these standards, you cannot be licensed to operate a motor vehicle. The driving evaluation report will state (1) if you meet the state's requirements for driving; and (2) what equipment modifications you need to drive safely. Whether you drive or ride as a passenger, the evaluators will write a prescription upon successful completion of this process. You will receive a copy of this report.

If you have a disability and are interested in driving, contact the Driver Training Program (DTP), even if you are not a BRS consumer. You will be provided guidance, information, and training to help guide you in the process. The wheelchair you use during evaluation, and training, must be the same chair you plan to use for driving. Changes in your seating or wheelchair will require a re-evaluation.

If you are a new (first time) or a current Connecticut license holder who meets the above requirements and you wish to participate in the program, first contact the BRS Driver Training Program for Persons with Disabilities (DTP) at 1-800-537-2549 to have your name placed on our waiting list for training.

Then contact DMV Driver Services Division at (860) 263-5723 to obtain the required medical clearance. State that you are applying for driver training through the BRS driver training program and would like to begin the medical review process.

Funding Sources

If you are not eligible for assistance from BRS, please review the following other potential funding sources:

Connecticut Tech Act Project - Assistive Technology Loan Program

(for a low-interest loan, maximum ten years)

800-537-2549 or 860-424-5619.

Veterans' Administration (for veterans with service-connected disabilities)

860-529-2571; 203-932-5711

The Office of Victim Services (for persons whose disabilities resulted from a crime)

800-822-8428

Donations from civic/religious organizations or other private grant sources.

Questions about eligibility and other vocational rehabilitation services should be directed to your BRS Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. For additional information go to:

www.ct.gov/brs.

