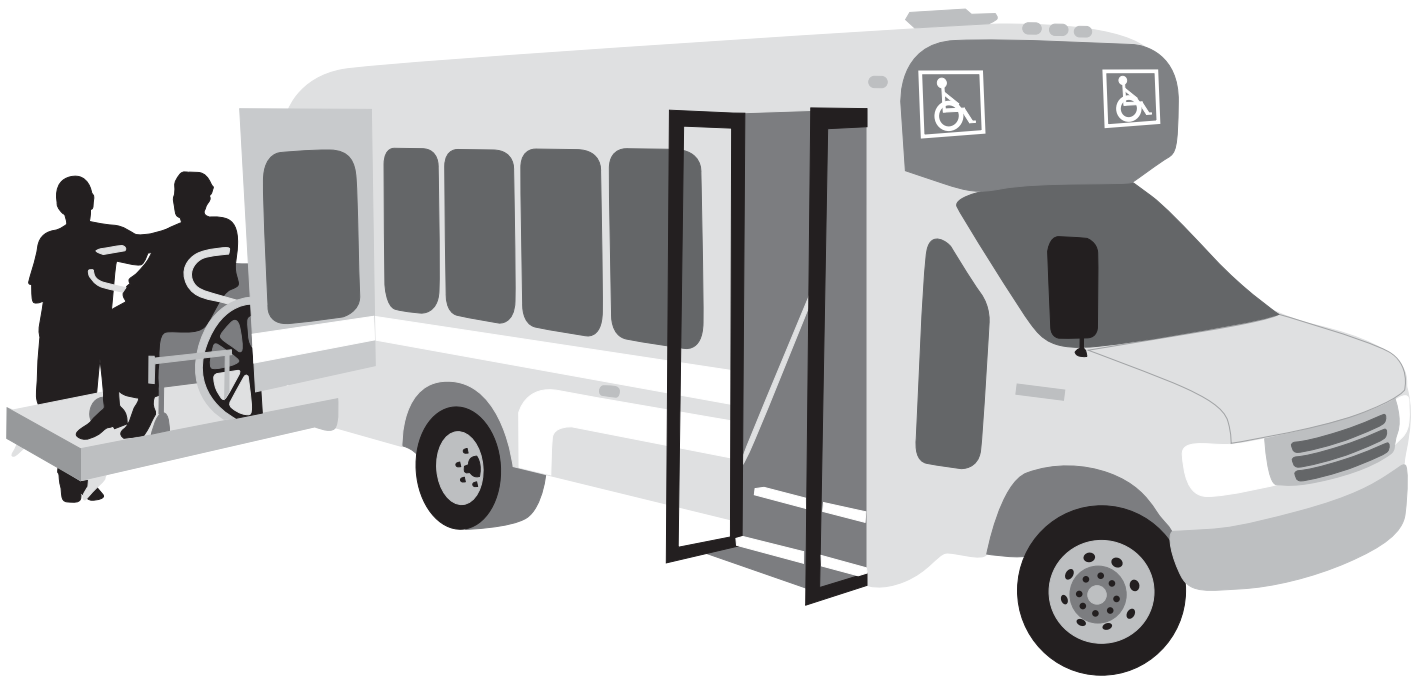


Transit and Paratransit Could Be Perfect Together

by Steve Fittante



Steve Fittante is the Director of the Middlesex County (NJ) Department of Transportation which provides community transit services to senior citizens, disabled residents and the general public.

He has over 30 years of experience in public transit and paratransit planning and administration, including the coordination of paratransit with traditional transit services.

His previous public and private sector experience include management positions with New Jersey Transit, Laidlaw Transit and as

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Steve has several published articles on taxi service contracting and the development of transit feeder services in suburban and small urban markets.

The demand for mobility for people without access to autos may be going the route of gasoline and other scarce resources. Once abundant enough to meet most trip needs, the demand is going to rapidly outstrip the supply.

This is particularly true of community transit services, particularly those non-mass transit services including advance reservation buses and van services. Many of these transportation services, including the paratransit services mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and local community and not-for-profit services, were developed over the past thirty years to meet the needs of specific groups of individuals. Shopping buses for older Americans, employment transportation services for economically disadvantaged individuals and transportation tailored for the needs of people with disabilities have been funded by funding sources concerned only with a narrowly defined constituency.

Over the next 20 years, it is anticipated that the trip demand among older Americans and people with disabilities will more than double. Given the fact that the traditional paratransit service covers less than 25% of its cost from the fare box, the cost of meeting this expanded demand will require financial resources that state and federal grant programs are ill equipped to meet.

The recent efforts of the federal government to push harder for the coordination of funding has been a goal of many human service transportation professionals since the 1970s but one that has fallen short of expectations. There are many good examples of sharing transportation resources but far too often communities have multiple providers creating duplicated services.

There are prescriptions for doing more with less and here are three that need to be strongly considered in order to meet what has been called by some national transit observers as the “tsunami wave of community transit demand.”

One neglected area of coordination is the use of the subsidized transit system as a resource, particularly in suburban and small urban communities. While it is perfectly acceptable to transfer between transit services in urban areas, the idea of bringing traditional paratransit users to the transit system is an idea whose time has come.

In New Jersey, the bus and rail transit services are subsidized at a rate of approximately 50%. In urban areas, these bus, light rail and rail services are often the means of choice for seniors and people with disabilities. Community transit systems need to establish a pipeline for obtaining bus and rail tickets and passes from the traditional transit providers and a means for distributing/selling them to their customers where it meets the criteria of being cost efficient and appropriate for specific customers and trips.

A second prescription goes hand and hand with the first—Travel Training. Identifying the easy trips that can be made by willing paratransit customers is the easy part. The next step involves building the confidence of these customers to use traditional fixed route services if they have never or rarely used them before. Travel training teaches potential customers skills including how to plan a trip, reading a timetable, identifying and paying fares and boarding a vehicle, skills critical to providing paratransit users more options for travel where traditional transit exists.

Finally, the overarching message that needs to be embraced by both traditional transit and community transit providers is similar to the argument for public/private partnerships—one sector can’t do it all and the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts if we work together. There are some trips for traditional paratransit riders that are better met by fixed route bus and rail services and there are some areas where paratransit can extend the reach of transit so traditional transit users can get to destinations where transit does not currently exist.

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We can no longer afford transit and paratransit systems that talk coordination without walking the walk. If mobility is one of the keys to independent living and reducing dependence on government support, transit and paratransit providers have to adopt the best practices that exist and find new ways to work together to meet this challenge. **P&F**

THE OFFENSES OF



“WHAT’S WRONG WITH THAT?”

Advocates Tell DreamWorks—

“Plenty!”

Finley speaks for many with intellectual disabilities when she describes how hurtful the “R-word” is to her.

“When they learned that the DreamWorks blockbuster “Tropic Thunder” was playing in Indianapolis, some of those attending the SABE (Self Advocates Becoming Empowered) conference there in September went over to protest.

When the moviegoers saw the protesters, “They stared at us,” said Hope Finley, a New Jersey self advocate and SABE regional representative.

Normally, she doesn’t like being stared at, “but in this case it was a good thing,” Finley said. “We got their attention.

“I found out that people all over the state and the country with developmental disabilities were protesting. We wanted to make theaters stop showing it and make everyone aware that it wasn’t acceptable.”

Finley was one of many people with intellectual and other types of disabilities who, as part of a national coalition of disability groups, protested “Tropic Thunder,” released late this past summer.

So why were so many with intellectual disabilities and their allies offended by “Tropic Thunder?” The short answer is one word—a derogatory slangword—“retard.” The slur was used excessively in the movie (17 times by one count) said Gail Williamson, executive director of the Down Syndrome Association of Los Angeles, Inc.

Also, with the phrase “never go full retard,” which is used throughout the movie and in the advertising campaign to promote it “they created a ‘walk away,” Williamson said. “They knew it was going to appear on T-shirts—that people were going to put it into the vernacular.”

Last August, a coalition, whose members, in addition to Williamson’s group, include Special Olympics, the Arc of the United States, and the American Association of People with Disabilities, called for a boycott of “Tropic Thunder.”

In a “Statement of Solidarity Protesting ‘Tropic Thunder,” the group urged Hollywood to “pledge to make this the final chapter in a sullied history of demeaning portrayals of individuals with intellectual disabilities.”

“Tropic Thunder” is a satire of Hollywood egotism and action movies. The movie satirizes everything from the egos of film directors to movies such as “Apocalypse Now,” and “inspirational” films like “Forrest Gump” and “Rain Man”—where actors win Oscars by playing characters with intellectual or other disabilities.

In the movie, Ben Stiller plays actor Tugg Speedman. Speedman, in turn, is playing the character Four Leaf Tayback in the movie within the movie—an action picture that takes place during the Vietnam War.

Speedman wishes that he could be playing better parts. But so far, his greatest acclaim has come for playing “Simple Jack,” a farm boy with intellectual disabilities.

There have been numerous stereotypical depictions of people with developmental disabilities in movies, said Beth Haller, an expert in disability and the media, who teaches mass communications at Towson University.

From “Of Mice and Men,” to “Charly,” to “Something About Mary,” to “Gump” and “Rain Man,” individuals with intellectual disabilities are variously seen as “holy fools,” “inspired eccentrics,” “savants,” “violent,” or “vulnerable,” notes Haller, who writes the blog Media dis&dat.

While individuals with disabilities wrote guest editorials about some of these films, no national protest was launched against them.

However, since the 1990’s there has been an increasing outcry against variations of the word

retardation. As its most common slang derivative has been used more and more as a put down, people with disabilities are understandably more offended by it. Mental retardation has become outmoded, and imprecise, as a clinical description of conditions affecting people with intellectual disabilities and, as a result, organizations such as the Arc and governmental bodies such as the President's Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities took the words out of their names.

Finley speaks for many with intellectual disabilities when she describes how hurtful the "R-word" is to her.

"I'm not like that!" Finley said. "That doesn't say who I am! And it hurts!"

People with intellectual disabilities are the last marginalized group, Williamson said. "(Until recently) They have relied on family and support systems to represent them, so they haven't been sitting around the table."

Stiller, who directed "Tropic Thunder," and others at DreamWorks involved in the film's production, don't understand that the word "retard" is "equal" to the N-word, for people with developmental disabilities and their supporters, Williamson noted.

"This is true for the general public as well. They can see how the N-word could hurt the black community," said Williamson. "But they don't see 'retard' in the same way yet."

Many mainstream film critics, as well as DreamWorks, have said that the intent of the film was to satirize Hollywood, not demean people with intellectual disabilities. Stiller has said that he and the other actors in the film are "equal opportunity offenders." They maintain that the film pokes fun, not at anyone with a disability, but at the egotism of Hollywood actors and the sentimentality of Tinsel Town's movies.

The point they were trying to make is a valid one, Williamson said. "They are making fun of actors—non-disabled actors who aim to get awards for playing a stereotypical depiction of characters with intellectual disabilities."

However, Williamson said, the fact they didn't consult with people with intellectual disabilities and their allies contributed to the creation of the problem. Those consultations may have resulted

in script changes, such as limiting the use of inflammatory language, as it did in other instances in the film after meetings with groups representing constituencies that might have found gratuitous use of certain references offensive.

After the film was made and ready to be released, the coalition of protest groups met with DreamWorks officials. In response to their assertion that they were "equal opportunity offenders," Williamson told them at a meeting, "I bet you have people who are gay and people of color who work at DreamWorks. But I bet you have next to no employees with disabilities—let alone intellectual disabilities."

"They had nothing to say in response," Williamson added. "They didn't pop up and say, 'We've got Steve in accounting or anything.'"

Some critics complained that the protesters have been overly "politically correct" in their critique of "Tropic Thunder." But many advocates interviewed for this article said that they had a sense of humor and that they understood that the film is a satire.

"I get the joke—the irony, about the way "retard" is used in "Tropic Thunder," wrote John Franklin Stephens, a 26 year-old man with Down Syndrome, in a guest editorial in "The Roanoke Times.

"We're supposed to get the joke that it is only the dumb and shallow people who use a term that means dumb and shallow," added Stephens, who is a Special Olympics athlete and a Global Messenger in Fairfax, Va.

But, though Stephens gets the joke, the word is still hurtful to him.

"So what's wrong with 'retard,'" Stephens asked? "I can only tell you what it means to me and people like me when we hear it. It means that the rest of you are excluding us from your group. It hurts to be left out."

Disability advocates didn't only protest "Tropic Thunder," because of offensive words. One key point of contention was that DreamWorks failed to do any outreach to the disability community during the production of the movie.

"Unlike people of color or veterans, the opinions of real, live people with disabilities weren't considered until DreamWorks became concerned about losing box office," said Lawrence Carter-



Self advocates gathered to protest at the Hollywood premiere of “Tropic Thunder.”
(photo by Blair Williamson—photographer, actor, self advocate)

Long, director of advocacy for the Disabilities Network of NYC.

The deeper issue isn't about words. “It's satirization without representation,” said Carter-Long. “People with disabilities haven't been recognized as a constituency to be respected. By failing to recognize the ‘nation's largest minority,’ DreamWorks itself created the controversy surrounding “Tropic Thunder.”

Some advocates feel the silver lining to the controversy is the exposure of some long-standing problems in media depictions of people with disabilities and the cohesion with which various constituencies within the disability right movement came together.

The “Tropic Thunder” protest gave “us a teachable moment,” said Williamson, who prior to her present position worked for 12 years in the Media Access Office of the California Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities.

“There's a lot of advocacy left to accomplish, but it gave us a time to gather together to rally the troops forward. The protest coalition is still deciding what they want to do in the future,” she added.

“I'm not convinced that they (DreamWorks) grasped how much harm the film's treatment of people with intellectual disabilities is causing globally,” said Andrew Imparato, president and CEO of the American Association of People with Disabilities. “But the protest had an impact in that it sensitized Hollywood and the general public to demeaning depictions of persons with cognitive disabilities.”

And, according to Imparato, the work of the coalition united groups such as SABE, Special Olympics and AAPD that did not have a history of working together to challenge offensive media portrayals and frame an argument for ensuring that people with intellectual disabilities weigh in fully on issues that affect them. **P&F**

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