



State of Rhode Island  
Department of Human Services  
Office of Rehabilitation Services  
40 Fountain Street ~ Providence, RI 02903

# Vehicle Modifications

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**Vehicle Modification**



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## **Vehicle Modifications**

If you are a person with a disability who requires vehicle modifications in order to enter or maintain employment,

*Where do you go to find out:* 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?

The Answer Is:



The Department of Human Services  
Office of Rehabilitation Services  
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Providence, RI 02903

401.421.7005 (V)  
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## **WHAT ARE VEHICLE MODIFICATIONS?**

Vehicle modifications are any mechanical or structural changes to a passenger car or other motor vehicle that permit 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 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.

## **THE VEHICLE MODIFICATION PROCESS**

### **Determining Eligibility for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program**

Vehicle modifications must be part of an Employment Plan developed jointly by you and your Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor in order to be provided by the Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS). When you apply for vocational rehabilitation at ORS, you will be asked to provide information about your disability and how it has affected your ability to find and/or keep a job. With your VR Counselor, you also will review your employment and educational history. This and other information you offer will help your counselor determine if you are eligible for vocational rehabilitation.

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The eligibility criteria are:

- (1) you have a physical or mental impairment which constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment;  
AND
- (2) you require VR service to prepare for, enter, engage in, or retain gainful employment.

### **Your Employment Plan**

Together, you and your counselor develop an Employment Plan called an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), which identifies what you need in order to attain your specific vocational goals.

Vehicle modification services may be included in this plan if they are required for you 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 for a driving evaluation at one of the following:

South County Hospital;  
Easter Seals;  
or  
Crotchet Mountain



The evaluation will check your visual functions and your reaction time, using special equipment. 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 are needed for you to drive safely. Whether you drive or ride as a passenger, a prescription will be written which will identify the necessary equipment for your particular needs. You will receive a copy of this report.

### **ORS Consultant Designated to Help with Vehicle Modifications**

The process of vehicle modification through the Office of Rehabilitation Services is complex and involves an investment of both time and money on your part, and on the part of ORS. For this reason, ORS has engaged a consultant to assist you and your counselor to make informed decisions. ORS also had an in-house Motor Vehicle Modification Coordinator. The coordinator oversees and expedites the process, and responds to consumer, counselor and vendor inquiries regarding vehicle modifications.



This person also coordinates with the Department of Motor Vehicles' handicapped driver training consultant, the driver rehabilitation specialist, and the automotive engineering consultant to review, prescribe, approve and evaluate your vehicle modifications.

Simple modifications or adaptive equipment (i.e., hand controls) for automobiles may be handled directly by your ORS counselor.

### **Bids and Awards**

Once you successfully complete the evaluation, receive your equipment prescription, and mutually develop and sign your Employment Plan 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. The ORS will try to include any vendors you prefer in the bidding process, if they are qualified to do the kind of work you need. **Only ORS approved vendors are eligible to participate in the bidding process.** Vendors also must have a valid certificate of insurance and be licensed with the Dealers and Repairers Division of the Department of Motor Vehicles. The ORS consultant for motor vehicle modifications will inform you when the bids are requested and when the job is awarded.

**Vendors have four weeks to respond to the bids.** Bids for modifications estimated at more than \$25,000 may take longer.



Generally, the lowest qualified bidder is awarded the work. 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 buy the recommended vehicle.

### **The Conversion Fitting and Inspection**

According to the terms of the ORS 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 the final fitting should 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.

When the work on your vehicle is completed, the vendor will contact the ORS automotive engineer to schedule an inspection. This will ensure that all prescribed equipment has been provided, functions properly, and meets applicable federal and/or state safety standards.



At this point, one of three things will happen:

- (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(s) and schedule another checkout before the vehicle can be released to you.

ORS 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 the automotive engineer contracted by the State of Rhode Island. Please contact the Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator for details.

### **The Timeframe**

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. Modifications requiring a dropped 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. If you feel that the vendor is taking unnecessarily long to complete the job, you should contact the ORS Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator.

### **Client Responsibilities**

You must notify the ORS's Motor Vehicle Modification Coordinator when your vehicle is available for work, when it is released to the vendor, and when it is returned to you. It is important for you to maintain contact with both the Motor Vehicle Modification Coordinator and your ORS counselor throughout the modification process. Notify them of any changes in your personal situation that may require amending, revising or cancelling your vehicle modification Employment Plan.

Upon receiving your modified vehicle, you should contact your ORS Vocational Rehabilitation counselor who will arrange training in order to familiarize you and/or your representative with the operation of the vehicle.

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



## **Vendor Responsibilities**

The contract must provide a preventative maintenance schedule to you for all equipment requiring such work, and return to you any parts removed while performing the modifications. In addition, the contractor must provide you with electrical and other appropriate diagrams to assist you in emergency road repairs, as well as demonstrate to you or your representative the proper use of the equipment which has been installed or modified.

The contractor also must provide you with a written warranty specifying the terms. A one-year parts and service warranty on all conversion items is written into the ORS contract with the vendor; therefore, you should incur no repair charges on your conversion equipment and no transportation charges (pick-up and/or delivery) 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, call the ORS Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator.

## **After Delivery of the Vehicle**

You are responsible for contacting the vendor directly to resolve any concerns or problems you may have with the services performed.



When the converted vehicle passes checkout, the job of the ORS's Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator is essentially complete. However, the Office of Rehabilitation Services is concerned about the reliability of your vehicle modifications over time. You should contact ORS if you have any chronic problems with equipment or vendors.



### **What Vehicle Modifications May The Office of Rehabilitation Services Provide?**

ORS 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. In general, this means the minimum driving system required for the individual.

For example, if you use a manual wheelchair for mobility, but possess transfer skills, ORS may equip an automobile with hand controls. If you cannot load your wheelchair by hand, a cartop wheelchair carrier could be provided.



The following are examples of vehicle modifications which ORS 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 tiedowns



## **What Should I Know Before I Buy A Vehicle That Will Require Adaptive Equipment and/or Modifications**

A new passenger car or van is a capital investment. In most cases, a new passenger car with power steering, power brakes, automatic transmission, tilt wheel, power seats and windows will cost approximately \$20,000. The cost of a similarly-equipped new minivan or full-size van will be at least \$23,000 and could exceed \$30,000.

ORS does not purchase or lease cars or vans for consumers, nor does the agency participate in the purchase of automobile devices which are available from the automobile manufacturer as factory-installed items.

Before you take the step of purchasing 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 vehicle modification **ITSELF** also should be insured. Although insurance rates differ, the annual 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. ORS assumes no responsibility for maintenance or repair of any vehicle for which is has provided conversion equipment.

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The vehicle to be modified must have power steering, power brakes, and automatic transmission. In addition, a towing or other heavy duty package is necessary for lowered floor minivan conversions. Your prescription for modifications also will list other recommendations to consider.

The ORS Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator, the driving training consultant, the driver rehabilitation specialist, and/or the ORS's automotive engineer will give you information regarding the type of vehicle you should obtain. They are also available to review the vehicle modification prescription with you, to make sure it will fit the type, make and year of the vehicle to be modified, as well as the type of wheelchair or scooter you will use with the vehicle, if applicable.

**DO NOT** purchase your vehicle until your consultation, driver evaluation, vehicle modification prescription, employment plan, and the bidding process have been completed. As a general rule, check with the ORS Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator before spending any money.

### **Should I Buy A Used Vehicle?**

It may not be financially wise to make a substantial investment in a vehicle which has a limited life span; therefore, buy a new vehicle, if possible. If this is not feasible, try to obtain the best suitable used vehicle. Used vehicles must be approved by ORS's



automotive engineer to determine suitability for the particular adaptations. You are financially responsible for any general repairs the vehicle may need before the start of the ORS-contracted vehicle modifications.

### **Other Considerations in Buying a Vehicle**

Some motor vehicles do not readily lend themselves to automotive adaptive control devices and/or modifications, due to the nature of their chassis and/or vehicle body. Prior to purchase, make sure your vehicle will be able to be modified to meet your needs. All-wheel and four-wheel drive vehicles should be avoided.

Custom interiors, which include sofa beds and appliances, should be avoided, because they can make modification difficult or may have to be removed. In addition, paneled ceilings should be avoided for vans getting raised roofs, since the paneling will most likely be eliminated. A vehicle which is mechanically and structurally sound, with minimal custom interior and exterior work, is recommended.

In the conversion process, especially with drop floors on some 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 are not the owner of the motor vehicle to be modified, an agreement must be signed by both you and the owner, stating that you will have access to the vehicle for a period of not less than ten 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.

If you order a new minivan that requires a dropped floor, you can request that it be shipped by the manufacturer directly to the subcontractor, and save transportation charges one way. If you purchase a vehicle off the lot from a local dealer, you will be required to pay the shipping charges to the subcontractor who is installing the dropped floor.

Shipping charges for transporting the van from the subcontractor to the primary vendor are included in ORS-contracted jobs.

Vehicle modifications must comply with all applicable state and federal laws and standards, in order to ensure their safety for highway operation.

### **What Equipment May Not Be Provided?**

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



The following are examples of items which ORS will **NOT** provide:

- ◆ Cosmetic Customizing, such as carpeted or panelled sidewalls and ceilings (ORS 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, or anti-theft systems;
- ◆ Air conditioning, automatic transmissions, power steering, power brakes, automatic speed controls, heavy duty alternators;
- ◆ Modifications to the basic vehicle to prepare it for conversion (for example, if the vehicles' suspension system requires "strengthening" to accommodate a van conversion, this will be your responsibility).

### **Other Funding Sources**

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

- The Veteran's Administration (for veterans with service-connected disabilities)
- Donations from civic/religious organizations



## **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 ORS will provide financial assistance. You may be asked to contribute toward the cost of the vehicle adaptation.

ORS assistance will be within the following parameters:

- **First modification:** ORS may provide up to 100% of the cost of modifications depending on your financial needs.
- **Repeat jobs following first modification:** ORS will not provide any financial assistance. ORS Administrator may grant waiver under special circumstances.

If you purchase a new vehicle, you will be expected to apply for any rebate available from a manufacturer to help cover the cost of the vehicle modifications. This amount will be deducted from the amount ORS will pay.

### **Please Note:**

Any work arranged between you and the vendor other than that listed on the prescription and agreed to by ORS will be YOUR RESPONSIBILITY.



## **What Is the Client Assistance Program?**

The Client Assistance Program (CAP) is an independent advocacy program located within the RI Disability Law Center. CAP provides advice, advocacy, and if necessary, legal representation to individuals who have concerns about the rehabilitation services they are receiving from ORS, independent living centers, and other community rehabilitation programs.

CAP is located at 275 Westminster Street, Suite 401, Providence, RI 02903 and can be reached at 401.831.3150 (V) or 401.831.5335 (TTY).

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If you have any questions, please call:

Joseph Murphy,  
Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator  
Office of Rehabilitation Services  
40 Fountain Street ~ Providence, RI 02903  
401.421.7005 ext. 322 (V) ~ 401.421.7016 (TTY)  
Email: josephm@ors.ri.gov

Questions about eligibility and other vocational rehabilitation services should be directed to your ORS counselor.



## Notes:





## Vehicle Modification

## **Notice of Non-Discrimination**

The Department of Human Services, Office of Rehabilitation Services, is an Equal Opportunity Affirmative Action Employer and offers its programs regardless of race, color, national origin, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, age, religion or sex in acceptance for or provision of services, employment or treatment in its educational and other programs and activities. For further information, contact: The Community Relations Liaison Officer at 401.462.2130 (V) or 401.462.6239 (TTY).

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, this publication is available in alternate formats including Braille, large print, diskette, and audiocassette, by calling 401.421.7005 ext. 318.

ORS hopes that this handbook has been a useful resource of information for you. If there are any parts of it that you do not understand, please call: Joseph Murphy, Motor Vehicle Modifications Coordinator at (401) 421-7005 ext. 322.



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