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Tom Greenwood: Commuting

Disabled seek 'Fuel Call' button at Mich. pumps



For most people, putting gas in their cars is no big deal, but for Mike Harris and Jerry Wolffe, it's more like an ordeal.

Harris and Wolffe have physical disabilities that make it a burden to fill their fuel tanks without help from others.

It's a problem that involves convenience, quality of life and economics issues.

That's why both men are campaigning with the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America to prod Michigan filling stations to voluntarily install the "Fuel Call" button, a large mounted touch pad that alerts attendants inside that someone with a disability needs help at the pump.

The Americans with Disability Act requires that filling stations offer assistance to the handicapped when there is more than one attendant on duty. Stations with only one attendant are exempt from the act.

Born with cerebral palsy, Wolffe has to rely on his wife, JoAnn, to help him fuel his car.

"I have my wife drive with me to the gas station to pump the gas," said Wolffe, who uses hand controls to pilot his car.

"Then I drive her back home and go to work. Otherwise I have to honk or wave my handicapped driving placard to get the attention of the attendant, who may or may not even see me. It's frustrating and undignified."

Wolffe can pump the gas himself, but it's time consuming.

The process means Wolffe is forced to slide out of the front seat, slowly make his way to the rear of his car while supporting himself against the vehicle and remove his wheelchair from the trunk. He

then seats himself and pumps the gas.

"Then I have to put the chair back in the trunk and make my way back into the car," Wolffe said. "Throw in snow, rain or windy weather, plus the pressure of other drivers waiting to fill up, and you can see the problem."

Wolffe could rely on the "kindness of strangers" standing nearby, but who wants to hand his or her credit card over to a stranger?

Westland resident Harris approached a Marathon station in his neighborhood about installing the Fuel Call button and management quickly complied.

"It's almost like driving up to an ATM," said Harris, executive director of the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America.

"It's mounted on a pole and when you push the button it plays a little tune inside the station, which notifies them that there's a customer at the pump who needs help. They provide full service at self-serve prices."

"It's strictly voluntary on the part of each station owner," Harris said.


To Wolffe and Harris, the installation of the device says those with disabilities are welcome and valued customers. If nothing else, installing the Fuel Call accommodation makes good economic sense, Wolffe said. "There are about 60 million (people) with disabilities in this country with access to \$400 billion in discretionary income," he said.

The Fuel Call is marketed by Inclusions Solutions, a Chicago based company. Inclusion Solutions can be found at www.inclusionsolutions.com. Go to the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America's Web site at www.disabilitygas.com for more information and a video about the Fuel Call service.

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