

Wheelchair Repair Task Force

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, November 30th, 2023

11:30 AM in Room 1A of the LOB and Zoom and YouTube Live

The meeting was called to order at 11:31 AM by Chairman, Beverley Brakeman.

The following task force members were present:

Members: Beverley Brakeman, Sen. Seminara L. S08, Rep. Case, J. 63, Rep. Smith, F. 118, David Morgana, Jonathan Sigworth, Rick Famiglietti, Sheldon Toubman, Wayne Grau, Diane Racicot, Gary Gilberti, Jon Slifka, Ginny Mahoney, Barbara Cass, Jim Carson, Susan Halpin, Shirley Skyers-Thomas, Michelle Duprey, Melissa Marshall

Absent were: Joseph Shortt, Darrell Ruopp, Jim Carson, Seth Johnson, John Lee Goetz

Guests:

Opening Statements & Introductions:

Chair Brakeman welcomes everyone to the meeting and thanks everyone for being at the meeting.

Approval of Minutes (November 23rd):

Chair Brakeman asks for a motion to approve the minutes from the last meeting. Representative Case makes a motion, Senator Seminara seconds the motion. The motion passes, the minutes are approved.

Review Survey Responses & General Discussion:

Chair Brakeman goes through the summary of the survey responses. She states the most critical issue is reducing the wait periods for repairs. She states one way to deal with it is ratios of techs in-shop to in-house, and a statutory penalty for failure to meet a certain deadline for a repair. She believes everyone can agree in-home is preferable for consumers, but it takes much more time. She believes it can be addressed by more access to public transportation and making the in-shop waiting experience better for consumers. She states the legislature might want to address the fact that service providers cannot help consumers out of liability. She states it is agreed upon by all parties, except the insurance industry, to remove prior authorizations for all repairs. They believe the impact is questionable because the insurance industry only regulates 13% of the payers.

Another idea she talks about is hospitals having a trained staff person for basic repairs but would likely be hard to do. She states everyone agrees that loaner chairs are important, and to lower the desire for loaner chairs would be to require preventative maintenance to their chairs. She states an idea is a State-funded loaner chair pool. She states an idea is a potential "lemon law" for wheelchairs. She states MA has proposed legislation that requires CRT equipment to have language that explains their rights under warranty. She states the right to repair issue is a big one, and that there is agreement that those who can repair their chairs should be able to. The Chair addresses the need for more companies to exist but acknowledges that there isn't much money to be made in the industry (especially in repairs). She finally states that there should be better education for consumers and service providers.

Rep. Case remarks that it's been great how everyone has come to the table and the proposals that the Task Force created. He states his biggest problem is with the budgetary side, and notes that the most vulnerable often get neglected the most.

Chair Brakeman states that it's important to figure out what is most important because it's rare that every ask gets passed.

Jonathan asks if the Task Force will be able to see everyone's responses to the Survey. The Chair states she isn't planning on giving all those answers. Jonathan believes it is important for the responses to be shared. Jonathan states that some of the recommendations are new that he isn't sure where they are coming from, and that he believes it's important to know who is proposing what. Jonathan brings up the consumer's proposal to give travel reimbursement for technicians and would like it to be included in the summary. He also states he would like the industry to include overnight delivery for parts and wants insurance to reimburse overnight delivery. Jonathan also believes it is important to get more adequate staff in the industry.

Rep. Case states that there needs to be a budgetary allocation to help with a lot of the issues raised.

Chair Brakeman states the other ideas were her ideas and they were conversations with individuals.

Sheldon states that consumers believe in equalization for in-home assessments and repairs and that the long wait times drive people to go in-shop even if it isn't safe to do so. He states reimbursements for travel time would be a good idea. Sheldon states there is already a lemon law for wheelchairs, but what isn't included is the MA proposed bill regarding warranties and that if the industry doesn't repair the wheelchair in a certain number of days it triggers the lemon law. He states he would want a broader reach, not just regarding

warranties. Sheldon states the consumers aren't opposed to a hotline but cautions that it not be the only solution, or it just moves the problem around and could make things worse if savvy individuals are prioritized within the system. Sheldon states that he also wishes to have the survey responses.

Chair Brakeman rebuts to Sheldon that it was never insinuated that the hotline would be the only solution.

Senator Seminara states it is unrealistic to think the recommendation would be equalized wait time between in-home and in-shop and that it is unrealistic for the industry to be able to do so. She states that the industry should cut down on wait periods for in-home, but to be equalized is simply unrealistic.

Melissa states those with the highest risk shouldn't be required to have students work on their chairs. Chair Brakeman states the thought was to create a tech track so that there were more people to be trained per industry standards. Regarding hospitals/nursing homes having a staff person to do basic repairs, could be a bad idea, but it is an idea to try to address the issues of timeliness. She states that no one wants less repairs from people who are adequately trained.

Wayne states that the industry is working with the MA legislature on the bill. The chair asks the industry if they have policy recommendations to improve the time delay on repairs. Wayne states there are a number of them that they believe are good policy. She asks if they have an opinion on the staffing ratios. Wayne states there needs to be a number of factors addressed before you can address staffing ratios (one example he gives is seasonality). He states it isn't as black and white as it is perceived.

Wayne states he wants to see the staffing ratios of other industries. Senator Seminara states there are nursing home staffing ratios.

Senator Seminara states she wants to focus on Connecticut and not worry about other states. She wants to focus on that goal.

Rep. Smith brings up his question about how many technicians it will take to bring down the in-home repairs to 2-4 days. Gary states he's working on the number, but it isn't as simple as they think. He states they are struggling to hire technicians in the current environment.

Senator Seminara stated when she asked if hiring was an issue, the industry said that there are people out there to hire. Gary clarifies that there are more applicants, but the number that can be employed is much smaller than the number of applicants received.

Senator Seminara asks if the state-mandated days of completion would be better than a staff ratio. Wayne states they'd have to talk about it but would like everyone to remember that there are a lot of variables.

Chair Brakeman states there needs to be accountability in order for this to get better. She asks if there is an insurance reimbursement problem for the industry. Gary states it comes from the travel time, and that they only get reimbursement based on time spent working on the actual chair. He states by the time someone gets fully trained, they lose 30% to attrition so it's a constant game of catch-up. Gary expresses major concern for mandates based on ratios or timelines.

Gary states they are investing in more inventory and trying to hire more technicians, as well as making technicians more available remotely. He acknowledges that remote isn't the most desirable.

Senator Seminara states the industry is being very vague about solutions.

Rep. Case asks if the industry is willing to invite neighboring state technicians to come to Connecticut to help with repairs when there is a backlog. Gary states they have already done that, and they bring in technicians as far as Kentucky.

Wayne states the industry came to the legislature with various issues to work on time delays. He states the technician is just one part of the problem and that the goal is to make progress on all the various aspects.

Chair Brakeman states she wants the industry to start thinking about more techs, and believes the industry agrees that it is part of the problem.

Sheldon believes the difficulty of hiring is a red herring. Sheldon then references a question Senator Seminara asked in a prior meeting related to hiring technicians and the industry's responses. Sheldon references responses from the industry related to in-shop versus in-home repairs and technicians. Sheldon believes it should be 2-4 business days to get repairs done and asks for clarification that one person is in-shop and 13 are doing in-home repairs. Sheldon acknowledges the industry said they can do 7.5 repairs versus 4.5 repairs related to in-shop to in-home. Sheldon struggles to understand why the industry can't come up with a figure on how many technicians it will take to get to 2-4 business days for in-home given that the industry is meeting 2-4 days in-shop, there is a 7.5/4.5 ratio for efficiency in-shop versus in-home, and we know the percentage breakdown of consumers in-shop versus in-home. Gary says they have more than one tech in-shop, but that they will get a reasonable figure for the Task Force. He states that when he said his staff at 14 is full, that it is not enough, and they are willing to hire additional technicians.

Jonathan states he didn't categorically oppose the unknown recommendations, he just wanted to know where they came from. Jonathan asks if the industry would be willing to share their survey responses. Wayne says if the Chair orders it, they will share.

Jonathan asks if the industry can get the numbers of repairs based on seasonality. Wayne says he can try and pull the numbers. Jonathan states that it might be good to have preventative maintenance before the seasonal times when repairs are more likely.

Jonathan asks if the 4.5 versus 7.5 is the maximum or the average of the in-home rate of repair per day. Wayne says it's the average. Gary also stated that not all repairs to the same and the average takes into account various situations. Jonathan then asked for a confirmed number of techs that are actually in the field. Diane then responded and said these numbers have been stated in previous meetings. NSM has six in-shop and eight on the road. Gary has also confirmed his numbers as well.

Melissa states that when people with disabilities don't have a working wheelchair they end up in bed and develop sores and more health problems and possible death. She hopes the industry will plan on addressing this time of repair issue.

Sheldon states an additional recommendation is for the industry to stop telling consumers that in-shop is faster. Wayne says they must educate consumers that they will likely have a faster repair in-shop but disagrees with the notion that they are coercing consumers. He states all the industry is doing is giving options. Sheldon believes that if someone is calling the industry is telling them that in-shop is faster and they should stop doing that. Wayne states that it is faster, and it's up to the consumer to decide.

Chair Brakeman states that she believes consumers should know that it is faster to have an in-shop repair but understand that it is the experience of some consumers that they feel coerced.

Sheldon states that the communications are misleading on in-shop versus in-home, and that the industry should fix those communications. The Chair asks Sheldon to share the communications because she hasn't seen any.

David asks how many full-time techs are doing in-home repairs for NuMotion. Gary says eight.

Rick believes they shouldn't tell people in-shop is faster and believes their messaging is geared to get people in-shop more. Chair Brakeman states that it is factually faster and whether Rick believes that is by design or not is entirely based on opinion.

Jonathan gives examples of how many repairs the technicians should be able to make in-home versus the average rate and observes a big disparity. Jonathan acknowledges that there are exceptions to the rule when it comes to a potential mandate on timelines.

Chair Brakeman states that the Task Force has identified the most important issue, which seems to be the staffing of technicians, and asks the industry to help provide some numbers and solutions. Chair Brakeman states that the ultimate proposal will not be easy to come to because of the nature of all stakeholders and their support and opposition.

Rep. Case states it might be best to have two documents, one that can specifically go to Human Services and then another document that will have to go to other Committees. He acknowledges that the bill from last year died in Judiciary.

Sheldon states that he disagrees there should be two documents but agrees that there should be an analysis of where each proposal should go (i.e. Human Services or Labor Committees)

Closing Remarks:

Chair Brakeman thanked everyone for coming to the meeting.

Announcement of the Date and Time of Next Meeting:

- Thursday, December 7th, 11:30am-1:30pm

Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 1:08pm.

