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Group Takes Action on Parking Problem

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Many citizens with disabilities are deeply concerned about accessibility issues. The RTC/IL staff shares this concern and has used the Concerns Report Method to identify the most common concerns of citizens with disabilities. Research conducted using this method has shown that parking is a serious problem for many disabled people. It is a concern in cities and towns as diverse as rural Viburnum, Missouri, and metropolitan Los Angeles, California.

During public meetings conducted by RTC/IL across the country, citizens with disabilities identified several problematic aspects of handicapped parking. (Editor's note: We are using the term "handicapped parking" to refer to those spaces reserved for vehicles displaying an appropriate license or window tag. This appears to be the most widely used term.) These aspects included lack of upright signs, lack of enforcement of parking ordinances, ordinances not applying to commercial property, parking spaces not being the appropriate width, and frequent violations of handicapped parking spaces.

Independence in Action, an advocacy group in Lawrence, Kansas, raised the above issues at a meeting. Eager to solve the problem, members decided to form a special committee to deal with handicapped parking. The committee joined with RTC/IL staff to design an action plan.

After several planning sessions, the group decided on an action plan that included the following steps:

1. Identify possible resources. The local independent living center, law enforcement officials, the local business community, and the local media were identified as potential resources that could be helpful in executing some of the tasks and providing support for group actions.
2. Study the problem from several perspectives. Committee members interviewed other persons with disabilities, talked to business managers and police officers, obtained information about local parking ordinances, and got a rough estimate of the level of the problem by systematically observing handicapped parking spaces identified as problem sites.
3. Choose sites where action is most needed. Committee members visited with store managers to discuss the problem and explore possible solutions. They chose stores where spaces were most frequently violated.
4. Document the problem in terms of percentage of time spaces were violated and frequency of violations by same car.

Once data were collected in spaces that lacked upright handicapped parking signs, group members visited with some businesses and negotiated the installation of upright signs.

Weekly prompts (telephone calls and letters) were sent to store managers until the agreed-upon action was taken. The advocacy effort was very successful, since five stores installed upright signs, but it took about 4 months before the first store put up its sign. Overall, the results showed a mean of 20% of inappropriate use before the sign was installed and 4% inappropriate use after a 4-foot upright sign was installed.

The above solution was not sufficient, however. It appears that the effect of signs is temporary. Observers took follow-up data that showed that violations reoccurred despite the signs. Some spaces with upright signs showed violation levels as high as 28%. After the first week of collecting data on the percentage of violations, committee members shared the data with the police chief and negotiated a crackdown on parking violations.

The police department conducted a 1-week, citywide crackdown on handicapped parking violations in Lawrence. Approximately 6 regular police patrol officers enforced handicapped parking spaces on an average of every 2 hours for 12 hours each day. Tickets were issued to those vehicles parked in spaces reserved for people with physical disabilities that did not display the appropriate license or window tag.

Group members took observational data on inappropriate use of handicapped parking spaces. This means that every minute for one hour the observer would check to see if the same car or a new car was parked in the space. If the car did not have the proper license or tag, the observer marked the car inappropriately parked. Data were taken in two sample sites with known violations in the city of Lawrence and one control site in the city of Topeka. In addition, follow-up measures were obtained approximately 6 months following the crackdown.

Before the crackdown, inappropriate use of handicapped parking spaces occurred an average of 25% of the time. The percentage time of violations was reduced to 9% after the crackdown and 2% during follow-up. Data also indicated that the police crackdown was effective in reducing the number of cars inappropriately parked. No change was observed in a control site where no crackdown occurred. This suggests that the crackdown and follow-up enforcement — and not something else — were responsible for the change.

Sixty tickets were issued during the 1-week crackdown period. Evaluation results were presented to the police along with a compliment for their help, and police agreed to conduct periodic crackdowns. In addition, group members wrote to the police department to express their thanks. No reports of unexpected negative consequences — either to participants, police, private businesses, or citizens with disabilities — were brought to the attention of the authors and/or the group. The above actions appear to be successful in solving the problem of handicapped parking experienced by citizens with disabilities in Lawrence, Kansas.