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City Hall Isn't Accessible: Wheelchairs in the New York City Subway

By Ben Brody

Simi Linton is a lifelong New Yorker, but because she uses a wheelchair, she hasn't gotten on a subway in 43 years.

"There are very few stations with access," says Linton, an artist, consultant and disability advocate. "This is a very important issue in New York City."

According to data from the city's Metropolitan Transit Authority, only 56 percent of weekday subway riders board a train at wheelchair-accessible stations. That represents only about 80 stations of more than 400 in the system, and at those stations that are accessible, riders who use wheelchairs must often confront difficulties switching between tracks or elevators that fall out of service.

It is a system that has stopped many wheelchair users, including Linton, from using the subway at all, even though they say they would use it if it were more accessible.

It is also a system that is markedly inaccessible by contrast to other transportation options for wheelchair users in the city.

In September, for instance, the New York agreed to settle a lawsuit by making half of the city's taxis wheelchair-accessible by 2020, up from 2 percent at the time of the decision. The move will essentially make taxis physically accessible for all of the city's wheelchair users.

But it does little to make the price of traveling by taxi accessible. The average taxi trip costs more than five times what a subway subway ride costs, according to the city. That's before tip, which is customary in cabs but not on subways.

As a result, many advocates want other options besides taxis for people who use wheelchairs or have other disabilities. They do have the regular buses, most of which are wheelchair accessible, and the Access-a-Ride buses, which specialize in transportation for the disabled.

But those options come issues too, and that those issues prevent people with disabilities from living fully integrated lives in New York City, according to Mary-Lee Kimber Smith, a managing attorney at the non-profit group Disability Right Advocates, which helped win the taxi lawsuit.

“A crowded bus will not allow someone in a wheelchair,” Smith says. “There’s usually only two to four wheelchair spots.”

Smith and others also say that Access-a-Ride buses are often up to an hour late and difficult to use.

That’s why many people want expanded access to the subways, but they say the current subway system simply doesn’t serve the needs of the disabled community, especially those who live outside Manhattan, where subway stations are already farther apart — and accessible stations farther still.

Wheelchair users who decide to use the subway face a daunting set of decisions and calculations. For starters, they likely live farther from an accessible station than a non-disabled person lives from a regular station, even as the distance might be more taxing for them.

Once they get to a station, wheelchair users might discover an out-of-service elevator and simply have to go to the next accessible station or figure out a new way to get to their destination.

Many subway stations, in addition, are only partially accessible.

For instance, at Manhattan’s Union Square, where nearly 110,000 riders enter on an average weekday, only the L, N, Q and R trains are accessible. The 4, 5 and 6 are not. The passageway between the Port Authority station and the Times Square station, both of which are on 42nd Street and which serve nearly 200,000 daily, is not accessible. Wheelchair users must exit one station, get above ground, wheel across an avenue and pay to reenter the other in order to transfer between lines at those two stations.

And while the busier City Hall-Brooklyn Bridge station is accessible, the regular City Hall Station is not.

As a result, any map that purports to show accessibility likely overestimates it.

“Using the subways of New York City requires you to spend a lot of time and a lot of brain space on what’s accessible,” says Edith Prentiss, a disability advocate.

City authorities have repeatedly cited the cost of updating subway stations, which were not built with wheelchair accessibility in mind, as the main reason that the bulk of stations remain inaccessible.

That was the MTA’s argument when disability-rights groups sued the city for transportation accessibility in 1979. When the suit was settled five years later, the transportation authority agreed to make 100 “key stations” — with high ridership — accessible. It also committed to putting 20 percent of any allocations for subway renovations toward accommodations for the disabled.

Advocates say that money has helped a lot. But until subway accessibility has expanded, people who use wheelchairs largely say the subway is not a viable option for them.