On the Edge of Accessibility

As a relatively new employee (three months) of the Kentucky Commission on Community Volunteerism and Service, I recently had the opportunity to attend the National Conference on Disability Inclusion and National Service in Washington, D.C. The conference was sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service as part of its National Service Inclusion Project to promote the active engagement of people with disabilities in all levels of national and community service. As a person with a disability, I had never before attended a conference where volunteering and inclusion were mentioned in the same sentence, much less the conference name. What an idea! People with disabilities seem to be the recipients of others' generosity and now **we** have the opportunity to provide service to others.

Despite considerable travel experience, each trip I take, whether to the grocery or to Washington, D.C., pose challenges. My first obstacle – and first pleasant surprise - occurred when boarding the plane. A thoughtful airline employee asked on my behalf if the plane could be boarded from the skyway rather than the tarmac – and the request was granted. Instead of going outside the terminal to board, all passengers avoided the cold and I was able to board without special assistance.

I arrived in the nation's capital with no noteworthy problems, checked in to my hotel, picked up my rental scooter, and underwent a crash course in operating it – which actually included crashing. I knew the scooter had been a good idea when I looked at the map to my room. First, I had to get on the elevator from the lobby and go down to a lower level where the conference events were being held. Then, I had to go down a hallway, turn left, then right, then right again and take another elevator the fourth floor, get off the elevator and turn left. My room was just beyond the elevator As I arrived at my room, I was fortunate to encounter a member of the housekeeping staff who gave me a door stop to use while entering and exiting my room on the scooter - an old trick I learned from traveling alone.

My room was the first "handicap accessible' accommodation I'd ever had, so I was curious about what was considered "accessible." I assessed the room for any accommodation problems and identified several: bathroom sink - too high; shower head with hand-held hose – also too high; coffee pot – where is that outlet? The bed also it looked a little high so I made a mental note to do a closer inspection later. Then, I headed to the conference.

I attended a session for state disability coordinators followed by a workshop called *Planning for Emergencies: People with Disabilities Leading the Way*. About halfway to the workshop site my scooter battery began to die. I crept along and coasted to a stop alongside a hotel Christmas tree. A hotel employee let me leave the scooter where it was to recharge and I continued to the workshop on foot. Always an adventure!

After the workshop, I checked on the scooter – and happily discovered its location was adjacent to the conference reception area. That made things a lot easier for me, as I was able to sit on the scooter as it charged, have a snack from the buffet and network with participants as they strolled by.

Finally, it was time to return to my room after a long day of "socializing." Directions in hand, I made my way to my room and left the scooter in the hallway, knowing I'd need to go back to the lobby to ask for a few "accommodations," such as one of those beverage trays from the banquet

kitchen to use as a stool to reach the bathroom sink and to ask to have the hand-held shower head removed from it holder which was too high for me to reach. I had planned for slippery tubs and floors by bringing four small bath mats.

I still hadn't located an accessible outlet for the coffee maker and, now, realized I'd also need an outlet to recharge the scooter. I'd inform hotel management about that little accessibility problem, but, fortunately, I'd had the foresight to bring along a three-foot surge protector. I'd long ago discovered access to hotel room outlets isn't always guaranteed.

Finally, it was time to check that suspicious bed. As I'd suspected, it was much too high for me – by at least five inches. I'm not sure how a person using a wheelchair could ever transfer onto a bed that high, but at that moment, it was **my** dilemma. After a great deal of thought, I finally decided to present the situation to the hotel staff in the hope someone could find a solution.

At 11 p.m., I went to the lobby to discuss my accommodation issues. Hotel employees made every effort possible to help. They located a beverage tray, plugged in the coffee maker (using **my** surge protector) and lowered the shower hose. After reviewing the bed problem, an engineer was called to the scene and, through a process of elimination, decided to place the box springs and mattress directly on the floor. Problem solved! Of course, the engineer had to call housekeeping to remove and replace the bed linens, but eventually I was able to bathe, get my morning caffeine dose and get into and out of bed.

Around midnight, my accessible room was mostly functioning well and I enjoyed a good night's sleep. Overall, it was all fairly routine for a person with a disability facing accessibility challenges. I can't help but wonder, with all the additional "accommodations" needed to make that hotel room truly handicap accessible, should I request one next time or am I better off adapting a regular room – which is more readily available - to my needs?

Either way, I'll be sure to bring along my surge protector, bath mats and a half-carload of equipment just to spend the night in a hotel. I may as well rent an RV…wonder if they're handicap accessible?