

Wheelchair Repair Task Force

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, November 9, 2023

11:30 AM in Room 1B 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, Joseph Shortt, Sheldon Toubman, Wayne Grau, Diane Racicot, John Lee Goetz, Gary Gilberti, Darrell Ruopp, Jon Slifka, Ginny Mahoney, Barbara Cass, Jim Carson, Seth Johnson, Susan Halpin

Absent were: Michelle Duprey, Diane Racicot, Shirley Skyers-Thomas, Melissa Marshall

Guests: Maureen Amirault, Jamie Moger

Opening Statements & Introductions:

Chair Brakeman convenes the meeting at 11:31AM, she states that the consumer advocates will be giving a presentation.

Advocates Presentation & Questions:

(The Consumer presentation was emailed to the entire task force at the start of the meeting. It should be noted that this is not compliant with Task Force guidelines which seek to have all presentations available for review by the entire Task Force a minimum 24 hours before the start of the meeting. As such, task force members were not able to prepare in advance.)

Jonathan states that the purpose of the presentation is to put stories of consumers to the data, and the human cost that comes with these issues. He states that he understands COVID has had an impact on the industry, but that the issue based on other presentations seems to be staffing issues and technicians' availability to go to people's homes to do assessments and repairs. He states they'll push back on the position that the consumers should go do in store repairs. He states that the desire for in home repairs is out of necessity because of their disability. Jamie Moger tells his personal story on the difficulties of getting his wheelchair repaired, and how long it took for his wheelchair to be repaired (about 3 months) by Numotion. He states that the wrong parts were ordered two times. Jamie states that removing prior authorization would help speed up the process for repairs.

Senator Seminara asks Jamie what the hold up was to get his wheelchair fixed. Jamie said it could've been a number of things, but he believes it was because the wrong parts were ordered two times.

Shelton states that Suzanne Garrafa couldn't come to the meeting, so he has been given authorization to share her story. Her issue was her steering and wheels, NSM told her they don't have enough drivers for a home visit and if she didn't come into the store, she'd have to wait several weeks. The technician told her that remote technicians are out of service until further notice. She has para transportation, but they wouldn't allow her to take her backup wheelchair, so she had to rely on NSM to provide a transfer chair. She felt unsafe during the process and isn't sure she wants to go back. The wheelchair issues have gotten worse, and she ran over her caretaker's foot twice. She reached out to NSM to see if they've ordered the parts and they said they ordered some, but the others will take a few more weeks.

Senator Seminara asks why the parts weren't ordered and that it doesn't make any sense. Jonathan states it likely got lost in the shuffle, and that when he called in for a repair it took 4 days for someone to answer the phone. He states that NSM and Numotion are completely understaffed. Senator Seminara states she doesn't want hearsay, she wants the actual reason. Diane from NSM asks for the complete name so that they can look up the order.

Senator Seminara asks if all the parts being ordered happen at once. Gary states that it could not happen all at once because you're using different manufacturers, but when Numotion knows the parts, they need they give serial numbers to the manufacturer. Sen. Seminara states it doesn't make sense when someone says the parts aren't ordered and asks when they do an evaluation and determine what parts are needed (even if from numerous manufacturers) does someone orders all of the parts at once. Gary states at Numotion they are supposed to be.

Rep. Case states the problem is that we're hearing people's experiences but not the facts and the fact the presentation was given to the group five minutes before the meeting. He hopes that there can be some backup on the stories and to not pin the manufacturers with something if it isn't true.

Maureen Amirault states she's a customer of Numotion. She states her footplate was never properly fitted. She met with someone in 2021 from Numotion and nothing has been done since. She states Numotion gave different excuses on what was going on, and they'd say they called back but didn't. In September of 2022 she sent a letter to the CEO, and they got the repairs taken care of but not the footplate. She had an appointment in March 2023 for the footplate and they had to reassess since it had to be so long and then didn't get an

appointment until August and had an appointment in October recently where the part was ordered and arrived but has to be cut down. She also states she needs an additional mechanical part. She believes she's on a path to resolution, but it has taken so long. She states before the appointment in October she was told that she was partially responsible for not getting the issue resolved and she doesn't appreciate it and believes it's ableist. She states that two people are needed for a remote assessment to get different angles of the wheelchair and she doesn't understand why the industry pushes for this. She states some repairs (gas) can't be done at home. She stated this past Thursday she was called stating that Numotion didn't have the part, but her transportation was already on her way. She states that Numotion's immediate response is always to blame the customer. She states that the shops aren't really wheelchair accessible because of their lifts. She states the shops aren't wheelchair accessible and that all of these reasons are why the industry shouldn't push for in shop repairs. She says the onus falls on her to make sure the part arrived because of the lack of communication, and that when Numotion makes a mistake she gets bumped to the back of the line and it'll likely be in December.

The Chair asks who pressured her to do more to get her repairs done from Numotion. Maureen stated that it was one of the managers.

Rep. Smith asks how she physically transported herself and her chair to the shop. She states from Hartford's paratransit, only because the chair was working enough to get there and that it's at her expense.

Gary Gilberti apologizes on behalf of Numotion and will go back to look at the situation personally. He also asks who the ATP was. She states she'll email who the tech was and understands that the techs are overworked.

Sen. Seminara asks Gary if Numotion makes an error if the client gets bumped to the back of the line. He states they try and prioritize the orders and he doesn't believe they consciously move someone to the back of the line.

Jonathan asks if she developed sores on her feet because the chair was not being repaired in a timely fashion. She confirms and states her bones are turning in words and can't wear her custom shoes anymore.

Jonathan shows a survey conducted by the State Independent Living Council. It takes 23% of users less than a month for a repair, 38% for 1-3 months, 26% for 4-6 months, and 12% more than 6 months. 19% stated their chairs got evaluated the same day they reached out, 6% said one day, 6% said three days, 31% said 1-2 weeks, 6% said 3-4 weeks, and 31% longer than one month. He notes that although it's anecdotal evidence of how long it takes for someone to get contacted back for each individual it is a serious problem and should be considered even though the sample size is small.

Jonathan shares data on how long it takes for in-home repairs (60-67 business days or 84-94 calendar days). He states most of the time is because of the industry's delay or accidental ordering of the wrong parts.

Jonathan believes that the industry is coercing consumers to do in-shop repairs. He believes the industry treats in-home repairs as a preference and not a need. He observes both NSM and Numotion don't clearly state that they do in-home repairs on their websites. He believes that they should be neutral on in-home versus in-shop, and it should be

portrayed as such. He states that their policy recommendations are; to offer in-home assessments to achieve 2-4 business days, in-home repairs to achieve an average of 2-4 business days, timely assessments and repairs to be ensured by staff/customer ratios or timeline requirements (failure to do so would be a fine paid to the agency in charge), have written and enforced policy of checking all ordered parts to ensure accuracy, and consumer partnerships to help hire more staff.

Jonathan states that NSM & Numotion are well funded by private equity. The Chair states that this isn't appropriate and isn't the purview, Jonathan states that it shows NSM and Numotion do have the funds to hire more staff.

Joe Shortt shares his story about getting his chair repaired. He states he gets minimal notice on when a technician will show up for an in-home repair. He states he has done in-shop repairs and that it takes too long for repairs to be completed. He states other companies have sent parts for him to repair himself.

Sen. Seminara asks Joe to clarify how he does the repairs himself. He states that if it's a simple wire there's no reason to have a tech come out to fix it since the company knows him and trusts that he can repair it.

Sen. Seminara asks the industry when they started allowing customers to do their own simple repairs and why it isn't allowed anymore. Gary says it isn't a policy change and they send out parts to certain customers as well. There are certain liability issues, and Joe clearly knows what he is doing and there are customers who clearly do not. He believes that people who are capable should still be able to do their own simple repairs. Diane from NSM confirms that they do the same thing as Numotion, and that NSM doesn't do it particularly when insurance is involved, and they want to submit something. She states that NSM has cannibalized a lot of their chairs which isn't typically normal for them.

David Morgana shares his story about getting his chair repaired. He states he's had a relationship with Numotion for over 20 years, he states, in the beginning, it was much more personal with staff, and easy to get a hold and set up appointments with Numotion. He states over the years it has progressively gotten worse. (Testimony available online on the [Wheelchair Repair Task Force website](#))

Jonathan states that the proposed legislative changes would cut repair delays by 23 days. He states if they want to make changes for all consumers, the only change that they can make is focused on the industry (staffing, timelines, penalties).

General Discussion:

The Chair acknowledges that the consumers have had a lot of trouble and that the insurers and industry have been at the table as well and that the group needs to develop policy changes. She believes everyone at the table wants to find a solution. She asks for everyone to move forward in a positive manner to get a plan together. She opens it up for discussion.

Sen. Seminara asks if the industry has data on how often a part is ordered and if it's the wrong part. Gary says that they are pulling the data as we speak.

The Chair asks the industry if there are any standards regarding to staff to customer ratio. Wayne states there is no industry standard and no specific issues on it. She asks if there is

an informal ratio the industry tries to meet. Wayne states that he isn't aware of one.

Rick asks if there are any industry standards for timeline. Wayne isn't aware of one but will get back to him next week. He states they all agree the timeline right now isn't working and they want to fix it.

Rep. Smith asks Maureen what it costs out of pocket for transportation to get to the shop. Maureen says she paid out of pocket for the Hartford transit, which is \$3 but the taxi ride home is \$5. He asked if public transportation was able to accommodate him. She states yes, it's through their para transit though not a regular bus.

Rick asks if anyone agrees with the new solutions Jonathan presented. Wayne states that some of those they agree upon, but they weren't given the chance to evaluate the presentation because of how late they were and that they have to go back and look at them.

Darrell asks if the industry was in a position that some of the advocates were, and what they believe is a good timeline for the repair. Gary says that no one agrees the timeline is right, and that the industry is in the group in good faith and acknowledges that the stories are bad and that he wouldn't be in the industry for as long as he has if he didn't care about people. He also states that if people have someone, they want to become a technician to send the resume. Darrell states there needs to be more regulation in the industry for timely repairs.

Jonathan states the changes everyone agrees with are regarding insurance and asks Susan Halpin to weigh in. Susan states that the insurance industry faces a multitude of mandates every session, and while each may be laudable in intent, the industry does not endorse codifying any additional mandates in the statute. She states that sitting through this task force it seems that targeting some of the private payers is the easy solution everyone can agree upon, but that if the other issues were addressed the payer issue wouldn't be as attractive of a solution. She states she doesn't want to say that the industry doesn't appreciate or understand the frustrations, but ultimately, policyholders and employers pay for additional mandates and remarked that premiums are high, in part, due to the large number of mandates in the statute. She believes there is already broad coverage for wheelchairs and that she opposes all new mandates in CT. Jonathan asks her if the industry would go on record to oppose coverage maintenance checks. Susan states she opposes a mandate put into statute, that there are all kinds of coverage for wheelchairs from companies, and that she wouldn't endorse anything being put in statute but she isn't the ultimate decision maker, and the industry is worried about the cost of healthcare and there have been several mandates passed over the years and if the legislature chooses to pass more mandates they'll build them into their policies.

Jonathan asks Susan if all the solutions regarding coverage for wheelchair repairs the insurance industry would oppose the mandates but would adopt them should the legislature pass them. Susan remarked that Jonathan is trying to get her to state something that isn't accurate, but she'd be happy to talk further about the issue should it be proposed for legislation. She also believes a lot of the things Jonathan mentions are already covered and he'd have to talk to the employers who pay for insurance for employees and whether they'd be supportive of this. She states she has sympathy and empathy for what has happened to some consumers but when talking about policy that is in statute, CT already has the most insurance mandates in the country.

Sen. Seminara requests Diane to also provide the information regarding the statistics on how often a part is ordered and it's the wrong part. Diane says she'll have it.

Closing Remarks:

The Chair states she wants to hear from all the people on the task force regarding the policy proposals and that they will have to figure out what that looks like. She asks if anyone has feedback on the survey for the policy proposals, and to email her any feedback. Sen Seminara states that there are some solutions that don't need to be addressed via legislation.

Jonathan believes that the solutions he has discussed, the vast majority don't need to be legislated and that they could be implemented by the parties (insurers and industry) themselves. He also encourages the group to remember that the reason shooting for the moon and legislating as much of this as possible is important to consumers because they don't have a seat at the table and don't have a voice in any of the policy or company decisions.

The Chair says that she can speak personally about the amount of work she put in to get this Task Force legislation passed that everyone is here and that there isn't a person on this task force who isn't hearing what the consumers are saying and who isn't equally as concerned. She states they do have a seat at the table which is why they created the Task Force and people are listening and the consumers have the commitment from the whole Task Force.

Announcement of the Date and Time of Next Meeting:

Thursday, November 16th at 11:30AM in Room 1A and via Zoom.

Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned at 1:19PM.

Chandra Persaud
Task Force Administrator

Nate Kalechman
Minutes Prepared by