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Naperville Sun

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A **2**/Sun Investigation

PARALYZED AT THE PUMP

How area gas stations are NOT servicing drivers with disabilities



PLUS: Here's one Naperville station that's doing the right thing

STORIES ON PAGES 4-6

Beck Dielenbach / Staff photographer

One of a vanishing breed, Citgo gas station owner and operator Bill Weikel pumps gas for Barbara Fitzgerald of Naperville on Thursday at the station's Washington Street site. "I've been coming to him since '92," Fitzgerald said. "I'd recommend him to anyone."

A message from The Sun's editor/publisher

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SPORTS



North, Central to uncork latest crosstown clash
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WEATHER

Sunny and clear,
72°/47°



Liz Lawlor,
grade 5,
All Saints Catholic Academy

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CBS2/SUN INVESTIGATION

Full service disabled

Some gas stations break law by offering no help to motorists with limited mobility

By Dave Savini and
Michela Youngerman
CBS 2 CHICAGO

They pull into a gas station and up to the pump, press the help button or honk their horns. Then they sit and wait. They wait some more. Time passes and no help arrives. This is the daily battle for drivers with disabilities who are simply trying to get gasoline.

"It's buying gasoline," said Laurie Slicer, who has been disabled since a car accident. "It's not something exotic. It's something that we all need and use."

A CBS 2/Naperville Sun hidden-camera investigation went to nine suburban gas stations including Exxon, Speedway, BP, Citgo, Shell and Phillips 66. We worked with three disabled drivers: Gary McDermott, who was injured in a diving accident; Ramiro Magallon, who was paralyzed while serving in the U.S. Army; and Slicer.

The investigation exposed a problem that could impact the more than 700,000

drivers with disabilities in Illinois. We found service stations repeatedly violate a federal law created to help people with disabilities access gasoline. Only one out of nine gas stations provided assistance. In the other cases our drivers with disabilities only were helped after long waits or after clerks were prompted by our undercover investigators.

"Unfortunately, I think failure to provide accommodations to people with disabilities at gas stations is very prevalent," says Barry Taylor, legal advocacy director at the non-profit group Equip for Equality. "I think it is actually shocking that 17 years after the ADA (American With Disabilities Act) was passed, we're still having such flagrant violations of federal law. ... It's not only a civil rights violation, I think it's bad business."

Help calls ignored

In one case, Magallon, of Bolingbrook, pulled up to a Speedway station in Dyer, Ind. He pressed the gas pump help button repeatedly. On the fifth try, a voice over the intercom asked, "Can I help you?"



Kate Szrom / Staff photographer

Bill Weikel, owner and operator of the Citgo on Washington Street in downtown Naperville, makes sure anyone who pulls into the station with a disabled placard in their vehicle receives full service without paying the extra fee of 25 cents per gallon.

Ramiro responded that he needed gas. He was then hopeful an attendant would provide him assistance. He saw a female worker come outside, but she was just

bringing a drink to another driver. So Magallon waited some more. He pressed

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Savini



Youngerman

Contact Dave Savini at dvsavini@cbs.com or 312-202-4317. Contact Michela Youngerman at mayoungerman@cbs.com or 312-202-4315.

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CBS2/SUN INVESTIGATION

PUMP

From Page 4

the help button for a sixth time - still no response. After waiting more than 20 minutes, our CBS 2/Sun investigator went into the station and told employees the disabled driver was calling for assistance.

"We didn't know you needed us to come out here and pump your gas," the station attendant said. When, in fact, our investigator, inside the gas station, could hear the beeping noise from Magallon's help button.

"What's the use of having a button that says help? It doesn't make any sense," Magallon said.

Companies apologize

McDermott and Slicer had the same problems at other stations in Lombard, Villa Park, Elmhurst and LaGrange. They pressed help buttons, they honked their horns, and they waited. At one station two strangers approached McDermott to see what was wrong. But, in other cases it was not until our team of investigators asked for help that an attendant came out to pump their gas. A Shell station in Lombard was the only station to provide immediate service during the hidden-camera probe.

"It makes me angry. It makes me upset. It makes me feel like I've done something wrong," Slicer said. "I don't have a handicapped sticker because I want the parking. I have it for medical reasons and I don't ask for anything more than what the law has said I can get."

In some cases employees said the call buttons or help buttons were not working. Others simply said they didn't hear calls for help, including repeated horn honking.

Spokespersons for all of the corporations involved say they are sorry and customer service is a priority, especially for their customers with disabilities. Several have launched investigations, others are issuing reminders about policy. Citgo is the only company that has failed to return our call about these findings.

Scott Dean, a public relations official from BP, said, "We are sorry that these customers experienced delays in refueling their vehicles, and for that we apologize. Our policy is to provide vehicle refueling services upon request for motorists if their vehicle

ON THE WEB

Check out some of the investigation's hidden camera footage at napersun.com.

displays an official state or locally issued disabled motorist plate or placard."

New device

Dave Smith, president of the Ridgeway Petroleum Company, a distributor for Exxon, said what happened to Magallon was unacceptable.

"We have to do something about it immediately. I don't want there to be a situation. Every customer is important. We tell our employees to treat customers as you would want to be treated," he said.

Speedway's spokesperson Linda Casey says the company is investigating. "I can promise you that we will look into it thoroughly. Customer service is our priority and that does include our handicapped customers."

The store manager of the Phillips 66 in Villa Park said his company's policy is to help drivers with disabilities but couldn't explain why his station failed the test.

"Horns and honking don't work," said Patrick Hughes, president of Inclusion Solutions LLC of Chicago. His company developed and pat-

ented a product called Fuel Call. It is designed to alert station employees.

"It is a wireless alert system that signals inside to the employee that a disabled person is outside," said Hughes.

He says several lawsuits have been settled against oil companies involving the inability to service disabled customers. But, he says his studies show there are still more complaints and the problem is far from solved.

"A lot of drivers with disabilities don't have the reach, range to hit the call buttons on the market. (Fuel Call) brings dignity to the consumer and the employees."

Hughes says only five Illinois stations have installed Fuel Call.

"We are falling through the cracks," said McDermott, who also is president of Paralyzed Veterans of America's Vaughn Chapter. He wonders how veterans injured in Iraq will be treated. "Hopefully (this story) will open some eyes. These guys are coming back with injuries; they're going to be driving."

Magallon agrees that the system has to change. "It's frustrating. You know, I put my life on the line for my country and when I get injured, I just ask for the simple thing of getting a fill-up."

Sun-Times News Group



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CBS2/SUN INVESTIGATION

Station owner: Full service 'seems like right thing to do'

By Paige Winfield
STAFF WRITER

Bill Weikel didn't know the law requires his Citgo gas station employees to pump gas for customers with disabilities.

But Weikel, who owns and operates the station on Washington Street in downtown Naperville, makes sure anyone who pulls into the station with a disabled placard in their vehicle receives full service without paying the extra fee of \$0.25 per gallon. When drivers with disabilities park next to the single full-service pump, he instructs them to pull over to the self-serve pumps, where an employee can help them for free.

"It's just regular training ... if you see they have a handicapped sign, you move them over to the self-serve," Weikel said. "It just seems like the right thing to do."

Many of Weikel's customers with disabilities live in the area's retirement com-

"It's definitely an issue. A lot of people I talk to say there are no gas stations in this area that have full service."

Anne Hegberg
WHEATON OCCUPATIONAL
THERAPIST

munities. He said his employees help about four to six drivers with disabilities every day.

Those drivers who want to receive full service should stick with the same gas station so the employees can get to know them and their needs, says Anne Hegberg, an occupational therapist with Marionjoy Rehabilitation Hospital in Wheaton.

"Since most people drive in the same area, get a gas station where they know you so you don't run into



these types of problems," Hegberg said.

As a certified driving instructor, Hegberg evaluates patients to determine whether they are able to drive safely following an accident or disease. She gives them paper copies of the law to show gas station employees of their legal responsibility to pump gas for customers with disabilities, even if the station has no designated full-service pumps.

"It's definitely an issue," she said. "A lot of people I talk to say there are no gas stations in this area that have full service."

Contact Paige Winfield
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McDonald Farm to host fifth annual harvest party

SUN STAFF

The Conservation Foundation will hold its fifth annual Harvest Moon Social from 4 to 8 p.m. Oct. 6 at McDonald Farm in Naperville.

Non-member rates, which include a one-year membership, are \$40 per person or \$75 per family of four to eight. Member rates are \$20 per person or \$45 per family. Those 15 and younger are \$10.

Admission includes an all-you-can-eat country cook-out, live bluegrass music, hayrides around the farm, campfire stories and nature exploration. Proceeds benefit the foundation's conservation programs.

For more information or to register, call 630-428-4500, Ext. 10, or visit www.theconservationfoundation.org.