

# business

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## Seeking assistance

### Quad-Citians with handicaps still face hurdles

By Rita Pearson

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The hardest task Mitchell Swanson does in a day is getting gas for his van. It can take him as much as 30 to 45 minutes to fill the tank.

Gas stations and convenience stores are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act to provide assistance when Mr. Swanson, who uses a wheelchair, drives up to any fuel pump and honks the horn.

But the law assumes the station attendant can hear him honking, and most service stations are on busy streets and highways where the horn can't be heard. There also may not be adequate staff on hand to provide assistance.

When Mr. Swanson recently demonstrated his dilemma at a local service station, he honked the horn and waited for assistance.

He honked again and waited some more.

After a short while, he drove away, without service.

Had someone responded, he would have filled the gas-tank, bought a cold drink and maybe more. He would have spent some money.

He turned his van instead toward a local post office with a wide wheelchair ramp and a heavy door with a high handle. He showed a short video of his previous visit to the building. It was a painful five-minute presentation. "They could have made that door a little easier, don't you think?" he asked.

Next up was a drive-up window of a local fast-food restaurant where his friends with hearing disabilities cannot place an order. More than 800 families belong to



Photos: Stephanie Makosky / staff

Mitch Swanson, a sales representative for Inclusion Solutions, tries to get a Moline gas station attendant's attention by beeping his horn. Mr. Swanson is a quadriplegic and getting gas is one of his most difficult challenges while running errands. Ideally, an attendant is supposed to come out and help, but that rarely happens. He waited for roughly 20 minutes before leaving. He says that with Inclusion Solutions' 'Big Button,' (below), it will be easier for community members with disabilities to receive the extra hand they might need, whether it is opening a door or getting gas.

the deaf community in the Quad-Cities area, said Mr. Swanson, a member of the Illinois Iowa Center for Independent Living board.

He told of a Culver's restaurant in Indianapolis that installed a call-button system that alerts employees that there is a customer who needs assistance. The customer rings the bell and pulls forward. The driver receives a written menu and a pencil, and places an order. The bell system works well for the hearing impaired and

parents with small children at little cost, he said.

On Mr. Swanson's drive through downtown Moline, he passes numerous businesses with entrance steps, steep ramps, narrow doorways, or double doors. If he determines it's too hard to enter the business, he drives on without stopping.

Mr. Swanson, 48, of Lynn Center, and others like him, want to do business, not



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While the 35-year-old Americans With Disabilities Act opened doors to many people with handicaps, it made many small business owners defensive, he said. It has taken away the meaning behind the universal symbol for handicap or wheelchair accessibility.

The wheelchair symbol is a joke, it's meaningless, because it implies full access without delivering, said Patrick Hughes, founder-president of Inclusion Solutions. The Evanston-based company offers over 300 inexpensive solutions for people in wheelchairs, parents with strollers, and an aging population that's struggling to open doors to Quad-Cities businesses.

The demand for accessible services is increasing, Mr. Hughes said. His data indicates:

- 50 million aging boomers are accelerating demands for accessible services.
- Women spend \$3.7 trillion annually; an estimated 25 percent have small children.
- 58 million people with disabilities spend \$175 billion of disposable income annually.

Products such as the BigBell alert system are easy to install and a cost-effective solution for opening a door, like the one Mr. Swanson encountered at the post office, instead of an automated door. The FuelCall and OrderAssist are similar wireless chime receivers to alert service station employ-

ees or restaurant window cashiers that someone who is deaf or hard of hearing needs assistance.

Matting and portable ramps are other inexpensive alternatives available on the market. Mr. Swanson became a sales representative for Inclusion Solutions Oct. 1, 2008.

Glow, a hairstyling salon near SouthPark Mall, Happy Dog Bakery on Moline's 15th Street Place, and Diamonds On the Avenue are among Moline businesses that added ramps, a BigBell or a custom button made to look like a paw, canes or walkers.

The BigBell and a portable ramp cost \$330 to \$468, Mr. Hughes said. Employers may receive a tax credit under the ADA for purchases of more than \$250 up to \$10,050.

The Illinois Quad City Chamber installed a BigBell at its Moline office last spring. Chamber president and CEO Rick Baker thought it was money well spent.

"It's a cost-effective way to make us more accessible to a broader base of people," he said. "It's not an automated door, but it alerts you to come and help open the door if someone needs it."

The owners of Mother Hubbards Cupboard plan to install FuelCall buttons next month at half of their 20 service stations in the Quad-Cities, Mr. Hughes said. "But we can do better," he said.

"People get defensive when it comes to the ADA, but the ADA can be your friend," Mr. Swanson said. He has been dealing with an injury to his spinal cord for nearly 20 years. He uses a power wheelchair and has limited use of his hands.

People are often uncomfortable when they see others struggling with a disability, he said. Instead of causing discomfort or fear or anger, Mr. Swanson would rather cause someone to say, "Let's let him in!"

"He's here to bring you business, with money," he said. "Do you value his business? In this day and age, everyone needs business."