

**W**e recently received several inquiries from bus operators asking about installing wheelchair lifts in their fleet. For those of you who have forgotten, the full impact of the ADA Guidelines takes effect in October of 2012. Requirements range from having all coaches accessible for larger scheduled service companies to being able to provide an accessible coach on 48-hours notice for a smaller charter company. This means that even smaller coach operators need at least one accessible coach in their fleet, unless you arrange some kind of pool agreement with other operators.

For anyone not yet aware of the guidelines for both reporting and vehicles, you can go to this document on the FMCSA Web site: <http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/rules-regulations/bus/company/ada-guidelines.htm>.

Logically, there are three ways to get an accessible coach into your fleet. One alternative is to purchase a new accessible coach. A second alternative is to purchase a pre-owned accessible coach. The third alternative is to retrofit an existing coach in your fleet. Many operators are using some combination of these alternatives.

For smaller operators, or even for larger operators requiring multiple accessible coaches in their fleets, retrofitting can be the most economical alternative to meeting ADA requirements. Considering all of the ramifications and concerns, the big question is: who can you trust to do a quality job on a wheelchair lift retrofit? A lift retrofit is far from a simple project since it not only includes structural changes but also includes seating, HVAC and electrical system modifications.

Faced with requests from numerous customers, MCI has already developed an OEM-level accessible retrofit program at their service center in Loudonville, Ohio. This has apparently met with the approval of several customers. Recent projects include five coaches for Omini Bus, four for Fullington Trailways and a group of 14 coaches for Turimex. Ron Miller, the manager of operations at the MCI Service Center in Loudonville, provided some background information on MCI's retrofit program.

A major advantage of the MCI program is that it offers an OEM-level retrofit. They match the original specifications on new wheelchair-lift equipped coaches. Hence, the retrofit comes out of the shop essentially equivalent to the way a new coach with a lift would emerge from the factory. "We use all the factory drawings from when the bus was built, so it's exactly the same as if your bus had been built with the lift," says Miller.

Bear in mind that MCI has both the proper equipment and trained staff to do this kind of work professionally. As a coach manufacturer, MCI has the heavy equipment

## Getting a Lift from MCI



by Larry Plachno  
Photos courtesy of MCI

**There are two major advantages with an MCI wheelchair lift retrofit in a coach already in your fleet. One is the economy over purchasing a new accessible coach. The second is the fact that MCI's retrofit will look and operate like in a new coach. Shown here is an MCI lift in a J4500 coach.**

to work on structural members and the technical equipment to work on systems. In addition, MCI's Loudonville facility boasts staff experienced with MCI coaches and with doing accessible retrofits. You not only have the comfort of knowing that they have done this hundreds of times before, but that they have access to the entire MCI technical support network if a question comes up. Your

job is not a "guinea pig" but takes advantage of substantial past experience.

Many people simply do not realize how involved an accessible retrofit can be. It goes way beyond just welding in a lift. Rearranging seats may be the easiest task. Then, you need to reroute the coach HVAC system around the lift. You have to use quality duct-

work and proper routing to keep from negatively impacting the coach's air systems. Instead of splicing wires, MCI uses complete OEM harness assemblies to maintain the dependability of the electrical system. In addition, MCI installs a fast-idle circuit to keep RPMs up so that the battery will handle the extra load of the lift. Finally, MCI professionally modifies the structure for the lift and the coach to maintain OEM standards.

MCI installs the same lifts that are used on new accessible coaches. This would include either Braun or Ricon, depending on the original coach specifications. Safety interlocks are provided to insure that the coach cannot be moved while the wheelchair is being used. Equally important is the fact that since MCI uses OEM standards and specifications, it can also use the factory trim packages. Hence, the final fit and finish looks like the lift was added when the coach was new rather than looking like an aftermarket retrofit.

Miller says that the time needed for MCI to do the retrofit varies by several factors but that four weeks is typical. Operators have asked whether there is any limit on age or mileage for a retrofit coach. While newer and lower mileage coaches typically are better candidates, older and higher mileage coaches are not necessarily excluded. If in doubt, someone from MCI will sit down with you and help you pick the best retrofit candidate in your fleet.

Miller tells people that while Loudonville does not offer the cheapest retrofits, it does offer the best. Due to the volume, prices are lower than they have been in the past. Miller



MCI's retrofit wheelchair lift program matches the original specification on new wheelchair-lift equipped coaches. In addition, it uses new coach trim pieces so that your lift installation is professional and looks like a factory installation. It helps that the MCI staff are experts at this and have done it several times before.

says that the MCI price is competitive, particularly when operators figure in the potential effect of a good, or bad, wheelchair retrofit on residual value.

Operators might also want to ponder the fact that a badly installed lift can end up being an operational nightmare. In addition to the lift not operating properly, you can also have problems with the HVAC system, draining your battery and possible structural problems. This is why an OEM installation has so many advantages.

For additional information on the MCI accessible coach retrofit program and other repair and reconditioning needs, contact Miller (419) 490-2141 or Ron.Miller@mcicoach.com. □

The full impact of the new ADA Guidelines take effect in October of 2012. Larger scheduled service operators will be required to have an all-accessible fleet while smaller charter operators will be required to provide an accessible coach on 48-hours notice. Shown here is an MCI D4505 demo coach photographed with an interesting cloud formation.



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**National Bus Trader**  
9698 W. Judson Road  
Polo, Illinois 61064  
Ph: (815) 946-2341  
Fx: (815) 946-2347  
[www.busmag.com](http://www.busmag.com)