

## **Delays frustrate disabled slow repairs to crucial equipment hinder mobility, area advocates say**

April 7, 2004 - Audrey Grauer of Modesto is not one to stay at home and brood about her health problems.

The 63-year-old paraplegic volunteers with a program that allows disabled people to bowl, and she is organizing adaptive walks on the paved paths of Tuolumne River Regional Park.

During a cleanup at the park last year, she used a grappler and plastic bags to collect bottles, cans and other litter that people had left behind.

But late last month, she lost **power to her wheelchair**, and getting the chair fixed properly through the Medi-Cal system could take weeks or months.

"Audrey is the only person who has the skill to reach out to the adaptive community," said David Herndon of Modesto, director of the California Poppy Project. His group is promoting use of the regional park.

"To be locked up inside your house like Audrey has been is just drudgery for her," he said.

When your car breaks down, you take it to the shop for repairs. But it isn't that easy for disabled people who need to fix a **wheelchair** or other equipment.

Modesto advocates for the disabled relate stories about a person whose **wheelchair** has been broken for three years, and a patient who has tried for three months to get leg braces replaced.

Grauer, who lives at Marple Manor on Coffee Road, was paralyzed in a 1993 accident.

Last year, she was suffering from sores. She said it took five months to get a seat cushion through the Medi-Cal process.

Her **wheelchair** stopped working March 27 and she said the medical equipment company that sold her the chair never came to evaluate the problem. Tuesday, Herndon paid \$60 for a Ceres company to replace a fuse and get the chair running again.

Grauer still needs to have the batteries replaced, at a cost of \$250.

"Six weeks to get a **wheelchair** repaired when you need it for your livelihood is unacceptable," Herndon said. "This is not an isolated case."

## REPAIR DELAYS THE NORM

The delays are typical and unacceptable, according to the Disability Resource Agency for Independent Living in Modesto.

George Sharp is a quadriplegic and staff specialist at DRAIL's McHenry Avenue center.

"Generally what happens is you get a prescription from your doctor and submit it to the **wheelchair** vendor," he said.

If the person is on Medi-Cal, the state's low-cost insurance coverage, the vendor submits paperwork to have the state authorize the repairs.

"It takes anywhere from three to six months to get anything approved," Sharp said.

Lea Brooks, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Health Services, which oversees Medi-Cal, said the average time to approve a request for repairs is 15 to 20 calendar days.

"We get the request from the provider, not the beneficiary directly, so I can't account for the time before we get the request," she said. "It may take time to fill an order because of something custom that needs to be made."

DRAIL's executive director, Dwight Bateman, said there is no reason for battery replacements to take more than 24 to 72 hours.

Advocates for the disabled attribute the delays to bureaucracy and budget cuts. Medi-Cal and the federal Medicare system are also being more careful about authorizations because of equipment companies that have bilked the government.

For people who become frustrated with the system, medical technology grants are available in Stanislaus County and some of its cities. The assistance is not available in Modesto, though DRAIL is seeking funding for next fiscal year.

Gov. Schwarzenegger has begun a reform initiative to make the Medi-Cal system more efficient.

Grauer spent several days trying to convince her doctor at a county clinic to send a prescription to the Redding-based company that sold her the chair. Maximum Comfort serves the Modesto area from offices in Sacramento and Fresno.

Clinic staff said she didn't need a prescription; the company insisted she did.

Richard Kilburn, manager of Maximum Comfort, said the doctor sent the prescription Monday. Kilburn said he concluded that Grauer's chair needed new batteries after talking with her on the phone.

"Usually for a routine battery (replacement) you are still looking at a month and a half to two months," Kilburn said. The company has a few loaner chairs, he said, but not enough for every customer.

#### ACTIVE LIFESTYLE RESUMED

With a new fuse installed Tuesday, Grauer said, she can return to her activities.

She said she helps other disabled people to "let them know you can do things instead of just stay at home in bed."

She helped distribute 100,000 bags of seeds to propagate the state flower up and down California. The Poppy Project is a good match for a person who likes to get out in nature.

"She wants to see every tree, she wants to listen to every bird," Herndon said. "She wants everyone to have a good time. She is doing her part."

Adaptive walks on the Bev Kilpatrick Trail of Tuolumne River Regional Park will be at 8:30 a.m. Saturdays, starting April 17. For more information, call Grauer, 527-4756. Disabled people who are having trouble getting equipment fixed may contact DRAIL, 221 McHenry Ave., Modesto, 521-7260.