



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

## Programs for Vulnerable Populations

### Wheelchair Program

USAID's Wheelchair Program is one of five Congressionally directed programs comprising the Programs for Vulnerable Populations:

- Displaced Children and Orphans Fund
- Leahy War Victims Fund
- Victims of Torture Program
- Wheelchair Program
- Disability Program

Each of these complementary programs has its own purpose and strategy, but they share a focus on providing assistance to poor and vulnerable populations. Each emphasizes the value of family and community as the first resort in providing protection, care, and support to vulnerable children, civilian victims of war, torture survivors, wheelchair users, and people with disabilities.



Photo courtesy Motivation Romania Foundation

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**Established in 2007, USAID's Wheelchair Program works to improve the availability of, access to, and sustainability of programs that provide appropriate wheelchairs in the developing world.**

The 2011 World Bank/World Health Organization's *World Report on Disability* reveals that of the more than one billion people in the world who are disabled, 110–190 million encounter significant difficulties in their daily lives. Of these, an estimated 20 million require wheelchairs to be mobile.

While there are many humanitarian and development agencies involved in broader rehabilitation programs, there are far fewer who provide a comprehensive approach to the provision of suitable wheelchairs and the associated training and education that must accompany this work.

Despite an overwhelming need, only a small percentage of people in the developing world are able to obtain an appropriate wheelchair and the requisite training needed to assist them in obtaining their maximum independence and functionality. A wheelchair is more than just an aid to mobility: it can be a means to self-sufficiency and increased self-esteem; it may be a vehicle to meaningful employment and contributions to community and society; and it reduces dependency and the associated burden placed on family and friends.

USAID believes that a number of fundamental principles should be applied to the production, provision, and distribution of wheelchairs.

#### *Appropriate to Environment and Individual*

Providing wheelchairs is not just about the chair itself. Rather, it is about increasing the quality of an individual's life through increased mobility, independence, and integration into society. When the wheelchair itself is the focus, there is a great temptation for an organization to take a "one size fits all" approach and mass produce or collect donated chairs and conduct mass deliveries. Not only are these wheelchairs generally ill-suited to the rough urban and rural environments of low-income countries, but they do not provide long-

term solutions, and have in some cases, caused the collapse of local wheelchair manufacturing enterprises. USAID supports projects that provide wheelchairs suitable and appropriate for use in developing countries and that can be adjusted to fit the needs of each individual.

### *Sustainable Local Services*

While numerous nongovernmental organizations endeavor to provide wheelchairs, few groups attempt to establish sustainable wheelchair service provision. Shipments of appropriate wheelchairs may provide a benefit to a group of people, but the benefit will be short-term if support services, including repair, are not provided in country. Consideration should also be given to supporting local production of good quality, repairable, and affordable chairs in country. Similarly, regional production, coupled with local assembly and repair, offers opportunities for sustainability. When considering local or regional production, issues such as appropriateness, cost, scale, commercial viability of the source, and implications for existing producers must be taken into consideration.

### *Training for Service Providers and Wheelchair Riders*

The usefulness of a wheelchair is directly related to the training and expertise of the technician fitting the chair, proper assessment of the potential user's needs and subsequent prescription of the chair, and basic training for the user on how to use the chair safely and effectively.

The World Health Organization (WHO), with support from USAID, has published *Guidelines on the Provision of Manual Wheelchairs in Less Resourced Settings* that includes Eight Steps to Wheelchair Service Delivery. These eight steps to service delivery, as per the WHO definition, include: 1) appointment and referral, 2) assessment, 3) prescription and selection, 4) funding and ordering, 5) wheelchair preparation, 6) fitting, 7) user training, and 8) maintenance repairs and follow-up. USAID promotes these eight steps in its wheelchair programs.

WHO and USAID have also collaborated to develop Wheelchair Service Training Packages for Basic and Intermediate levels. These training resources are instrumental in furthering standards and creating common ground for knowledge and skill development regarding wheelchair provision.

### *Quality of Life for Wheelchair Riders*

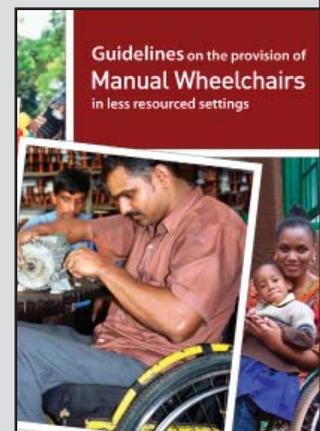
The provision, or production, of a wheelchair is only a beginning step to enabling a wheelchair user to improve his or her quality of life and play a role within the community. Efforts to provide wheelchairs should be coupled with investments in local disabled people's

organizations and self-help groups, increased opportunities to attend school and be active in the workplace, and advocacy on local and national levels.



Photo courtesy Motivation

In 2006, USAID's War Victims Fund collaborated with the World Health Organization and the International Society for Prosthetics and Orthotics (ISPO) to sponsor the "Consensus Conference on Wheelchairs for Developing Countries" in Bangalore, India.



As a result of the conference, WHO developed *Guidelines on the Provision of Manual Wheelchairs in Less Resourced Settings*. The guidelines provide information on the design, production, supply, and service delivery of manual wheelchairs. The guidelines are particularly relevant to the provision of wheelchairs to long-term users who live in less-resourced settings.

Copies of the guidelines can be downloaded at <http://www.who.int/disabilities/publications/technology/wheelchairguidelines/en/index.html>