

Submission to the Inquiry into ACTION Buses ACT Legislative Assembly

From Women with Disabilities ACT

May 2007

Women with Disabilities ACT (WWDACT) is part of the national network of women with disabilities groups. Our national body is Women With Disabilities Australia. WWDACT welcomes all women with all types of disabilities as members.

The socio economic status of women with disabilities is significantly different to men with disabilities, and the broader population. Women with disabilities in Australia (and the ACT) are half as likely to be in paid employment as men with disabilities. They are twice as likely to be in part time employment as men with disabilities. They are also half as likely to access employment assistance programs as men with disabilities¹. The result for women with disabilities is that a large proportion are reliant on income support such as the disability pension.

The socio economic status of women with disabilities results in them being heavily reliant on public transport: in Canberra that means buses. Additionally many women with disabilities who use mobility assistance devices (wheelchairs, walking frames, etc) are of lower socio economic status but are unable to use, or are restricted in their use of, public transport because of lack of accessibility. While this is being addressed over time through the national accessible transport standards, it is still a significant hindrance to the ability of women with disabilities to engage with the broader community.

It is also particularly important to note the pivotal role that accessible public transport plays in supporting low income earners to move into the workforce. To sustain employment people with disabilities need a reliable accessible public transport system. Without it they are forced to consider alternative, and often quite expensive, transport options which can negate any income earned in part time or low paid employment.

¹ Frohmader, C (2000) *There's No Justice – There's Just Us*; WWDA 2000 (available on the WWDA website at www.wwda.org.au)

WWDACT has two key areas of concern with ACTION buses and the ACT public transport system:

1. Accessibility

Accessibility is a broad area and means different things for people with different disabilities. Some matters raised by members of WWDACT have been:

Assignment of accessible (green) buses

There are currently two bus routes that have been allocated specifically as accessible – routes 34 and the 300 series between interchanges. This is a great first step and creates an ability for many people with disabilities to reliably use the public transport system knowing that an accessible bus will show up.

The current green bus fleet is apparently about 30 per cent of the total ACTION fleet. This is a significant number of buses and WWDACT would like to see more routes allocated as being specifically accessible routes. Rather than assign green buses in an ad hoc fashion, which renders them useless as a means of transport for the very people they are designed to assist, the buses should be part of a rolling expansion of accessible routes according to their proportion of the fleet.

If a consumer is unable to rely on a green bus turning up then they cannot rely on getting any bus at all and must make other transport arrangements (usually significantly more expensive). Allocation of bus routes as accessible will increase the numbers of people with mobility restrictions who can become part of the broader public transport user group. Now that the interchange routes have been allocated as accessible, other routes could be allocated according to the expressed needs, or locations, of people with disabilities.

Safety of accessible buses

The green buses are generally of a high quality; however, there are some simple modifications that would increase their safety and comfort for people with mobility restrictions:

a) the installation of attachment straps for wheelchairs – this has been raised through other forums with TAMS, and is also in use in some other states in Australia. A strap is fixed to the wall of the bus in the wheelchair bay that is able to be fastened around a wheelchair to prevent sliding or travel during the journey. It is easily attached by the wheelchair user and detached at journey's end.

b) the installation of dimpled flooring surfaces in the front area of the bus and the wheelchair bay – the floors of buses can be slippery when they become wet. Wheelchair tyres also become slippery when wet. This creates a potentially dangerous area where a wheelchair can slide around in the open

area that the wheelchair bays are situated in. Further to this is the difficulty that wet wheels can cause in parking neatly within the bay. The installation of dimpled flooring would enhance safety and manoeuvrability.

Overcrowding of buses

Recently there has been publicity about the overcrowding of buses. While various measures are being taken to address this in an effort to better serve the public transport using public there are some considerations that should be taken into account for people with disabilities in a crowded transport system.

A wheelchair can take the place of 6 to 8 passengers depending on size. To make the ACTION system more accessible for people with disabilities crowding needs to be recognised as a barrier to getting on a bus. Crowding can result in the only accessible stop being an interchange where significant turnover of passengers occurs. Once a bus is very crowded it becomes quite difficult, or impossible, for someone to enter, turn, and park a wheelchair. It would be unsuitable to consider that people using wheelchairs or other larger mobility devices might be the object of resentment by other passengers due to the amount of space that is needed.

Other difficulties for people with disabilities that arise in a crowded bus are difficulties in ingress and egress (particularly for people with vision impairments and people with restricted movement), difficulty in alerting the driver to your need to get off (missing the stop), and physical vulnerability (particularly for people with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities, or people with sensitive areas on their bodies).

WWDACT recommends an across the board occupancy loading for the bus network that is lower than 100 per cent, and builds in an expectation of some space on all buses, rather than having a 100 per cent occupancy target. There are still significant numbers of people with disabilities who are not using the bus network who will increasingly use it as it becomes more accessible to them.

Light rail

Many WWDACT members are concerned for the environment and applaud moves to increase the use of public transport and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However there must be some consideration of accessibility when considering alternative options – this is particularly the case with light rail.

The usual method of making light rail accessible is to build a large concrete platform at a stop to allow level access to the carriage. The safety of such platforms for people with disabilities will vary and must be factored in. Further to this is the need to build platforms at every single stop to ensure across the board accessibility for the system. Without this we would be constructing a system that is only ever going to be partially accessible and WWDACT rejects this as being exclusive and reducing the ability of people with disabilities to engage with the community.

WWDACT has no particular opinion about any specific means of transport, but cannot accept any variety that will not be universally accessible.

2. Safety of the public transport system

WWDACT members have been very concerned at recent publicity about safety at bus interchanges. Many of our members are physically vulnerable and consider that interchanges should be places of safety, particularly at night. WWDACT recommends staffing levels at interchanges that are consistent with this approach, and would also like to see regular foot patrols by police to enhance the perception of safety. As interchanges are often in close proximity to police stations we do not consider this recommendation to be onerous.

WWDACT would also like to commend the service that is provided by ACTION staff, particularly the drivers and platform assistance people. While ACTION staff are a well known, and positive, feature of the Canberra public transport system it cannot be over emphasised how much this increases the sense of safety and accessibility that the bus network provides.

A further safety concern for WWDACT members is the frequency of buses, particularly at night on suburban routes. We do understand the difficulties of timetabling in such circumstances, but must emphasise the reliance that many of our members have on buses and the need for them to reduce the amount of time they spend in dark suburban streets waiting for a bus. For many women with disabilities this acts as a barrier to using the public transport system and therefore participating in community life.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Women with disabilities are a potentially increasing group of public transport users and appreciate the efforts that are being made to ensure a more accessible transport system. Many of WWDACT's members are unable to use, or restricted in their use of, the ACTION network and look forward to experiencing this basic mechanism of community life in Canberra as the network becomes fully accessible.

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On behalf of Women with Disabilities ACT.