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Job Well Done

- **Metro's Juanita "Maggie" Cook Educates Disabled About Wheelchair Marking and Safety Strap Program**

By Laura Kloth
Staff Writer

(June 22, 2010) Juanita "Maggie" Cook now says it was almost "serendipitous" that she was named to head Metro's Wheelchair Marking and Safety Strap Program in February.

A wheelchair user herself, Cook, who typically works as a Metro Customer Information Agent, was tapped for the position by ADA Compliance Administrator Chip Hazen to help Metro promote the program.

Launched in 2009, the program was created to promote the use of safety straps on wheelchairs to keep their users safe while riding buses. It was initiated after a battery of simulated crash tests showed that wheelchair users can sustain serious injuries with their chairs seriously damaged or even destroyed if not properly secured.

The program includes an educational component to provide extensive public outreach to wheelchair users who ride buses as well as training for bus operators who must properly secure the chairs.

Cook can empathize with disabled patrons because she suffers from Lupus and uses a wheelchair herself.

Lupus is an auto-immune disease that weakens the muscles and has forced Cook to use a wheelchair or crutches to get around. "I know what they're going through; I've been on the bus," she said.

A 36-year employee at Metro, Cook says she has enjoyed her job as a Metro Customer Information Agent. Cook has fielded calls from disabled patrons who complain about feeling unsafe on a bus when it stops or turns corners and being passed up when a bus is full.

So when Cook heard that Metro needed some assistance in promoting the safety strap program, she told Hazen, "Why not give me a try?"

On loan from her regular duties in Customer Relations, where she works as a Centrex Operator under the direction of Communications Manager Tom Horne, Cook's current duties have consisted primarily of educating wheelchair users at senior homes and rehabilitation facilities, visiting



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agencies that assist the disabled, and setting up assessments for patrons who need their wheelchairs fitted with a safety strap.

Her role, she said, has allowed her not only to promote the program, but also to help “smooth over” complaints from patrons.

On a recent visit to a senior center in Long Beach, Cook was assisted by a trained technician to assess and fit 21 wheelchairs with safety straps or markings.

According to Hazen, who oversees the program, the markings consist of a ½-inch yellow electrical tape installed on the wheelchair to indicate to the bus operator that this is the best location to put the bus securement hook. A safety strap is used when there is no easy location on the wheelchair to attach the hook.

“Bus Operators are taught to look for either the yellow tape or the safety strap when securing a wheelchair on a Metro bus,” Hazen said.

Training for the technicians consists of approximately 10 hours on how to safely secure a wheelchair on a Metro bus plus hands-on training provided by Cook and Metro’s wheelchair securement consultant Doug Cross, from Doug Cross Transportation Consulting.

Hazen says Cook has fulfilled her duties extremely well.

“We were looking for somebody who is a wheelchair user, because the riders could relate better to her. Once they saw her, they changed their opinion about Metro,” he said, adding that, at times, some patrons became teary-eyed when they expressed their appreciation for Cook’s involvement and for the program.

When her task as a supervisor ends, Cook plans to return to her Customer Information position with Metro but her passion to help people with disabilities will continue, she said.

In the past, Cook has attended rallies in Sacramento and Washington D.C. seeking additional funding for programs that serve the disabled.

Cook, named after her strong-willed grandmother, says she’s grateful she was able to assist with the program.

“It was such a positive experience and I always went home feeling that I accomplished something in helping others with disabilities,” she said.