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UMTRI and university partners awarded grant to study wheelchair transportation safety

ANN ARBOR, Mich.---The University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute (UMTRI) and three other university partners have been awarded a \$4.5 million federal grant to continue research on transportation safety and usability for people who use wheelchairs.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research has renewed funding of the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Wheelchair Transportation Safety (RERC WTS) for five years to a partnership headed by UMTRI that also includes the universities of Pittsburgh, Louisville and Colorado.

The partnership was originally formed in 2001 to advance the safety, usability and independence of the large proportion of 1.7 million wheelchair users who remain seated in their wheelchairs when traveling in motor vehicles.

"While considerable progress has been made in the past five years, the announcement by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to fund the RERC WTS for another five years provides an important opportunity to solidify past accomplishments and to make measurable gains such that transportation for the growing population of wheelchair users is not an impediment to successful integration into today's society," said Lawrence W. Schneider, the Center's new director and a research professor and head of UMTRI's Biosciences Division.

Wheelchair users need access to public and private motor-vehicle transportation to successfully function in today's society, Schneider says. Although federal, state and regional legislation and policies of the past three decades have increased the availability and use of motor-vehicle transportation by people who use wheelchairs, these policies have done relatively little to assure that these individuals can travel easily, independently and safely, he adds.

"Recently, the National Council on Disability reported that many people with disabilities who are willing and able to work cannot do so because of inadequate transportation," Schneider said. "While this report and other similar studies apply to people with all types of disabilities, there is little question that wheelchair users face the majority of transportation problems."

The partnership of universities will conduct research and development in six project areas, ranging from developing solutions for forward-facing and rear-facing wheelchair passenger stations in large accessible transit vehicles, to investigating issues of school

bus transportation for children who ride to school in wheelchairs, to improving frontal- and rear-crash protection for wheelchair occupants in private vehicles.

In addition, the RERC WTS will disseminate information, train future researchers, transfer technology concepts to manufacturers, and develop and revise voluntary industry standards.