Ms. Johnson: Hello everyone and good afternoon and welcome to the teleconference. “Accessible Transportation: A Key to Independence for Youth with Disabilities.” I’m Donna Johnson, a Research Fellow with the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition and today we are pleased to have Dr. Alan Abeson and Karen Wolf Branigin of Easter Seals Project ACTION as our presenters.

Dr. Abeson is the Director of Easter Seals Project ACTION. This project conducts a variety of activities regarding all aspects of public and private transportation for people with disabilities including training, technical assistance, and information. Prior to becoming Director of Project ACTION in 2002, Dr. Abeson served 15 years as Executive Director of the Arc of the U.S. headquartered in Arlington, Texas. While in Arlington he was a city-councilor appointed Chairman of the Special Transit Advisory Board and an advocate for the establishment of citywide public transit. Prior to his tenure with the Arc, Dr. Abeson served in positions with the Council for Exceptional Children.

Karen Wolf Branigin is the Training and Technical Assistance Manager of Project ACTION and is responsible for the project’s national training and technical assistance services provided to the disability community and the transportation industry. Karen came to Washington, DC as a 2001 Joseph P. Kennedy Junior Public Policy Fellow and worked for Senator John D. Rockefeller, IV of West Virginia. Prior to her fellowship, Karen served as Associate Director for Community Support at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Karen has an MSW in social welfare policy and planning from the University of Michigan.

The format of today’s teleconference will be a 45-minute presentation with a question and answer period afterward. We ask that you hold your questions until after the presentation is completed and I also ask that people reduce background noise by muting their phones. Dr. Abeson and Ms. Wolf Branigin have posted a PowerPoint presentation on the NCSET Web site and also a document for your review. These documents may be found at http://www.ncset.org/.

Dr. Abeson: Thank you, Donna. Good afternoon, everyone, wherever you may be. Karen and I are sitting in our offices downtown DC, about three blocks from the White House, and hopefully we’ll still be sitting here when the call ends and that there will be no evacuation threats today, if you saw the news.

It’s a pleasure to be with you. We are very, very pleased to be able to talk to you about transportation and Easter Seals Project ACTION. We think that NCSET is quite wise in beginning to address this very critical issue that is in fact often the difference between the kind of transition that young people make or don’t make as they complete public schools. We hope that if you don’t know Project ACTION that by the end of this teleconference you will not only know us but you will begin to establish a long-term relationship. I’d like to begin by giving you just a brief history of the project and, more importantly, transportation for people with disabilities in the U.S. 2 The project is 16 years old. It began one year before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and was created by Congress primarily because, at that point in time, the disability community was in many respects just beginning to become part of the mainstream of society and wanted to take advantage of public and private transportation. Well, that was, of course, a new phenomenon for the transportation industry and they quite literally...
fought it tooth and nail. To describe the environment in those days as hostile was understating it. It was significantly abusive, combative, and threatening in many respects, including individuals who use wheelchairs chaining themselves together in front of buses. Much of that preceded the ADA and with the ADA came a significant movement on the part of the transportation industry aided, I would say, by Easter Seals Project ACTION, because the mandate we got from Congress was to bring together the transportation industry and the disability community to increase mobility for people with disabilities and to help involve in a meaningful way the people who work with people with disabilities as well as their families. And as the PowerPoint indicates, we have a very large and varied program including technical assistance in many different areas. As Donna indicated moments ago, we also do training, we do technical assistance, we do resource development and distribution, and we do it all in accessible formats so that we are able to truly involve people with disabilities in everything that we do.  

As we pursue our work, and in particular with regard to young adults—students who are leaving school—we have discovered that there are several aspects as to why this issue is now becoming so important. As we look at the situation there really is a dearth of effort on the part of public schools to deal with transportation. First, a whole lot of people in schools do not recognize the importance of planning for transportation and that includes not only being aware of transportation options but also teaching students—with travel training or other approaches—how to use transportation. Some say that because of the lack of transportation and knowledge and skill in using it, the good work of the schools and others involved in transition is a waste of time, energy, and money. Without transportation, people can’t get to the community to take advantage of what the community has to offer. We believe that in order for the realization of life in the community, and as fulfilling and independent as possible, there must be a way of getting around—mobility—in the community.

We find in our work that when we talk to people who are dealing with students of transition age, many of them do not know how to travel across their community by public transportation. You can ask yourselves that question right now, do you know how to get across your community by bus, taxi, or another alternative if you don’t drive a car? Do you know what transportation services are available in your community for people with disabilities and do you know what hours they operate? These are fundamental questions that many people just don’t bother with because they have alternative means of transportation. That of course leaves, and reinforces, the fact that many people in many communities, even where there is public transportation, are unaware of options that are available. These typically fall into a couple of categories where there is regularly scheduled transportation or, as we call it, fixed-route transportation. Most of that transportation today is now accessible to people with mobility impairments. We feel that while the hardware is in place, there still is more work to be done in terms of educating the transportation operators, bus drivers if you will, and others about people with disabilities. Complementing that system under the ADA for people who can’t use those vehicles is complimentary ADA transportation and that’s typically a van, sometimes taxis, and sometimes other alternatives. Again, historically, when we look at the transportation that has been provided and that we’re used to for people with disabilities, it tends often to be agency provided, which means that a common group goes to a common destination. There’s no opportunity for individuality in decision-making or experience.

I’ve mentioned and want to emphasize that this is a really important point and it’s one that Karen can speak to at some length; it is that we tend as a society to reward, recognize, and prepare young people to drive cars. Yet bus familiarization, travel training, and orientation mobility for young people with disabilities is not as readily available nor has it begun to be recognized as significant as driver’s education. Yet when you cut to it it’s exactly the same in terms of providing people with mobility. Even as we can say that about 90% of the large buses that exist and operate in the U.S. are accessible, about 40% of the counties in the U.S. have no public transportation whatsoever. So as we look at the country, we have to be aware that in some communities where there is no transportation of a public nature, efforts have to be undertaken to try to help communities.
We also tend not to be terribly familiar nor prepare young people to deal with other options besides those I’ve mentioned. Taxis, for example—if taxi companies buy vans, whether new or used, they have got to be accessible. If their sedans are not accessible, they have to arrange what’s known as equivalent service for people with disabilities.

We also have to deal with, and you may feel this stereotype yourselves, that the kind of people who ride buses are those who threaten our personal safety. That is stereotypical and is an issue often faced when dealing with families of people with developmental disabilities. They are often reluctant, out of fear, to allow their children to ride public transportation. This is yet another area in which we have a good deal of work to do.

Ms. Wolf Branigin: Hi, everybody—it’s a pleasure to join you. When we look at transportation answers for young adults there’s a couple of things that we can think about for both the transit side as well as the school side. First of all, public and private transportation providers understand that people with disabilities are a large share of their customer base. Depending on the city that you live in, you can have a city where public transportation isn’t valued by the community, everybody drives cars and trucks, and typically in those situations the customers that transit serves are people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and older adults because those are people who can’t afford a private vehicle or who are unable to drive a vehicle. When you live in cities say like Washington, DC where parking is very expensive and very limited, that customer base also includes what transit refers to as choice customers and those are people who make a choice to use public transportation even though they have a vehicle that they could use at home. But regardless, if it’s a transit-oriented city like Washington, DC or Chicago or New York City, or whether it’s a community like, say, Detroit where I used to live and where the car is always valued more, public and private transportation providers know that people with disabilities are a large part of their customer base. And I was very, very excited when I first came to Project ACTION and learned that the transit industry really welcomed so many of us and wanted to do the right thing and they are really reaching out to the disability community to learn how they can better serve their customers.

There’s no question that they’re required to do this under the ADA and many public and private transportation providers work every day to meet the letter of the law, but we’re also working so many other transit providers who want to go above and beyond the law, who want to do the right thing, who know that these are their customers, and want to make things work for their customers. And this has really been a delight for Project ACTION staff when we work with transit folks who actually speak our language, who understand what the disability community needs and wants, and who are sophisticated enough to understand that there’s a difference between their customers. Customers with disabilities who are older have very different needs and interests than kids who are still in school. So many of the transit systems that we work with throughout the country are rolling out different programs to attract new customers and they’re doing different things for kids and for students and they’re understanding that they have to make the bus something that’s cool, that kids want to be part of. There are lots of initiatives across the country where they’re doing, like I said, special things for kids and for students and they’re working with school systems to try to get the students to learn about public transportation at a younger age and then be able to use it as soon as they finish school and beyond.

They’re doing this for a couple of different reasons and one of the reasons absolutely positively for sure is that specialized transportation or paratransit costs a lot more per person per ride than the regular fixed-route bus. And as you can imagine there are fewer people who can take a paratransit vehicle, typically a 10-15 passenger vehicle, versus the large buses that you see on a typical system street where it’s a 40-passenger bus. Also because the fixed-route travels on a fixed-route and has certain stops and only goes on one particular route, drops people off at pre-defined stops, that’s less costly then a paratransit vehicle that’s taking someone from where they live to where they work or to a store they want to go to or wherever it is. So it’s more costly to use paratransit and while paratransit is very appropriate for some people, and it is a service that people are eligible for if they have a disabling
condition that prevents them from using fixed-route service, it costs more money. So the public transportation systems are very interested in identifying people who currently use paratransit and might be able to use fixed-route for all or part of their trip if they had the proper support and training. And many of those transit companies are looking to people who work in schools, who work in adult service agencies, to help figure out what’s the best way to support people to move from paratransit to fixed-route. Again, it provides a lot more independence and community inclusion for the customer and it also saves us money for the transit companies. So that’s a lot of what we see as a win-win.

There are many transit providers who are very, very aggressive and actively working to help students, and that’s a real population that they want to focus on because their belief is if you can learn how to ride your public system when you’re 14 or 15 years old then we don’t have to be serving you on paratransit for 10 years and then try again when you’re a little older. So public transit systems across the country are extremely interested in working with schools and they don’t understand your system, we know that we don’t always understand their system, so there’s a lot of learning and a lot of potential work that we can do with schools and transit systems.

At Easter Seals Project ACTION, our main job is to connect the disability community and the transit industry to improve local services. We have had the opportunity to work with a number of communities across the country and their school districts and their individual schools have been involved in some of the work and we’ve really looked at very different ways to help students learn more about public transportation. A couple of examples of what schools are doing, one of the very first steps that they’re doing is they’re trying to introduce the use of public transportation as part of a school activity. So, for example, where a group might go on a field trip and use a school bus, they’re trying to arrange something where they’ll go on a field trip and use public transportation. If you’re dealing with union drivers and unions who want to have as many opportunities to use the school buses that’s going to be a challenge. But the idea of taking a field trip where you’ve got your correct ratio of staff to students and you’re all going at the same time, if you can try something like that, a short trip using public transportation, it’s just one opportunity to introduce the students to using the fixed-route bus system.

Several schools are looking at using public transportation for vocational training or work experience type of situations. If you’re in a district where a teacher is required to be with a student off campus that’s a little more challenging than if you’re in a district where a paraprofessional or a teacher’s aide can take the student off-campus, you may have a little better luck with your ratios there. Schools that are able to use volunteers to do that kind of activity have another option. Schools that may include parents who might be interested and willing to escort their child and teach them a little bit more about the public bus system is another opportunity. But again, whether it’s part of a school activity like vocational training, or whether it’s a homework assignment where a mom, a dad, a cousin, a sibling can go on a trip with the student using the public bus system, they’re all different opportunities to introduce kids to the public system. We have one group that we’re working with that has an after-school program doing work with the local YMCA and as part of the after-school program, one of the activities they focus on is introducing the students to the public transportation system.

There are a number of public transportation systems that are trying to develop incentives as they work with these school systems. We know that several communities will provide free tickets when a school personnel and a student is learning how to ride the bus, whether it’s in a formalized travel training program or whether it’s a more informal bus familiarization program. But again, for the bus company to give you some free tickets knowing that your whole purpose is to try to get the kid to learn how to use the bus system so in the future they will not be taking the more costly paratransit service, a lot of transportation systems are very interested in making that very small investment. We also know that there are several transit systems who themselves have decided to hire travel trainers. They know that often the schools are unable to provide that service even though they have the opportunity under IDEA
to provide that, but they know that it’s tough, they can’t meet the off-grounds ratio, if that’s an issue in your state. But again they’re so interested in getting kids interested in and excited about using the public transportation system that many community transit systems have hired their own travel trainers and often if there’s a school that has a travel training program, if that school personnel are off during the summer or during holidays, often the public transportation provider will hire that particular school personnel to help them with their travel training program, whether it’s providing direct service or helping them develop and design the program. So there’s lots of examples that we know about and we’re involved with across the country where the school system is working very closely with the transportation industry.

6 We want to tell you a little bit about our resources. We are very excited to offer a number of general resources in a variety of ways that we can get information out to you and also tell you a little bit about some of the products that we have that are particularly useful for people working in the school system. First of all, we have a clearinghouse that includes over 70 free print, video, and audio products that can be used for students as well as school personnel as well as the transit industry. So, for example, if you were interested in approaching the transit industry and wanted to learn a little bit more about the transit industry and why they would be interested in working with you, we have some materials that can help you with that and we would absolutely love for you to give us a call and we can help you strategize. We don’t know every single transit person in the world but we know a lot of people and if we don’t know someone in your particular community we may know someone who knows someone in your community and we might be able to arrange a conference call with you and your transit representative and us or somebody that we know, just to kind of introduce you and get you going on the right foot. No one likes to make a cold call and we would be absolutely delighted to help make that connection.

As Al mentioned, our materials are in alternative formats, and if we don’t have something that’s been produced in an alternative format that you want, we will make sure to get that to you. So if you have students that you would like to share some of these materials with we may be able to get them and work with you so we can put them in a format that your students can understand. And not only something like braille or audiotape, but there may be something that is written at a higher level and we may be able to break it down to meet the students’ needs— if you have students with some cognitive limitations, we may be able to help with that as well.

Our materials really cover a wide range of topics. There are things that are specifically designed for transit personnel, introducing them to the disability community, and things for the disability community that advise them on how to work with transit folks. Again, we use different words, we have our own jargon, it may take us awhile to focus on where our common area is, but believe me, the transit industry is very interested in learning about how they can serve their customers, your students, and how they can do that in the most efficient and effective manner.

We have a couple of documents specifically written for schools by school people. One thing that we have is called You Can Ride. It’s a pictorial guide with a CD audio—it’s a little spiral-bound book and it is kind of a step-by-step booklet that explains how a customer would find out about a particular route they were interested in and how they would actually board the bus and ride the bus and that’s something that may be really helpful if you’re working with students at the very beginning levels, students who are non-readers, that can help them work through the steps that they would take to ride the bus. There’s also something that we have called Buses and Trains Everyone and that’s a K-8 curriculum. It’s for teachers and it gives you some lesson plans that you can use when introducing your students to the public transit system. We’re putting the final touches on our 9-12 curriculum, and I say 9-12 but it may be 9 and above. I worked in Michigan for a long time where adults didn’t age out until 26 so it’s definitely looking at 9-12. But there again, it’s materials specifically by and for teachers, it’s been field-tested in several districts across the country and it’s been developed to help you get an idea and a sense of how you might introduce public transportation into the classroom.

Dr. Abeson: And this latter product that Karen mentioned is also tied into the kind of outcomes
that are being measured across the country in various ongoing testing schemes. We are also incredibly fortunate in the fact that as a project we actually have some resources to support projects that yield products. I hope that all made sense to you—we do support what we like to think of as applied research. We are not a theoretical entity and like to focus on those kinds of issues that really are pressing the transportation and disability communities as they move forward to provide safe, affordable, accessible, and reliable transportation for people with disabilities—young and old.

We have an annual cycle that starts with statements of need. These are broad but short statements that anybody can submit to us that present a need that relates to our basic purpose. We accept these from universities, from consultants, from public schools, from rehabilitation agencies, we really don’t care where they come from, and in fact we happen to have a statement of need announcement out right now. They’re due on June 10 of this year and we will take all of them—we often get in the neighborhood of 75-90—and try to involve representatives from transportation and disability in the prioritization of these which will subsequently become requests for proposals. We then get proposals and make funding decisions.

We also have at the moment, a Request For Proposals (RFP) out on the street that is due on the 31st of this month. It deals with a review and an analysis of currently available materials and projects that deal with the accessible pedestrian environment. Applied to bus stops, as an example, doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to have accessible vehicles when people with disabilities are unable to get to the bus stops because they are not accessible from a pedestrian perspective. And as more and more people with more and more varied kinds of disabilities get into the community and are able to take advantage of public transportation, the pedestrian environment becomes critical. Often the assumptions about the pedestrian environment are that it only impacts, or primarily impacts, people who use mobility devices such as wheelchairs and people who have vision limitations, but we see broader issues that impact people with cognitive disabilities as well. The way to get this information about the RFP is through our Web site and we’ll share more about that in just a few minutes.

I would like to invite you or your agency or your university to submit [a proposal], make your needs known. We are very anxious to deal with young people involved in transition in ways that will enable them to take advantage of the increasing opportunity being made available by the transportation industry. The more we can, as Karen pointed out, enable people with disabilities to stay off paratransit, to use regular bus service, the more excited the transportation industry is going to be and the more we will be doing to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Ms. Wolf Branigin: Okay, for those of you who are following along with our slides we’re up to the one with the telephone that says “Resources: Toll-Free Information Line.” We have our toll-free number which is 800-659-6428 and what we have available when you give us a call is lots and lots of information on whatever you’re looking for and if we don’t have the answer we’re always happy to help track down the information and either put you in contact directly with the person who knows or act as a liaison if that’s what you wish.

Our toll-free number is typically used for people who are either looking for resources or people who are interested in learning a little bit more about the ADA guidelines. We get a lot of questions saying, “This is the situation that I’m in, this is what my transportation provider is telling me, is that within the law?” We get calls from the transportation industry saying, “This is what our customer is asking us to do, we’re not quite sure that that’s what the law says, will you please help us better understand it?” So we get questions from both the transit industry and the disability community and we’re always happy to provide you with what the law says. We do not have attorneys on staff. We have an excellent working relationship with the federal departments that are in charge of answering these questions. A lot of times the answer that we give around the ADA is “it depends” because so often the law is written in a very general way and even though there have been rulings on specific issues, a lot of the issues are still a little fuzzy. So what we try to do, because our whole mission is to bring together in cooperation the transit industry and the disability community, we try to help folks work it out. We like to use mediation-
type strategies which is often difficult to do if you're just talking to one party over the telephone, but we have often given suggestions on how one might approach a particular situation if there's a challenge at hand. But we have a lot of information and we have a lot of connections and we are always delighted to give you the kind of information that you're looking for when you're interested in resources.

9 Our Web site is another way that people can get information. Of course everybody loves to not pick up the telephone anymore and they like to go on the Web and we hope that our Web site can give you information. Our Web site is updated on an extremely regular basis. We are very careful to make sure that we have pertinent information and accurate information. All of our training and technical assistance events are posted on the Web site. We have a number of events that I will talk about in a minute with applications and application due dates, and they're always posted on the Web site. We are always looking for ways to improve the Web site so there's a spot to let us know if there's a particular component or set of information that you're looking for that we don't have and if it's something that we can do to help out people who are interested, we are absolutely delighted to do that as well. Our Web site is again something where you can get a lot of our materials by downloading them and we always offer them in PDF and text format so we want to make sure that it's accessible to everybody.

10 We also have a newsletter. There's a free bi-monthly print or electronic newsletter and you can call us and ask to be placed on the mailing list or you can also register for that using our Web site. There was actually several issues ago a big story that we had on some work that schools were doing in the area of travel training and bus familiarization. So again we're always looking for ways to improve the Web site so there's a spot to let us know if there's a particular component or set of information that you're looking for that we don't have and if it's something that we can do to help out people who are interested, we are absolutely delighted to do that as well. Our Web site is again something where you can get a lot of our materials by downloading them and we always offer them in PDF and text format so we want to make sure that it's accessible to everybody.

11 Our training and technical assistance, we have several different projects that we're involved with. The first one I want to talk about is called People on the Move. People on the Move is a training initiative. We present five of these training events in each calendar year. We go across the country and we try to present in the North, the South, the East, the West, and the Midwest every year. Our remaining training events are in Salt Lake City June 8-9, Boston September 7-8, and New Orleans November 14-15 and there are application dates that are about a month or so before the training dates and you'll find them on our Web site. This training is developed for both professionals who work with people with disabilities, students, and adults with disabilities as well as people from the transit industry. We're always fortunate that we have a mix of people. Because we serve a nationwide audience we'll often have people from different parts of the country and it's really a great opportunity to connect with other people who do the same thing that you do someplace else, but also it's a great opportunity if you work in the disability community to talk with transit folks and ask them how might you approach your transit personnel or do they know someone in your community who works in transit who would be a good connection for you. But it really is an opportunity to learn the basics about accessible transportation, what the law requires, what the intent of the law is around accessible transportation, some of the challenges that people are facing and how they are dealing with those challenges. We have modules that are also specifically developed for the school system, but unless we have a lot of school personnel in the course we will not use those modules during the training but we have them available on the CDs that people get as part of the toolkit. It's really a great opportunity to learn about how I can use these materials with the students that I'm working with who are transition age.

We have typically had teachers come to that training, usually a transition coordinator is the typical person from the school system that comes. We've had parents and their children come to the training,
which has been very exciting and a lot of fun for all of us, and it’s really again an opportunity to take a couple of days and just think about transportation and how you can talk about it in the IEP and how you can have it as part of the transition plan and how you can get your principal or your superintendent or your special ed director, whoever it might be, to get excited about transportation and figure out how we can include it into your regular curriculum.

We also have a program that we call Mobility Planning Services. This is a three-day institute that we have each year and this is different from People on the Move which is for individuals to attend. In the Mobility Planning Services Institute we take applications from teams from local communities. The team must include at least one person who comes from the disability community—we’re looking for a disability advocate, so a student or a parent. We’re also looking for someone from the transit industry and then we’re looking for anybody else who wants to round out that team and someone from the school would be an absolutely perfect person. And what we ask each team to do is to identify decision-makers, people who are involved with the money and involved with the decision, to come together to pick a particular issue that’s challenging you in your local community and take a couple of days to meet with national experts in the disability and transit community and develop a plan that you’ll take back in your community and implement. We are also able through our project to continue to provide you with training and technical assistance throughout the year following the Institute because we don’t want you to just come on in, get all excited, go back home, see all the problems, and let the energy kind of fade out. So we’re able to support teams a year after the training.

We are currently in process of developing a travel training curriculum. It will not be specific to schools but it will be specific to travel trainers so we’re going to be focusing on travel trainers who work with schools as well as adult service agencies as well as transit systems and other programs as well. We are always available to provide telephone technical assistance or onsite assistance. It’s typically involved only when we’re working with you through another project like the Mobility Planning Services Institute but we’re always available through telephone to help you strategize, whether it’s a short-term or a long-term issue that you’re dealing with. We’re always available by telephone and e-mail of course and we’re really, really interested in reaching out to the transition-age kids and hope that we can help you learn what’s going on across the country as well as identify some ways to improve transportation options in your local community.

Dr. Abeson: I have to say that it’s good you can’t see us because both of our tongues are hanging out. We are feeling terribly rushed in this brief amount of time to tell you about this project that has an amazing array of resources to try to work with people such as yourselves to create greater opportunities for people with disabilities in the community. And I’d like to stop talking and take your questions with this brief autobiography as haiku about this is 17-year-old man which I think sums up our perspective quite nicely.

And I quote: “Same time, same place everyday, 6:40 a.m. the number 90 bus from Damascus to Shady Grove Metro. For six months my son has been volunteering in the Health and Human Services mailroom in hopes of a permanent position. This job could enrich his life in unfathomable ways. Jay is developmentally disabled. Last week he was informed he has a full-time position, he tells a fellow rider on the way home. Next morning as he boards everyone on the bus applauds him. I know it takes more then a village for Jay, it takes a bus too,” and that’s from his mother. And now we’re open for questions.

Ms. Johnson: This is Donna. Please announce your name and the state from which you’re calling before asking a question of Al or Karen. So go ahead, our first question.

Ms. Hibshman: This is Donna and I have a question. You were talking about some of the attitude—no, access barriers that you have from parents feeling like transportation is not safe. Can you talk about some of the strategies you use to help them understand that it is safe?

Ms. Wolf Branigin: Sure, probably the easiest way to think about introducing parents to public transportation is using the same type of techniques that you use when introducing parents to employment. The first thing is, if you have a parent whose child is using public transportation or has tried
public transportation, having a parent talk to another parent about how they at first were afraid and then they took a look at the system and then went on the bus with their son or daughter and after awhile decided it was okay, that's really the best way to give the message. We know that when a professional—especially, I always say, I’m a recovering professional is what I like to say. I am not a parent of a child with a disability and I’m not a parent, I don’t have children, so for me to give you the message, you know, “Take the risk,” really isn’t fair, I’m not the right person to give that message. But when another parent with a child who has a similar disability to the parent who is considering trying public transportation, when they can give that message it’s really the most effective way.

In addition, obviously, is getting on the bus. So many of us just don’t use the public transportation system so we have this idea in our head of what it’s like. The first thing is that any bus purchase since 1990 has to have a wheelchair lift or have a ramp. So people who use wheelchairs can physically get on the bus as long as their wheelchair is not one of these huge giant Amigo type mobility aids. So the first thing is actually trying to see if you can get on the bus. The second thing is taking a look at the bus. Most of them are new, they are air-conditioned, they have lots of different bells and whistles that make it more accessible for people with all different types of disabilities to use the bus. One of the requirements by law is that the bus operator call out the stop when somebody requests that they call out the stop or when it’s a major intersection. So the idea that my son or daughter may miss his stop is something that can be addressed by law. Very honestly that seems to be, for whatever reason that we just can’t get a handle on, something that’s a real challenge for a lot of operators, they just don’t like to get on the microphone and call out the stop. But again, by law if I got on and I hand them a card that says, “Please tell me when I’m at 6th and Main,” if I can’t communicate that through verbal language, or if I ask the driver and make sure to sit right near the driver, that that’s something again that might help parents feel a little bit more secure.

Most bus systems have panic buttons; they have ways to report emergencies. We’ve heard several stories where a person with a disability was riding the bus system and got lost, they got on the wrong bus, and because the bus system is all connected through a dispatcher, the dispatcher was able to call in and say, “We’re looking for a man named John who’s 19 years old, he has on a red shirt and blue jeans,” and in about two minutes you get the bus driver who says, “He’s on my bus, I’ve got him, tell me what to do.” So there’s a lot of safeguards, and if parents are willing to get on the bus with their kid, with the teacher, with the paraprofessional, whoever it is, and actually ride the route, because we want to teach people one route at a time. It’s too comprehensive to think that everybody can learn every bus route, plus you don’t need to learn every bus route. But if they can actually pick out one route, go with their son or daughter, see how safe it truly is, it’s really the best way to get parents to agree to try it. The other thing is, you make a deal, you say you can try it and if you don’t like it, that’s okay, you don’t have to continue—there is that built-in safety net. There’s nothing that requires you to take a bus route that you’re afraid of. It’s okay to try it and then make your decision slowly.

Dr. Abeson: And I would add that if any of you have had a chance to read Riding the Bus with My Sister—not necessarily the film that was on television, but if you’ve read the book you get a different perception of what bus operators really are like. And again, they are not of one ilk but quite representative of a variety of the kinds of people and many are extremely conscientious and develop relationships with their passengers. That too can be an added safety measure for people with disabilities that can be conveyed to parents, as Karen points out quite correctly, when they ride the bus together.

Mr. Webb: My experience is that bus or transit companies will allow people to come into their garage to practice getting on and off a bus or to take a tour of the bus or to see exactly how the wheelchair lift works, how the fare box works, things like that. If you contact your local transit company they’ll probably arrange for you to come and have a tour or to have that shown to you like that.

Dr. Abeson: And in fact in a number of communities they’ll bring the bus to a school or they’ll bring a bus to a vocational rehabilitation agency for the very same purpose.
Ms. Wolf Branigin: It’s also an excellent idea to make that arrangement if someone is considering purchasing a new wheelchair. Obviously the wheelchair needs to be the proper wheelchair for the person’s body but there’s no question that there’s a lot of wheelchairs with a lot of bells and whistles and the bigger and heavier they get, they may first of all exceed the definition of a common wheelchair under the ADA and therefore the bus company may not be able to provide service to that person because the wheelchair is just too heavy for the lift. So if you’re in schools with PTs or OTs and if you’re working with the Children’s Hospital or a similar organization considering purchase of a wheelchair, that you may want to involve the public transit system and use one of their buses is a really good idea.

Ms. Holsopple: This is Michelle Holsopple. I’m a travel instructor with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit 3 in Pittsburgh, and my question was in terms of information for school districts in terms of travel instruction and the professional preparation that’s necessary for the individuals who provide travel instruction and teach individuals with cognitive or physical disabilities to travel, you know, to the point of independence. Is there information available to them through Project ACTION—you know, for instance, the Western Michigan standards that were developed with Project ACTION—is that available to school districts?

Ms. Wolf Branigin: It sure is, Michelle, and boy, you live in Pittsburgh with some really nice transit services. As you mentioned, we had a contract with Western Michigan University to develop—and I’m embarrassed that I don’t know the full correct title of this but the word competencies for travel trainers is there and my e-mail is on the slide and if you want to e-mail me for the exact title I can make sure to get copies of that out to you. This is a book that was developed by a number of people who are experienced travel trainers, travel trainer supervisors, and people who use travel training services, and it’s a list of both academic and field competencies that this group felt were important for travel trainers to learn. We give this list of competencies—there are over 200 of them—to the field and the way schools and organizations are using them is they’re looking through it and they’re either deciding “Yes, we want every single one of these to be part of our training program,” or “No, we’re going to pick and choose the ones that make sense to us,” and however that works for you is just fine. The document is called Competencies for the Practice of Travel Instruction and Travel Training. Again it’s a list and a CD of the different skills that this group felt were appropriate for people who were learning to be travel trainers and people who are involved with travel training and travel instruction. (Editor’s Note: This document is available on the Project ACTION Web site at http://projectaction.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=ESPA_04COMP.)

As I mentioned also we’re working on a travel training curriculum. We’re guided by a curriculum design board that includes travel trainers from schools as well as adult service agencies and the transportation industry and that curriculum we’ll be field testing in the fall. So it will be another opportunity for people who are interested in establishing travel training programs or improving their own skills. We know that with travel training it’s an emerging profession. There’s a group called the Association for Travel Instruction (ATI); we can provide you information on them as well. That’s looking at how this group of professionals can continue to grow and provide responsible services in the field. It is an emerging profession. We’re very excited about travel training—it’s a big thing that we care deeply about. We know that it is the link for transit systems who want their customers to use fixed-route transportation. We know that you can’t just say to somebody, “Start using the regular bus”—people need to learn how to do that and we know that travel trainers and orientation mobility specialists for people who are blind and have little or no vision is the way to do that. So we’re absolutely delighted again to either put you in contact with other travel trainers or get these materials in your hands as well.

Dr. Abeson: Two other points. I want to emphasize that these are free since we operate under a Federal cooperative agreement. The other thing I wanted to mention is if you haven’t read—and I suspect most of you are quite familiar with the IDEA 1997 amendments which did speak specifically to travel training for students with disabilities
beyond vision so that those with cognitive difficulties are also potentially eligible for travel training services, particularly if it’s stated in the student’s IEP.

**Ms. Voorhees:** Hi, this Patty Voorhees. I was past president of the ATI so I’m very thrilled that you’re mentioning ATI to the group and also talking about the competencies because as you both are well aware, the liability risks are very high. So it’s very critical to have trained professionals out there, meaning instructors as well as trainers who can provide the services in a safe manner.

**Ms. Johnson:** Okay, any other questions? Well, with that I’d like to thank Dr. Abeson and Ms. Wolf Branigin for sharing their time and expertise with us. Our next NCSET teleconference will be on June 29 at 2:00 Central Time. The topic will be “Youthhood: An Interactive Web-Based Curriculum Developed by NCSET.” Thank you all for joining us today and thank you Karen and Al. Bye.

**Ms. Wolf Branigin:** Thank you.

**Dr. Abeson:** Bye bye.

**Ms. Johnson:** Thank you, bye.