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For Texas Mother of Three, a Power Wheelchair Enables Her to Work, Raise a Family and Enjoy Independence: Mobility Matters

ODESSA, Texas, June 9, 2011 ----- Ten years ago, life changed dramatically for Lori Hernandez when her car swerved off the road in the small border town of Presidio, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down. She was 17, and suddenly facing an uncertain future.

“I was driving, and there was a car coming, and I think I over-corrected, lost control and rolled over,” Lori recalls.

Since the accident, what Lori has accomplished is remarkable. Every morning, she sees her husband, Edward, off to work as an equipment operator at an oil field and dresses and feeds her three young children before they leave for school or daycare. Next, Lori uses a lift to hoist herself into the driver’s seat of her pickup truck and she is off to the office, where she works as an insurance agent.

Despite her physical disability, Lori’s morning routine is much like that of other mothers who are caring for their families. But what makes this possible for her is the [power wheelchair](#) she uses. “I can do a lot more with the power wheelchair,” Lori says. “I am independent and can do things for myself and my family in our home and I can go out on my own.”

Lori says that in the first three years after the accident she used a manual wheelchair, but had to switch to a power wheelchair when she was pregnant with her oldest son who is now seven.

“When I first switched from a manual wheelchair to a power chair, I was pregnant, and it was so much easier for me,” Lori says. “I stayed with the power chair. I have three children now, and it’s impossible to hold a newborn in your arms and maneuver a manual chair. The power chair allows me to be a good mother to my children and take care of my family, like every mother wants to be able to do.”

Her other boys are age four and one. The power wheelchair, Lori says, allows her to keep up with them. “There’s no way I could keep up with them without the power wheelchair,” she says. Moreover, Lori says the power wheelchair eases her mind. “If one of my children were to fall or get hurt, I need to get to them quickly,” she says. “I’m confident that my power wheelchair will allow me to be there for them. I would be very worried if I only had a manual wheelchair.”

Lori recalls how difficult it has been when her power wheelchair breaks down and needs repairs. “I had to go back to my manual chair,” she says. “It made me feel real limited. I needed to go check the mail, but I had to rethink it because it’s a long way to push myself back and forth.”

Lori’s experience underscores the difference that a power wheelchair can make in the life of someone who is living with physical disabilities. In her case, the power wheelchair allows her not only to perform the daily necessities of life for herself – grooming, preparing food and getting to the bathroom – but also to raise a family as well as have a job. Her story is an inspirational example of a woman who, with the aid of a power wheelchair, refuses to allow her disability to restrict her home life or her activities. And she won’t let disability dampen her spirit.

Unfortunately, the federal government has implemented new policies and regulations that are making it harder for other men and women who, like Lori, live with physical disabilities to receive power wheelchairs through the Medicare program.

The new measures include a controversial [competitive bidding](#) process for power wheelchairs and most [home medical equipment](#). That flawed bidding process restricts a Medicare beneficiary’s choice of provider. Also, beneficiaries no longer have the option of purchasing a power wheelchair in the first month they receive it. Instead the government now uses a more costly 13-month rental system. While Medicare patients can still own the equipment after 13 months, providers are facing severe cash flow problems. Furthermore, providers are forced to endure extensive government audits and the guidelines for documenting a Medicare patient’s medical necessity for mobility assistance remain inconsistent and confusing. Because of these significant factors, home medical equipment providers from coast to coast are reporting consequences ranging from layoffs to no longer offering power wheelchairs or going out of business.

Advocates for older Americans and people living with disabilities, as well as providers of home medical equipment, are concerned about the impact that the changes are having in communities across the country.

“We have already turned patients away,” says one North Carolina provider who responded to a survey from the [American Association for Homecare](#). “I don’t even know where to send them. We are not physically in a competitive bidding area, but most providers around us stopped (providing power wheelchairs) last year due to the significant documentation requirements. I guess they saw the writing on the wall. One lady I spoke with had already called four companies and was still searching. Let’s hope that she can find a reputable company before she falls and requires a hospital stay.”

Lori hopes the new restrictions won’t affect her efforts to replace her power wheelchair.

“It’s too bad the government is making it harder,” she says, noting that a combination of her husband’s insurance and government health programs have paid for her previous power wheelchairs as her husband has switched jobs and has occasionally been out of work.

But now it’s time for a replacement [power wheelchair](#). She hopes Medicare will provide it. “I recently started the paperwork for a new power chair,” Lori says. “I’ve had this one for five years, and it’s so beat up and worn out. It looks like I’ve had it for 20 years. I have used it every day for 12

to 15 hours a day. It has a lot of wear and tear on it, and I think five years is a long time to wait for a new one for people who have to stay in them all day long.

“I got a six-page pamphlet from my doctor to fill out explaining why I need a power chair. The person from the power wheelchair store said it’s really hard to get power wheelchairs through Medicare, but I will try my best. My heart sank because I thought, ‘Oh my God, what would I do without my power wheelchair?’ It’s my other half. I don’t know what I would do!”

Mobility Matters is published periodically by the American Association for Homecare to inform policymakers and consumers about Medicare’s power mobility benefit and the need to sustain it. To learn more about the Medicare power mobility benefit, go to www.aahomecare.org/mobility. The American Association for Homecare represents durable medical equipment providers, manufacturers, and others in the homecare community who serve the medical needs of millions of Americans who require oxygen equipment and therapy, mobility assistive technologies, medical supplies, inhalation drug therapy, and other medical equipment and services in their homes. Visit www.aahomecare.org/athome.