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The wheel deal:

Volunteers refurbish and manufacture wheelchairs for global distribution

Unleashing potential in people. It's a fitting mission for Hope Haven, an organization founded in 1964 in response to the needs of eleven children who were hard of hearing. Today, Hope Haven offers opportunities to nurture independence through diverse residential, educational, and work services. The organization serves the needs of more than 1,300 children and adults, most with disabilities, throughout 69 counties in Iowa and Minnesota.

WHEELCHAIR REPAIR AND MANUFACTURE MAKE AN INTERNATIONAL IMPACT

Since 1994, Hope Haven has coordinated an international program that refurbishes and redistributes wheelchairs. Used and damaged wheelchairs are received from across the United States and Canada and sent to one of Hope Haven's ten refurbishing centers.

Each wheelchair refurbishing center specializes in a particular brand or type of wheelchair. Volunteers repair the wheelchairs, and then the wheelchairs are distributed, at no charge, to recipients around the world. More than 90,000 wheelchairs have been restored and given to persons in more than 100 countries.

In addition to refurbishing used wheelchairs, Hope Haven manufactures two types of pediatric wheelchairs. Volunteers, primarily retired persons, at an Iowa shop and paid prison inmates at the South Dakota State Penitentiary make the new chairs.

Many CARF-accredited service providers benefit from persons served, staff members, governance, donors, and volunteers working together to achieve success. This article highlights one organization's ambitious project to help provide mobility and independence to persons with disabilities. The organization coordinates a variety of human resources, primarily volunteers, to refurbish, manufacture, and distribute wheelchairs.

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Hope Haven volunteers fit a man in Laos for a refurbished wheelchair. The organization coordinates an international program that refurbishes and redistributes wheelchairs.

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Three years ago, Hope Haven expanded the program to a manufacturing plant in Guatemala that is staffed by persons with disabilities who are paid to assemble the wheelchairs. These new chairs, like the refurbished ones, are given away.

Only qualified teams of physical therapists, occupational therapists, and other medical personnel distribute the new and refurbished wheelchairs. The expertise of these rehabilitation professionals—who are volunteers—enables the best match between the equipment and the recipients. Each wheelchair is custom fit for the user.

RECIPIENTS AND GIVERS ALIKE BENEFIT FROM THE WHEELCHAIR PROGRAM

Often, the persons who receive the wheelchairs would not have been able to afford a wheelchair on their own. A wheelchair gives them mobility that otherwise might not have been available.

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WHAT THE CARF STANDARDS SAY ABOUT VOLUNTEERS

The vital role that volunteers play in many CARF-accredited organizations is interwoven throughout the CARF standards. The standards are designed to ensure that volunteers receive the same dignity and respect as the organization's persons served and personnel.

For organizations that use volunteers or students, a standard in the Human Resources section of the ASPIRE to Excellence[®] standards (applied across all CARF accreditation areas) specifically addresses:

- Signed agreements.
- Identification of duties, responsibilities, and supervision.
- Orientation.
- Training.
- Assessment of performance.
- Policies and written procedures for dismissal.
- Confidentiality policies.
- Background checks, when required.

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But the recipients of wheelchairs are not the only beneficiaries of the wheelchair program. The volunteers who refurbish or manufacture the wheelchairs say they have something useful to do with their time and the work truly makes a difference in the community. Even the prison inmates say they look forward to coming to work, and many say manufacturing wheelchairs for others is one of the few positive things in their lives. The professional rehabilitation specialists are so eager to participate in the program that they pay their own way to be part of the distribution process.

Finally, the public benefits from the participation of persons with disabilities who receive wheelchairs. The mobility enables them to participate in the community in ways that they choose.

In its most recent CARF survey report, Hope Haven received commendation for its corporate and civic responsibility.

Learn more about the wheelchair program at Hope Haven's websites at www.hopehaven.org and www.hopehaveninternational.org.

Top right: A physical therapist fits a boy for a Hope Haven wheelchair in Vietnam.

Bottom right: Carl Mulder volunteers at a Hope Haven wheelchair refurbishing center in Iowa.



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A child in Vietnam smiles in her KidChair. Hope Haven manufactures two types of pediatric wheelchairs.

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