

Rory Cooper and Team Create Global Network to Distribute Wheelchairs

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Rory Cooper has spent years traveling the globe, using both his academic expertise and spirit of compassion to help improve the lives of people with disabilities.



Rory Cooper

On many trips he sees people, some living in remote areas and difficult conditions, who would benefit dramatically from a device that is plentiful in wealthier nations: a wheelchair.

“There is a need for about 70 million wheelchairs in the world, and there are only about 20 million people in the world who have access to wheelchairs,” said Cooper, director of the University of Pittsburgh’s Human Engineering Research Laboratories and a wheelchair user himself. “Bottom line, there aren’t enough wheelchairs produced in the world, they don’t last long enough, and many of the wheelchairs produced are used in ‘high-resource’ countries.”

But Cooper and his Pitt colleagues hope to change that imbalance with the help of a two-year, \$2.3 million grant they received to develop an organization called the International Society of Wheelchair Professionals.

Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the effort began last month. It is being administered by faculty in Pitt’s Department of Rehabilitation Science and Technology. Cooper, who is also the FISA/Paralyzed Veterans of America Endowed Chair and Distinguished Professor in Pitt’s School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, and Jon

Pearlman, associate director of engineering at Pitt's Human Engineering Research Laboratories, are codirectors of the new initiative.

Pitt faculty will develop the global network by reaching out to experts, Pitt alumni, and other associates for collaboration in such countries as China, Japan, Korea, India, Brazil, Mexico, and Germany. USAID will provide guidance.

The global network is seeking to build affiliations that will ensure equipment goes to the right people and organizations; provide a higher level of equipment standardization, education, and oversight; and teach wheelchair repair.

Several factors helped Pitt land the grant, Cooper said.

"I think our strength was the unique approach that we proposed: to form a professional society that would include regions around the world. I believe the reach of Pitt's alumni network and the University's research strength were also important contributors."

Among the initial tasks are the development of international wheelchair standards; the dissemination of wheelchair technology and repair to service providers around the world; and the launching of an advocacy and outreach campaign to recruit affiliates on every continent.

"USAID works to spread the mission of the United States internationally," Pearlman said. "In this case, it's a grant to the University of Pittsburgh, but we've been charged with building a network and the capacity to professionalize services around the world to contribute to this common goal: improving the lives of wheelchair users."

Cooper said of the 20 million people across the globe who have access to a wheelchair, about 8 million of them live in North America and Europe.

About six million wheelchairs are produced annually, Cooper said, and they last an average of three years. The supply imbalance leaves a large number of people with either no access to a wheelchair at all—or with access to a chair that needs a service or repair that no one is qualified to do.

"There is a critical need for more wheelchairs in more countries, and a need to increase the number of wheelchair professionals and their level of training," Cooper said.

Cooper and Pearlman are hopeful that the International Society of Wheelchair Professionals can be a big step toward reversing the supply and educational training imbalances.