

Disabled say UIS difficult to get around

*Some are calling in lawyers;
administration calls in experts*

By **BRUCE RUSHTON**
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To know Katelyn Murray's experience is to understand her persistence.

During her first semester at the University of Illinois at Springfield, Murray, a quadriplegic, could not get to her room without calling someone for help or waiting for a passer-by to open a locked entrance to her dorm's residential area.

"Like a dog sitting at the back door waiting to get in — that's how I felt the entire semester," Murray said.

Murray says she couldn't shower without help during her first year at UIS because her wheelchair wouldn't fit inside a shower measuring 28 inches by 32 inches, short of standards that say showers for wheelchair users should measure at least three feet square.

The university was told that grab rails were required in showers for the disabled in the summer of 2005 but didn't install them until two years later.

UIS administrators deny that the school falls short in its treatment of disabled students.

"We are absolutely and unequivocally committed to meeting the needs of our students with disabilities," says L. Christopher Miller,

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vice chancellor for student affairs and administrative services. "We go beyond the Americans With Disabilities Act when it comes to accommodation. It's part of our value system on this campus, and it's true. We are responsive."

But administrators, under fire from Murray and other critics, have called experts from the Champaign-Urbana campus to assess how UIS is meeting the needs of the disabled. Murray has called a lawyer.

Problems widespread, disabled students say

Problems on campus go beyond inaccessible dorms, according to Murray and her allies.

■ Karla Carwile, a disabilities specialist who had pushed for door openers and other improvements for disabled students, was replaced

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Katelyn Murray brushes her teeth in her dormitory bathroom, a tight space for her wheelchair.

Suzanne Schmid/SJ-R

UIS

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in August. She remains on the payroll but has hired a lawyer and filed a complaint with the state Department of Human Rights. Mary Lee Leahy, Carwile's attorney, declined comment on her status, as did university officials.

■ A faculty committee on disabilities blasted school administrators in an October report that said students weren't getting help they needed and were unsure whom to contact if they needed assistance.

"(Committee) members suggested that more proactive efforts should be made by ODS (the campus Office of Disabilities Services) and the university to assist students with disabilities," wrote committee members. "Constructive communication between ODS and the campus community is greatly needed."

Miller dismisses the report. "I think there was a difference of opinion and that people didn't know all the facts," Miller said.

■ The Office of Disabilities Services has been slow to tell teachers what disabled students need in classrooms. Letters explaining needs such as extra time to complete assignments and sign-language interpreters were late by as much as three weeks last fall, according to the faculty committee's report. Miller and other university officials say they received eight complaints, six from students and two from faculty. In at least four cases, they blame students for not submitting paperwork early enough.

■ Murray and others say the university's new \$16 million gymnasium isn't as accessible as it should be. They say administrators last year ignored their recommendation for \$16,400 worth of exercise equipment, most of which could also have been used by people without disabilities.

Miller says students can still exercise with other equipment and help from personal trainers.

Disabled students say the new gym is better than the old one. But there are still problems.

Larry Porter, a quadriplegic who plays wheelchair rugby and finished the Boston Marathon this year in slightly more than 31/2 hours, points to weightlifting benches that are barely a foot wide. A wheelchair user needs a bench a bit wider than his torso so he can get himself back into his chair by pushing off from the bench with his

hands on either side of his body.

The gym opened in September. A ramp allowing wheelchair users to access racquetball courts arrived last Wednesday. Murray, who has trouble gripping things, said she can't use some weight-lifting equipment because there are no straps that would allow her to attach handles to her wrists.

"We are still in the equipment purchasing mode," Miller said.

UIS seeking outside assessment

As recently as last week, experts from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign were on campus assessing how UIS is addressing disability issues. Miller said UIS asked for an outside opinion last year. He said he didn't know when the assessment would conclude or if a report would be issued.

"I don't know if there's going to be a report or just a meeting," Miller said. "It's probably going to be an ongoing thing," he said.

Murray said she is talking to a lawyer with Equip for Equality, a non-profit advocacy group for the disabled.

"We know there are issues out there with compliance — big-time issues," says Barry Lowy, an Equip for Equality attorney who has examined blueprints for Murray's dorm, which opened in 2001. "All I want them to do is understand they have problems and they need to fix them. I think there's some recognition on their part now that they have some concerns."

Last spring, Murray and fellow student James Lyon, who also uses a wheelchair, began gathering signatures on a petition to administrators stating that the needs of the disabled weren't being met and demanding that the university get accessible gym equipment. The gym issue was especially important to Murray after she suffered a potentially deadly blood clot during her first semester at UIS. Exercise helps prevent quadriplegics from developing blood clots that can lodge in vital organs, shutting them down.

The old UIS gym, since replaced by the new recreation center, had no equipment accessible to Murray. Before suffering her blood clot, Murray offered to bring her own equipment from home, but she says university administrators refused the request because of liability concerns.

Ringle says that wasn't the reason.

"It should be our responsibility to



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Suzanne Schmid/The State Journal-Register

English professor Curtis Meyer heads to his office in University Hall. When the fire alarm went off, he hadn't been told about call buttons in stairwells that would have summoned campus police to help him get out.

provide exercise equipment for her," Ringle said.

Ringle said the university found equipment, but it took about three months for the supplier to deliver. In retrospect, he said, allowing Murray to use her own gear on an interim basis would have been a good idea.

U of I president promises 'best possible experience'

B. Joseph White, president of the University of Illinois system, did better than sign a petition demanding exercise equipment when Murray and Lyon approached him last spring. He wrote out a pledge, promising that he would send an expert from Urbana to meet with them and administrators, then make recommendations.

"We want you to have the best possible complete experience at UIS," White wrote.

However, White backed off in an e-mail sent to Lyon less than a month later. The president told Lyon that he'd spoken with UIS Chancellor Richard Ringeisen, who had assured him that campus officials had already spoken with Urbana experts about the new gym.

"He or his staff may choose to consult further with Urbana experts on the matter," White wrote.

"They may choose to involve you in such discussion. I need to leave this to the Chancellor and his staff, as you will understand."

Thomas Hardy, University of Illinois spokesman, noted that an assessment is under way now.

"It's unfortunate that it seems to have taken too long," Hardy said.

Based on the number of complaints received by the Office of Disability Services, administrators say they believe the vast majority of disabled students are satisfied. Just two of the school's 70 registered disabled students — Murray and Lyon — have made formal complaints, administrators say.

"Every single person they've wanted to speak with, they've been able to," Miller said.

That's not the point, says Curtis Meyer, an English professor who uses a wheelchair.

"What happens is, students are placated verbally," Meyer said. "They're told they'll be given certain concessions, and then they're not given concessions. I think the idea is, we'll string them along until they either graduate or quit."

Murray says administrators have been watching her, and an e-mail she obtained through the state Freedom of Information Act suggests she has a point.

In January, a resident adviser e-

mailed his supervisor when a lawyer visited Murray.

"Could you please provide more information?" the advisor's supervisor replied. "What time did this occur? Was this the same attorney who has visited previously (he would be in a wheelchair if so)? Were you asked to do anything?"

The e-mail, with a subject line reading "Important," was sent up the chain of command to Miller, who makes no apologies.

"It is appropriate for that information to be passed on," Miller said. "She's not being spied on. They're (the resident advisors) the eyes and ears of what goes on in the building."

The solution, Meyer said, lies in more communication. The university should gather a group of experts and affected parties, including civil rights attorneys, medical professionals, students and administrators from UIS and elsewhere, and hold a public panel discussion.

"I mean really communicate," Meyer said. "Really put everything on the table, and make every party responsible and accountable."

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Problems at University Hall

■ Curtis Meyer had no way of knowing the fire alarm at University Hall on April 6 wasn't the real deal.

But Meyer, an English professor with cerebral palsy, knew at least three things: He uses a wheelchair, he was on the third floor and you're not supposed to use the elevator in a burning building.

So Meyer, a martial arts enthusiast, descended three stories with hand presses, lifting his body up by pushing his hands against each stair and lowering himself down, one stair at a time.

There are call buttons in each stairwell that connect directly to campus police, but Meyer says he didn't see them. He'd never been in one of the stairwells before, he says, and no one had explained what he should do in case of emergency.

Chancellor Richard Ringeisen personally apologized to Meyer, even though administrators defend the school and point out the call buttons.

"It wasn't about anything other than one human being talking to another human being saying, 'I'm sorry this happened to you,'" says Cheryl Peck, UIS spokeswoman. "We need to find more and better ways to get (emergency) plans out."

Trial and error

■ University of Illinois at Springfield administrators point to University Hall as an example of their commitment to the disabled.

Built in 2004, the building had a flaw that came to light when a disabled person got stuck in a corridor that led from a main hallway into a restroom. There was no way for the person to get through doors leading to the bathroom or the hallway.

David Barrows, executive director of facilities and services, says the university has spent between \$30,000 and \$35,000 to install automatic openers so no one will get stuck again.

Besides showing that the university cares, the incident demonstrates that making buildings accessible for the disabled is sometimes a matter of trial and error, administrators say.

Barry Lowy, an attorney who represents the disabled, blames architects.

"Nobody ever sets out to design an accessible building," Lowy said. "It's always an after-thought."

UIS slow to act on residence hall problems

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While students struggled, the University of Illinois at Springfield dawdled in making Lincoln Residence Hall accessible to the disabled.

The university had known it had a problem at Lincoln since the summer of 2005, when disabled high school students who attended a conference signed a petition asking that the university fix the four-year-old building.

In a letter accompanying the petition, Gerard Broeker, executive director of The Statewide Independent Living Council Of Illinois, wrote that bathrooms didn't have grab rails, getting into dorm rooms and bathrooms was difficult, and there were no fire alarms that could alert the deaf to danger.

For months, university officials exchanged letters with Broeker, insisting there were no problems. Finally, in February 2006 — after Broeker threatened legal action — the university acknowledged that improvements were needed. Problems would be fixed before summer, David Barrows, UIS director of physical planning and operations, promised in a letter to Broeker.

Seven months later, Katelyn Murray enrolled at UIS and found no grab rails in her shower and no way to get to her room without help. Her room is one of four in Lincoln that the university had designated as accessible to the disabled.

A door opener wasn't installed in Lincoln until after Dec. 1, 2006. The university didn't put in grab rails until last summer. A shower bench in Murray's bathroom that prevented her wheelchair from fitting inside wasn't taken out until September. Until then, Murray needed someone to hold her wheelchair in place so it wouldn't roll backward down a ramp and out of the shower.

Why did it take so long?

In the case of bathrooms, the university delayed spending \$4,000 to fix showers and eliminate sharp corners from countertops until it knew whether disabled students would live in Lincoln this year.

"I guess we didn't know if the residents were coming back," said John Ringle, director of housing and student life.

It took a semester to install a door opener because of problems with contractors, software and equipment, Ringle and other university officials said in interviews.

"It was disappointing," said Christopher Miller, vice chancellor for student affairs and administrative services.

E-mails from 2006 show that a door opener was ready for immediate installation in mid-September, but administrators delayed a decision, hoping they could get one for less than \$5,000. An e-mail Ringle sent to David Barrows, executive director of facilities and services, more than a month after Murray arrived on campus shows that a useable door opener wasn't a priority. Ringle e-mailed Barrows after Karla Carwile, formerly a campus disability specialist, asked why Murray still couldn't reach her room on her own.

"Frankly, this one slipped through the cracks & I didn't follow-up after my last email to you 5 weeks ago," Ringle wrote.

Administrators say they sometimes don't realize what they must do until confronted with a specific problem.

"When she (Murray) came in with the CAPS scholar program (a program for honors students), I don't think we were aware of the extent of her disability," Ringle said.

However, Barry Lowy, an attorney working on Murray's behalf, noted that Broeker had put the university on notice more than a year before Murray enrolled and that accessibility laws were passed years ago.

"These things have been in place for eons," Lowy said.

Last year, Murray asked the university to install a curtain to screen a corridor between her bedroom and the bathroom. The corridor is visible from a public hallway, and Murray said she didn't want passers-by to see her when she wheeled herself to the shower. The university refused.

For one thing, Ringle said, a curtain poses a security threat: Someone could hide behind it. For another, he said, there's no reason

that Murray can't cover herself until she gets to the bathroom.

Murray, however, says she can't disrobe the lower half of her body without lying down, and there's no room for a bed in her bathroom. In any event, a shower curtain now affords Murray the privacy she says she needs.

She had a friend install it.

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