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New adapted vehicles help program serve more consumers

Injured in an auto accident at 17 months, Joseph "Trey" Johnson is paralyzed from the chest down.

The young man, now 16, never dreamed he would be able to drive.

Then his parents learned about the adaptive driver's program at the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services' Lakeshore Rehabilitation Facility.

The Opp High School sophomore learned to drive in the program's new 2010 Dodge Grand Caravan and recently earned his Alabama driver license.

"I'm pretty excited," said Trey, who drives with a steering knob. "I'm ready to hit the road."

The Caravan is one of four new vehicles recently purchased with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, allowing the adaptive driver's program to serve people with a range of physical disabilities.

One, a 2010 Ford E250 Conversion van, has the most updated high-tech driving equipment on the market.

"This equipment makes it possible for just about anyone with a physical disability to drive," said Craig Rogers, ADRS Lakeshore's certified driving rehabilitation specialist.

Because Alabama is a rural state and many residents must drive considerable distances to work, making sure vehicles meet the needs of all types of physical disabilities is very beneficial for employment because doing so removes transportation as a barrier, Rogers said.

"This provides a level of independence that will enable more people with physical disabilities to work," he said.

A second Caravan and a Chevrolet Impala round out the new vehicles.

The Impala, the fleet's "low-tech" model, offers four basic types of hand controls and six different types of steering with aids or orthotics.

The Caravans each have a lowered floor that allows access by manual and power wheelchair. They also include removable driver and front passenger seats and feature a sure grip electronic foot accelerator, four major types of sure grip hand controls, and seven types of steering orthotics. Both have a fully automatic power door and power ramp.

The Conversion van features electronic mobility control, all options for joystick steering, and voice activation of all functions. There are also 10 different types of steering orthotics and touch screen electronic access to all major secondary functions.

Rogers said he thinks it is important that Alabama have the most up-to-date equipment for adaptive driver's vehicles.

"To my knowledge, we are the only state program in the country with its own driving program," Rogers said. "It

makes sense that we stay on the cutting edge.”