

## **National Rail Network: A Medical Lifeline**

Amtrak's long-distance trains are a vital component in this country's transportation system, but often overlooked is the fact that for an untold number of Americans with medical issues, those trains are the *only* travel option.

Perhaps a sophisticated diagnosis is needed, or a complex surgical procedure that's beyond the capabilities of a small town clinic. These patients must seek help from medical facilities in large cities, and they are transported there safely and in comfort aboard one of Amtrak's national network trains. Many other people are simply not able to fly or drive for a surprising variety of medical conditions. They, too, must rely on rail transportation.

NARP recently asked some of its members to share any of their personal circumstances in this context. What follows is a representative sample of the nearly 100 responses received.

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**Marcus Ruef** of Martinsberg, West Virginia, must travel to Chicago two to three times a month for business. He has been diagnosed with Deep Vein Thrombosis and his physician has advised him not to fly. For that reason, Mr. Ruef takes the Capitol Limited whenever possible. On some occasions, he must make the 11-hour trip by car because the train is sold out, but he says that can be impossible in the winter. He adds that many of the other regular passengers are also frustrated by the train's lack of capacity.

**Timothy Herrig** lives in Ashland, Oregon, but makes regular holiday visits to his elderly parents and his siblings in Iowa. With a severe malabsorption disorder, Tim needs constant access to restroom facilities, which makes flying essentially impossible. His only practical travel alternative is to take the Coast Starlight to Sacramento where he connects with the eastbound California Zephyr.

**Aric Spence** of Sandpoint, Idaho, was thankful for the existence of the Empire Builder when his wife needed specialized surgery that required multiple trips to Seattle. They boarded the train late at night in Sandpoint, went straight to their

sleeping compartment, got some sleep and arrived at King Street Station the next morning. From there it was a 5-minute taxi ride to the hospital complex. With the stress of the situation, driving would have been out of the question. Taking the train eliminated the need to navigate unfamiliar roads, find parking, or deal with bad weather conditions in the midst of a medical crisis.

**Raymond Parks** of Albuquerque, New Mexico, frequently rides the Southwest Chief because he was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome by the Mayo Clinic and is restricted to using surface transportation. He works for a company owned by the government and points out that in some cases, Federal Travel Regulations cite train travel as the preferred mode of transportation.

**Rachel Maines** and her husband, **Gerald Pottinger**, must travel between their home in Ithaca, New York, and hospitals in New York City. He's connected to a heart pump, which includes equipment that is bulky and heavy, so they are unable to fly. Amtrak is their only feasible alternative transportation.

**Elizabeth Blatch** and her husband of Whittemore, Michigan, take Amtrak to California every winter to avoid the cold winter weather. He has had open-heart surgery and eight stints and they have been advised that exposure to cold weather would be dangerous. Without Amtrak's long-distance trains, they would have to remain in Michigan for the winters.

**James Boardman**, who resides in Poughkeepsie, New York, is deaf and visually impaired. As a consequence, Amtrak is the only public transportation that is practical for him to use. He says he's grateful that many Amtrak routes are available to him and that the Amtrak crews are very helpful when he travels.

**Dorothy Shook** from Noblesville, Indiana, says her late husband was both legally blind and an amputee. They had to travel by train because he and his prosthesis wouldn't fit in an airline coach seat.

**Jerry Puffer** is an on-air personality for a radio station in Shelby, Montana. When he was diagnosed with bladder cancer, he was sent to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for treatment. He's been back many times since for additional treatments and surgery. He travels there aboard Amtrak's Empire

Builder because the airport nearest to his home is 100 miles away and he can't afford the inflated airfares. He says the Empire Builder has literally been a lifesaver for him and many others all across Montana and North Dakota.

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