

Wheelchair Plates

Enabling the Disabled

by Justin Mattes

Every state in the USA issues wheelchair plates, making it the most popular license plate graphic of all time.

They are considered one of the first special issue license plates ever. These pieces of tin go by many names including, wheelchair, disabled, and the less popular description, handicapped. They are easily identified by a symbol of a person seated in a wheelchair. The logo was designed almost forty years ago and today remains one of the most recognized

icons in the world. Usually you need a letter from a doctor or some other proof to obtain these plates. The plates aren't just restricted to cars; you can spot them on pickup trucks, motor homes, and even motorcycles.

Wheelchair plates are among the few that allow the vehicle to park in designated spacing and in some cases exempt them from paying parking meters. Collecting these plates takes an especially patient person because there are some many different types it can take years to complete the set.

International Symbol of Access

Who knew a sketch by a Danish design student would go on to become one of the most recognizable symbols in the world? In 1969 a competition was held to find a picture that indicates a facility is accessible to people in wheelchairs and with other physical disabilities. After some discussion the winning design was submitted by Susan Kofoed. Ms Kofoed drew a profile view of a stick figure with a tadpole's head on top of three-quarters of a body. Two of the judges suggested the addition of a head to the stick figure. The judges still weren't pleased one of the judges described it as awful even as a symbol of specific wheelchair access due to its ugliness and its strange Borg-like union of tadpole-figured man and machine. People compared it to some kind of alien anal probe. However it was the best design and the committee approved it. They then discussed a label and decided to call it the International Symbol of Access.

No Words Needed

When it is displayed on road signs and in public buildings the International Symbol of Access is traditionally featured as a white figure on a blue background. The colors are sometimes displayed in a reversed fashion, meaning a blue figure appears on a white background. Arrows can also be included under the logo to direct the person to an accessible entrance or exit into a public build-



ABOVE: The Corn State uses the wheelchair graphic—the international symbol of access—on more types of plates than any other state. Photos courtesy of the author and Mike Wiener (#1517).

ing. Interesting enough, unlike most other signs with symbols (like those found on rest room doors), signs with the International Symbol of Access logo don't have a word on the bottom of the sign. This is the standard the world has come to recognize. Over the years there have been some attempts to update the symbol, like changing the colors or have a person walking with a cane rather than sitting in a wheelchair. However the designs don't seem to convey the same message as Kofoed's original idea.



ABOVE: Placards, like this example from California, are a popular alternative to wheelchair plates; Wheelchair plates are most common in the passenger series, but non-passenger types—like this New Jersey State Government plate—are increasingly common too.



BELOW: Mike Wiener shares some wheelchair vanity examples.

Proof of Disability Required

To obtain these plates a person has to provide proof of the disability. Every state has its own laws regarding disabled license plates. In Arizona for example, the person is issued license plates so long as he can provide a valid Medical Certification signed by a doctor. Although the driver doesn't have to have the disability, just a person in the household. New Mexico has an interesting law on the books regarding wheelchair plates. In order to qualify the person must have lost a limb or use of a limb above the wrist or ankle. If the driver wishes to transfer the plate to a new vehicle, he is exempt from paying the motor vehicle excise tax. Some towns in New Jersey allow vehicles with disabled plates to park in meter areas free of charge.



person has injured him or herself and need the disabled parking is needed until he or she recuperates from the injury. They usually expire within a month of being issued. For folks with a permanent disability, like myself, the states issue a blue placard that has to be renewed every couple of years. Each placard has an unique number that is entered into the state DMV computers, just like a regular license plate. Oregon is the only state in the union that currently does not issue disabled plates, only the window placards. In order to use the placards the person with the disability has to carry an id card that matches the number on the placard.

Placards, Too

Every state in the USA issues wheelchair plates; however, placards are another option besides having a permanent license plate

Collecting Wheelchair Plates

Wheelchair plates are one of the most common runs in the collecting world today,

LEFT: The International Symbol of Access, as shown on this current Arizona base, was designed in 1969 by a Danish art student; Optional plate series are often available to disabled motorists with the wheelchair symbol, as the Virginia Great Seal plate shows; While not a wheelchair plate, Tennessee was a leading innovator in recognizing motorists with disabilities. This 1959 handicapped veteran issue is white on red and blue.

More Than Just Passenger Issues

Disabled license plates aren't just restricted to passenger cars. The International Symbol of Access has been spotted on all kinds of vehicles. States that issue combination truck plates, like Connecticut for example. A big farming state like Wisconsin has issued farm truck plates with the logo before the number. Iowa holds the distinction of having the largest variety of license plates with the wheelchair logo on them. In New York a ham radio plate was spotted with the usual symbol along with the regular antenna graphic.

There has been a push for the motor vehicle departments to make the logo available on optional plates so drivers with disabilities have the ability to express themselves just like every other motorist on the road.

Disabled Cycle Riders

States across the country from Arizona to

attached to the vehicle. These special signs hang from the vehicle's rear view mirror and are issued to the person, not to the vehicle itself. So if the person uses another vehicle he or she can just transfer the placard from one vehicle to another easily, especially now that leasing cars instead of buying them has become the new trend. This is useful for people like myself who can't drive an automobile, I can allow my friends to not have to worried about finding a close parking space because I have my placard with me. By having window placard it allows the person to purchase specialty plates, like the New Jersey Meadowlands license plate without having to sacrifice the ability the park in spaces reserved for people with disabilities.

Placard Types

They come in two different colors, red and blue, and are also available through the DMV. The red placards are issued temporarily if the

although the run is far from easy to complete. Among the hardest to get are Washington DC, Oklahoma and of course Oregon. When I started on my own walking around age three my parents decided to apply for a placard to gain access to closer parking so I wouldn't have far to walk. Then they bought a new car and decided to obtain license plates because the placard show signs of aging. We have since gone back to using a placard because they are a little more durable now and ideal for folks who lease cars. Years later when I got into collecting plates, I found our old plates on a shelf in the garage, my father never can throw anything away! That was in 1994, eleven years later I have thirty-one plates in my collection. 🚗

A very special thanks to my mother, for her help and support in preparing this article. Thanks also to Mike Wiener for his photo contributions.



ABOVE: The wheelchair symbol is universal but not exact, as the three design variations in these wheelchair vanities illustrate. In particular, Idaho has the most extreme variation.