The nature of the care giving environment is another major factor in determining the most appropriate and safe bathing solution. It can safely been said that most people, disabled or not, would prefer to remain in their own home setting rather than go to an institution to meet their daily living requirements. As the “baby boomer” generation ages, many are currently either caring for their elderly parents and trying to keep them from being placed in nursing homes, or they may be facing nursing home care for themselves when they do not have the availability of a care giver or an appropriate care environment. Two story houses, with a shower upstairs, have driven many elderly individuals to either sell their homes or to have to move to a nursing home. A mobile home, too, can present nearly unsolvable challenges for safe bathing care, or for re-model.

Unfortunately, for many individuals, sponge bathing has been the only real alternative. And ask any physician or caregiver who sees the skin of an individual who has only had sponge baths. There will be skin breakdown, lesions, irritation, infections, and oftentimes odor. Sponge bathing is simply not a good alternative.

Home ownership, or the ability to do modifications, has oftentimes determined whether or not an individual with a disability could have the appropriate care environment and could have an alternative to sponge bathing. For untold hundreds of thousands of individuals with disabilities who live in apartments, rental homes, or even just in the home of a family member, the option to do any re-modeling for accessibility is precluded. And, the simple facts of the cost of a re-model and the impact on the resultant home value have kept even home owners from doing the full accessibility re-modeling necessary for safe bathing. Portable wheelchair showers do, though, now offer a solution to even the most difficult situation, and they require no re-modeling or huge expense.

With these as just some of the issues faced by all types and levels of individuals with disabilities, the HME/DME industry has always been challenged to determine the best solution for each individual and situation.
To review some of the solutions, it is critical to keep in mind the issues listed above. No one solution is going to be perfect for every situation, but by working with the occupational or physical therapists and the family, it is now possible to find a safe, effective bathing solution for nearly every individual with a disability, home owner or not. Sponge bathing can truly be an option of the past.

To quickly review the alternatives now available, the industry now offers safety bars, for the minimally disabled, but physically unstable individual. There are bathtub modifiers where an individual can be moved onto a bench, then slid into the tub. There are walk-in bathtubs for those who can still stand and walk for short periods of time. There are lifts and transfer devices which can be used to transfer a person into a tub or shower. All of these do require some ability for the individual to either be able to move on their own, or to use a transfer device. The portable wheelchair shower, introduced to the market about three years ago, is available to address the needs of individuals who may or may not be able to safely transfer to a traditional facility. Portable showers have the advantage of requiring no modifications to the home, are lightweight, fold up for storage, and can be used by any individual in a wheelchair, in a sling, on a gurney, or in a reclining shower chair without requiring lifting or transferring. And, there is of course, the option to re-model for those who can, and who do not object to the cost or to the potential for lowering of house value when an accessibility re-model is done.

Finally, bathing safety is not only an “at-home” issue. Many seniors and individuals with all types of disabilities still want to be active. Travel and travel accommodations are an issue which HME/DME dealers have had limited opportunities to address, but with options such as the portable wheelchair shower in a travel case and portable, fold up travel shower chairs, this life benefit to clients can also be a business benefit to the HME/DME. Bathing safety and enhanced quality of life for individuals with disabilities is a nice advantage to offer, especially when enhanced profitability is part of that solution.