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NEW YORK ASSOCIATION ON INDEPENDENT LIVING

United Spinal Association

NYSILC
New York State Independent Living Council, Inc.
"Empowering New Yorkers with disabilities"

Taxis For All Campaign

December 13, 2016

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor, State of New York
Executive Chambers, Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

As advocates for people with disabilities in all corners of New York State, we are writing to urge you to make accessible transportation options for New Yorkers with disabilities a priority, especially as you and the Legislature consider authorizing rideshare services across the state. To that end, we request a meeting with you before any ridesharing proposal is introduced.

In the past few years, you and your Administration have played a prominent, positive role on accessible taxi service in New York City, which we greatly appreciate. **You now have another chance to champion accessible taxi transportation across the rest of the state.**

Our view, and the view of our members across upstate and downstate, is that any rideshare proposal must include a provision that a substantial percentage of rides offered by rideshare companies must be in wheelchair accessible vehicles before the companies are authorized to operate in a given city or region.

Ridesharing and the need for accessibility must go hand in hand with guaranteed real accessibility, not put off with a promise that it will be dealt with sometime in the future.

Need for accessible taxi service

The limited availability of accessible transportation services is a major barrier faced by individuals with disabilities throughout the state, often leading to unemployment, the inability to access medical care, lack of access to voting sites, and isolation from friends, family, and full community participation. As such, providing accessible transportation options is essential to the State's community integration obligations under Olmstead.

Survey after survey confirm this need. For example, the most recent New York State Independent Living Council Needs Assessment Report illustrates the dramatic unmet desire for adequate transportation for people for disabilities. NYSILC's executive summary notes that transportation is in the top three needs for persons with disabilities statewide and is cited as "least available" service overall.

NYSILC's report also showed that "transportation" was ranked just behind "finances" as the "greatest daily challenge" facing persons who have disabilities who want to live independently, with 43.5% rating it their greatest daily challenge. The need for transportation was uniform, whether respondents were from rural, urban or suburban areas.

Accessible service across the state

Outside New York City, there is no wheelchair accessible taxi service except in limited locations. In some communities, unreliable paratransit is the only option; in others, there is nothing. A few taxi companies, particularly in the Capital Region, have accessible vehicles, but most have none. (For many years, we have urged the legislature to pass legislation that would require taxi companies to offer accessible service.)

In New York City, there has been substantial progress. Your role in achieving this progress cannot be understated.

In 2011, your Administration guided negotiations that required all 2,000 new medallions to be accessible, along with 20% accessible taxis in the green cab fleet. In an accessibility report you also required, the City of New York later promised to bring the green taxi fleet to 50% accessibility by 2024.

At the same time, the State created a tax credit to assist taxi providers to purchase accessible vehicles, or to modify vehicles to make them wheelchair accessible.

Two years later, these steps paved the way to the City of New York's settlement with the Taxis For All Campaign to require 50% accessibility in its yellow taxi fleet – a landmark agreement that would not have been possible without your original action.

Unfortunately, the progress in New York City has been slowed dramatically due to Uber's presence. Since the Taxis For All Campaign's agreement in 2013, Uber and other rideshare operators have competed with yellow taxis for the same riders, but with none of the rules imposed on yellow taxis, including the 50% accessibility requirement. Yellow taxis have lost as much as 30% of their business, and the City did not sell 1,650 of the new accessible medallions. Meanwhile, Uber operated not one accessible vehicle in New York City out of 42,424 vehicles in all until recently. (The company now says it has 50 accessible vehicles on city streets.)

In our meetings with Uber, the company's representatives have told us they have no plans to offer accessible service in upstate locations.

Potential for progress

If made to include accessible vehicles, Uber could potentially help expand transportation options for many people with disabilities. However, without a mandate requiring rideshare companies to make their fleets as accessible as possible and to guarantee true equivalent service for persons with disabilities, we will be stuck where we have been for decades – with no or little accessible transportation for tens of thousands of New Yorkers. In fact, a rideshare bill without accessibility requirements could potentially make the situation worse by putting what accessible taxi service that does exist upstate out of business.

We know your Administration is eager to authorize insurance coverage legislation that would effectively allow rideshare companies to operate statewide. But the State should not and cannot allow a new business to operate throughout New York that refuses to serve a segment of the population and in fact discriminates against tens of thousands of New Yorkers.

We would very much like the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this urgent matter further. Please contact Meghan Parker at MParker@ilny.org and 518-465-4650 to set up a meeting.

Yours truly,

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