

For the Disabled Community, the Better Bus Act is Revolutionary

Vehicles illegally parked at bus stops prevent Marylanders with disabilities from safely accessing transit buses, keeping us from reaching jobs, schools, healthcare appointments and more on time – if at all. This is a major problem that has gone unrecognized for a long time – but help is finally on the way thanks to Del. Robbyn Lewis and Sen. Arianna Kelly.

To combat this problem, last year WMATA launched its Clear Lanes program to enforce illegal parking at bus stops with bus-mounted cameras. However, this program operates only in Washington, DC and must be turned off when a MetroBus goes into Maryland because there is no law allowing such critical enforcement there yet.

Across Maryland, blocked bus stops are an everyday problem. When street parking is difficult, many are tempted to park at a bus stop. It might seem harmless, but it's not: the consequences of this illegal parking for people with disabilities are dire.

The Better Bus Service Act of 2024, introduced by Del. Lewis and Senator Kelly would reduce illegal parking at bus stops by enabling transit agencies operating in Maryland to enforce these impediments to safe and reliable transit service with cameras mounted on buses. This bill is essential to improving safety and transportation access for Marylanders with disabilities.

There is a reason buses are designed to pull parallel and even to a bus stop curb – to make boarding and exiting the bus safer and prevent riders from having to step down into an active road, which is critically important for blind and low vision people. A bus stop is a physical feature, so a blind or low vision rider can independently and safely locate the bus stop using a long white cane, guide dog or other technique. Blind and low vision riders depend on the audible bus announcements to identify the bus number, route, and even the destination, as most cannot see the signs on the bus. But if the bus stop is blocked, the bus can't pull up where a blind or low vision rider is waiting. The rider may not know the bus is nearby, causing the rider to miss the bus, which means they are late or miss their appointments or work. Many individuals on dialysis take the bus to their appointments, and if they miss the bus because the bus stop is blocked, they could literally die.

For people using wheelchairs and other mobility devices, blocked bus stops can make it impossible for wheelchair ramps to safely reach the curb, and those riders could be prevented from boarding or exiting at their stop. Bus stops are specifically designed to have enough clearance from the bus door to the end of the ramp without obstructions. But if the bus stops somewhere other than at the bus stop, then individuals using mobility devices have to rush to get to where the bus has stopped, often through obstacles not conducive to those using wheelchairs and other mobility aids, like tree roots and stoops. The bus ramp may also not have sufficient clearance for the rider to get on the bus safely if the bus has to stop somewhere other than the designated bus stop.

In a recent study, Philadelphia showed that this is an urgent issue. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) found that on an average weekday, over half of bus stops on two key routes were blocked at least once.

Some bus stops were blocked up to 30 percent of the time – meaning that 30 percent of the time, a disabled person may not be able to safely board or exit the bus. [This recent video from Liberty Resources](#), the Center for Independent Living in Philadelphia, highlights the severe consequences of blocked bus stops for people with disabilities.

This is a crisis in Maryland too. And it is unacceptable. The illegal parking status quo makes our streets more dangerous not just for people with disabilities, older Marylanders and bus riders – but everyone. A blocked bus can delay traffic when it can't pull into a stop, and unloading passengers in the street creates risks for everyone who utilizes the roadway.

In addition to Washington, DC, New York City Transit has been using this technology to combat bus lane violations for years. The camera system forwards video evidence for parking authority officers to determine if a violation occurred.

And it is a proven method of reducing dangerous parking violations. In New York City, 86 percent of drivers who receive a ticket for parking in a bus lane never commit a second offense.

By reducing illegal parking at bus stops, camera-assisted transit zone enforcement will significantly improve safety for transit riders with disabilities. According to a study by the University of Louisville, boarding and exiting is the most dangerous part of the bus journey for wheelchair users. Keeping bus stops clear for buses will go a long way towards removing the danger.

The Maryland legislature must immediately pass this legislation and bring this much-needed technology to the Free State. It's time we put safety and accessibility first.

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