

Subject: Opposition to HB1447 Motor Vehicles – Autonomous Vehicles – Standards Requirements, and Prohibited Acts

Date: March 7, 2024

From: National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

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To: House Energy and Environment Committee

My name is **Ronza Othman**, and I serve as the President of the **National Federation of the Blind of Maryland**. Our organization is committed to advancing the lives of blind individuals across the United States. One critical aspect of our mission is safeguarding the civil rights of blind people.

Today, I stand before you to advocate for our rights. **Level IV highly autonomous vehicle technology** has already been deployed in cities such as San Francisco and Phoenix, and it will soon be available in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Peninsula, Houston, and Austin, Texas. As a blind woman, I am excited about the possibilities this technology offers. Imagine me using my iPhone to hail a fully autonomous vehicle—one that operates without a licensed driver or any other human presence in the passenger compartment. This vehicle would safely transport me to my desired destination. In fact, I could fly from BWI to Phoenix or San Francisco today and experience this groundbreaking technology firsthand.

However, proposed legislation that prohibits autonomous vehicle use on our highways and mandates licensed drivers would hinder our progress. It would lock the door to fully realizing the dreams of blind individuals like myself. If this law passes, we will be denied the same freedom of movement which is a right for every licensed driver in Maryland.

We urge you to do the right thing. Let us protect the rights of the **111,500 people** in our state who report having a vision disability. As an affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind, we firmly believe in the promise of autonomous vehicle technology. In November 2023, we passed a resolution emphasizing our commitment to encouraging the Maryland General Assembly to enact equitable legislation in this domain.

I have included an excerpt of that resolution below for your review:

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland assembled this eleventh day of November, 2023,

that we urge the Maryland General Assembly to pass legislation making it possible for autonomous vehicle manufacturers to deploy and test autonomous vehicle rideshare service in Maryland; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we urge Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and other jurisdictions to create policies that would incentivize autonomous vehicle rideshare companies to operate in their jurisdictions; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we urge the leading autonomous vehicle manufacturers to start investigating opportunities for deploying and testing commercial autonomous vehicle rideshare service in Maryland.

Why Is a Licensed Driver in a Highly Autonomous vehicle an Issue?

The presence of a licensed driver in a highly autonomous vehicle gives rise to several critical problems:

A. Discrimination Risk:

Blind individuals currently face discrimination from rideshare companies based on various factors, including being service dog users or using a long white cane while blind. Additionally, members of marginalized and underprivileged communities encounter discriminatory practices. When a licensed driver is involved, the risk of discriminatory behavior persists, leading to the choice not to serve our community.

B. Testing and Accessibility:

Our national organization's headquarters is located in Baltimore, Maryland. We eagerly anticipate the opportunity for our members and national staff to rigorously test various aspects of autonomous vehicles. These include software applications, vehicle controls, announcements, points of interest, and scheduled drop-offs. Ensuring that these vehicles remain fully accessible to the blind population is crucial. However, having a licensed passenger onboard introduces the risk of interference with these critical testing procedures during scheduled trips.

Inaccuracies About Safety: Proponents of this bill will tell you that it is necessary to ensure safety. That is categorically wrong, as the cities where this technology has been deployed will tell you. In fact, the Federal government currently has a bill making its way through Congress to promulgate rules around the use of AV technology with an emphasis on prohibiting discrimination against blind and otherwise disabled users/operators. More, the allegations around safety are incorrect in that every accident involving an AV has been due to a standard vehicle causing that accident, e.g. a non-AV causing an accident and getting in the way of an AV which could not stop

quickly enough – just like a non-AV could not have stopped quickly enough. More, allegations that a human driver who possesses a driver’s license is needed if the car locks up to manually steer is also incorrect, as new non-AV vehicles have their steering column lock up, preventing the car from being able to be put into neutral and moved; also, doing so requires two people, and so unless the law will prohibit single individuals from operating a vehicle, this argument is ridiculous.

In Maryland, rideshare vehicles are considered commercial in nature, and so this proposed bill will also prohibit individuals with disabilities from moving about their communities, getting to the airport, and even getting to the General Assembly to engage their representatives.

As we stand at the on ramp of technological innovation, we have a unique opportunity to shape the future of transportation. The advent of highly autonomous vehicles promises newfound increased independence and mobility for blind individuals like myself. However, we must tread carefully, ensuring that our legislation reflects the principles of equity, accessibility, and fairness.

By embracing autonomous vehicle technology, we open doors that were once tightly closed. We empower blind individuals to move freely within our communities, unencumbered by the limitations of traditional transportation. Let us not allow fear or hesitation to hinder progress. Instead, let us champion legislation that paves the way for a more inclusive and accessible world—one where blind individuals can confidently hail an autonomous vehicle, knowing that it will safely transport them to their destination.

On behalf of Maryland’s blind individuals, and the over forty organizations that are part of Maryland’s Disability Coalition, implore you: vote unfavorable to this bill - Consider the dreams of the blind, the aspirations of those who seek independence, and the promise of technology that transcends barriers.