

Delegates of the Maryland General assembly,

My name is Jesse Shirek, and I work in the Advocacy and Policy Department of the National Federation of the Blind, our nation's transformative organization of blind individuals, with our headquarters located in Baltimore, Maryland. One of my key priorities is federal legislation affecting autonomous vehicles. Nationally, we are working to secure a federal framework that will establish guardrails intended to protect the public as autonomous vehicles continue to emerge as a viable transportation option. Ironically, one of the federal priorities that the National Federation of the Blind has fought to protect is the right of blind individuals to benefit from the advantages of autonomous vehicle technology. The Autonomous Vehicle Accessibility Act H.R.7126, sponsored by Congressman Greg Stanton accomplishes that very goal, by eliminating the requirement for an autonomous vehicle passenger with a disability to possess a driver's license.

When I first started working on autonomous vehicle public policy for the National Federation of the Blind, I never imagined that our collective dreams could be threatened in Maryland. What Maryland truly needs is an autonomous vehicle law that doesn't unnecessarily restrict or hinder the growth of this transformative technology. We require legislation that incentivizes and encourages rideshare companies to bring autonomous vehicle technology to Maryland, allowing our residents to benefit from society's investment in this innovative field.

Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind, eloquently stated during an address at the US Department of Transportation: "Equal access to reliable, affordable, flexible, and barrier-free transportation is one of the most significant obstacles preventing people with disabilities from fully contributing their talents and achieving full integration in our communities. The race to bring fully autonomous vehicles to America's roads presents an unprecedented opportunity to ensure equal access for people with disabilities."

Please edit and proofread this portion of my testimony to the Maryland General assembly.

The advantage to autonomous vehicle technology is that it is not dependent upon a licensed driver, and, as such, is not constrained by the same limitations as conventional rideshare service. Autonomous vehicles can operate in rural less populated areas, because access is not dependent on a rideshare driver living and working in that geographic area. In addition to circumventing transportation droughts, autonomous vehicles will be available in the middle of the night, when a licensed driver may not want to drive me to the airport. It means that autonomous vehicles will pick up pedestrians in locations in the city with higher incidence of crime. It means that a licensed driver is not present to discriminate against a person who has different a religious background, or skin color, or the fact that the person is blind and using a long white cane, or a service dog.

The National Federation of the blind works with autonomous vehicle companies to ensure that their technology is accessible to all blind people, unfortunately our national staff has very few opportunities to use and test autonomous vehicle technology. The citizens of Maryland and all Americans would benefit from increased autonomous vehicle testing by our national staff, because when you listen to the voices of diverse population you find solutions that are yet uncovered.

One example of how the incorporation of access technology has benefited other populations can be seen when you look back in time. In the 1970s and 80s talking computer software was invented to give blind people the same access to computer technology as the sighted public. Today you see smart speakers in our homes including, Amazon Alexa, Siri on Apple's HomePod, and Google Home are a few common devices that have leveraged access software and turned electronic text into spoken words. They also have leveraged speech to text technology developed to help individuals who are physically unable to type. If we bring autonomous vehicle technology to our community, we will see a level of innovation that will contribute much to our future. However, we may never be as effective if a licensed driver is required to be in the vehicle because there will never be a need for the technology to advance beyond that to full automation. Blind Marylanders will not be free to become truly independent automobile travelers.

We implore you, please do not require the placement of licensed drivers in autonomous vehicles, and please do not hinder the path of progress. Rather, open the doors to a future enriched by imagination and innovation. Thank you for considering our perspective, as we encourage legislation that fosters responsible development and deployment of autonomous vehicles in Maryland.