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MARYLAND

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Subject: SB943/HB107 Vehicle Laws – Bus Obstruction Monitoring Systems (Better Bus Service Act of 2024)

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

To: Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

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Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland urge the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee to support SB943/HB107. This bill will create a statewide bus monitoring system to keep vehicles from parking, stopping, or otherwise obstructing in bus lanes.

THE PROBLEM

Blind and low vision Marylanders rely on public transportation to get to work, medical appointments, worship services, and other places. The public transportation system in Maryland is riddled with problems, including inconsistent and late fixed route bus service. The impact of these challenges on riders is significant — from losing their jobs to missing dialysis and other critical medical appointments to missing religious services, and more. This problem is exacerbated by drivers who stop, drive, and park in bus lanes, which effectively slow down buses and block access to bus stops for those with disabilities. In addition, many with disabilities can only get on and off buses at a bus stop due to accessibility barriers that exist elsewhere, and those who drive, stop, and park in the bus lane prevent riders with disabilities from being able to access the buses on which those riders depend to move about their communities.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee must pass the Better Bus Service Act of 2024, which will implement prohibitions on driving, stopping, and parking in dedicated bus lanes state-wide as well as those who obstruct curb cuts, which those with disabilities also depend on to safely and independently move about their communities. It is particularly important that JPR protect the language in the bill concerning bus stops and curb cuts, as the House failed to do so, rendering their version of the bill no longer a disability support bill.

BACKGROUND

In 2022, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation, specific only to Baltimore City, that prohibited drivers from using dedicated bus lanes and established a bus monitoring system that captured vehicle information for drivers that violated this law. However, the current legislation expands the prohibition state-wide and clarifies which vehicles are covered. The 2022 law was intended to clear Baltimore City's dedicated bus lanes of non-bus traffic in order to make sure buses could travel without obstructions. In addition, the law decreased the number of instances when a non-authorized vehicle blocked a bus stop, resulting in passengers with disabilities being able to get on and off buses safely and accessibly. This bill was intended to deter misuse of bus lanes and improve on-time rates for Baltimore City buses while ensuring accessibility for riders with disabilities.

The problem persists state-wide however, and thus the law needs to be expanded throughout Maryland.

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. We in Maryland deserve the same safety benefits as our neighbors in DC.

CONCLUSION

To ensure passengers with disabilities throughout Maryland can get on and off buses safely and without obstruction, and to improve on-time performance of the public transportation system, the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee must vote in favor of SB943, the Better Bus Service Act of 2024 and protect bus stops and curb cuts in the bill.