

Testimony in Support of HB 1256

Presented by Christopher S. Danielsen,
President

Greater Baltimore Chapter, National
Federation of the Blind of Maryland

Before the House Environment and
Transportation Committee

Maryland General Assembly

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Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Christopher Danielsen, and I serve as president of the Greater Baltimore Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, which is made up of blind people like me from Maryland's largest city and its surroundings. I am here today to express our strong support for HB 1256, which promotes the deployment of autonomous vehicles in Maryland without a human operator holding a driver's license.

For blind people, transportation is not simply a matter of convenience, it is a fundamental issue of independence and equality. It affects our ability to obtain and hold a job, get an education, raise a family, and help in our community. There are other transportation options in Baltimore, but each of them has their limitations, which I have personally experienced and which I hear about from our members all the time. While Baltimore has public bus, light rail, and some subway service, many blind individuals cannot always reach stops or stations due to additional disabilities, not yet having training or confidence in the use of a white cane or guide dog, severe weather, and/or the deplorable condition of sidewalks and pedestrian infrastructure in the city. Any of you who have navigated a Baltimore sidewalk even with two functioning eyes wide open will know what I mean. While there are door-to-door transportation services in the city as well, they too have their drawbacks. Paratransit services such as MTA Mobility require reservations in advance, and rides are shared with other passengers. These factors limit flexibility and spontaneity in travel. For most blind people, there is currently no such thing as a "quick run" to

the store, or anywhere else for that matter. While ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft are available, they often come with an unacceptable risk of discrimination. Guide dog users frequently experience outright denial of service, as you will hear from my other colleagues, and even blind individuals using white canes are sometimes refused a ride.

Autonomous vehicles (AVs) offer a transformative alternative. Unlike human drivers, AVs do not discriminate. They also do not insist on asking us a hundred questions about our blindness when we are tired at the end of a long day and simply want a quiet ride home. They incorporate accessibility features that make them usable by blind people, such as making sounds that allow us to find them and using voice technology to describe the route they are taking. Like Marylanders who have their own cars, we can enjoy the music we prefer or have private conversations inside these vehicles or do nothing at all as we relax on the way to our destination. In short, these vehicles provide an on-demand transportation option that enhances safety, privacy, mobility, and independence. I know because I have ridden in these vehicles myself in San Francisco, where they are currently providing rides to thousands of passengers.

As to their safety, the ride was smooth and the car was going at a reasonable speed, with no sharp turns and no sudden stops. This contrasts with the white-knuckle thrill rides I have experienced at the hands of some Uber and Lyft drivers. I have no objections to thrill rides when they are at amusement parks or the Maryland State Fair, but not on my commute, thank you very much. Furthermore, I have had plenty of drivers who were far more interested in the phone or text conversation they were having than getting me to my destination efficiently and safely. AVs focus on the job at hand.

In summary, the deployment of AVs in Baltimore and throughout our state would significantly expand transportation choices for blind residents, allowing us to participate more fully in employment, education, and community life. Furthermore, they will provide a safe, private, and nondiscriminatory transportation alternative.

We urge the Committee to support HB 1256 and help advance transportation equity in Maryland. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

Christopher S. Danielsen, President

Greater Baltimore Chapter

National Federation of the Blind of Maryland