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Subject: HB 439: Autonomous Vehicle Standards

Date: February 6, 2025

From: National Federation of the Blind of Maryland
15 Charles Plaza, #3002
President@nfbmd.org

To: House Environment and Transportation Committee:

The members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland urge the House Environment and Transportation Committee to oppose HB0439. This bill prohibits the use of autonomous vehicles (AV) for heavyweight vehicles in the State of Maryland, but it also imposes very rigid and arduous reporting requirements on all autonomous vehicle entities. We oppose this legislation for two reasons. First, the nature of the reporting requirements is such that we are concerned they would discourage industry from bringing AVs to Maryland altogether, or that if they do, the costs associated with compliance would be passed onto the customer. Second, though blind people are typically currently not truck drivers in terms of careers, as the AV technology continues to evolve, we believe that we could and should have the opportunity to seek and obtain employment on the aspects of transporting freight that do not require vision. For example, as AV technology continues to evolve, the need for a human operator to actually “drive” a truck will diminish, but the need for a human to maintain custody and control of the goods being transported, to ensure proper quality controls for refrigeration and other aspects of transporting freight, and the need to provide security will remain necessary aspects. Blind people can and should be afforded the opportunity to hold those jobs, as nothing in those duties requires those tasks be performed exclusively through the use of sight.

We are empathetic to the concerns of truck drivers and their advocacy groups, and we believe that a compromise is possible. In fact, we attempted for several months in 2024 to engage with some of these advocacy groups to try to work together to find solutions with which we could both live. However, those groups refused to respond to us or even acknowledge our efforts to engage with them. Consequently, we have no choice but to oppose this legislation, as we do not believe that blind and disabled Marylanders should be shut out of access to needed options for transportation and potential careers in the goods transportation field as the technology evolves simply to appease a group that refused to work with us to find mutual solutions.

Blind and low-vision Marylanders depend on transportation options including rideshare to move about our communities, attend medical appointments, go to and from work, and so on; we do not

drive ourselves, and thus we depend on other means besides our own vehicles. Rideshare is one major method we use to travel. However, we have experienced significant discrimination when using rideshare services where there is a human operator. Our members report regular, sometimes daily, rideshare denials from individual drivers of companies like Uber and Lyft. Though these denials tend to be regular and frequent for guide dog users, they are alarmingly common for those who use a long white cane as well. Inherent in a system that depends on people is a system that is capable of discrimination. AV technology eliminates this discrimination, because an AV doesn't know or care if I have a guide dog or a long white cane, and it won't bring its preconceived notions or incorrect stereotypes when deciding whether or not to leave me standing at the curb, causing me to miss my doctor's appointment or be late to work.

The NFB has been working with the autonomous vehicle industry to ensure that AV technology is nonvisually accessible. Washington, DC, and other nearby jurisdictions have laws and regulations in place that enable their residents to use AV technology, or they are in testing phases meaning this technology will be coming to an end user soon. At present, an individual has to switch vehicles at the state line, but with Maryland, the District, and others being part of a single transportation system and community, this is frankly silly and disruptive. We believe Maryland should have the same access for AV users as nearby jurisdictions.

The reporting requirements of this bill are burdensome and unnecessary. They may deter companies from wanting to do business in Maryland altogether, or if they do, the costs of producing those reports may be passed on to the end user, who are people like me.

Consequently, we urge that, minimally, a sunset provision be incorporated in this bill should it pass so that we can have access to these sorts of jobs when the technology evolves. We also encourage removing many of the burdensome reporting requirements, though some are of course necessary. Should the Committee not wish to make these changes to the bill, we urge an unfavorable report.

For questions, please contact me at President@nfbmd.org or at 443-426-4110.