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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 give a favorable report to HB1295. This bill establishes standards for the use of fully autonomous vehicles in Maryland. This bill also ensures that the mobile application interface for such services are accessible to those with disabilities and that individuals with disabilities are able to use such AVs free from discrimination.

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 blind and disabled passengers standing at the curb, causing them to miss doctor's appointments 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. In fact, Baltimore City has begun testing autonomous vehicles so such vehicles can learn the traffic patterns and transportation culture in Baltimore.

Virginia and the District of Columbia are also working to enact legislation that would bring AV technology to those jurisdictions; if Maryland does not also do so, an individual would have to switch vehicles at the state line, but with Maryland, the District, and others being part of a single transportation system and community, this would be frankly silly and disruptive. We believe Maryland should have the same access for AV users as nearby jurisdictions.

Some may raise concerns about this technology with regard to safety. The reality is that AV technology is safer than human-operated vehicles, because an autonomous vehicle will not drive drunk, or text while driving, or fall asleep while driving, or drive while distracted.

A recent media story about an AV that got lost in an airport parking lot discounts that human operators routinely get lost in parking lots, drive the wrong-way on a one-way street, and so on. The benefit of an AV is that the monitors can get it straightened out fairly quickly, whereas human operators will continue to be lost, etc.

Another common objection relates to AV's that experience mechanical difficulty simply dying on the road with no way to move them. Modern human-operated vehicles die on the road all the time, and the controls of such vehicles these days make it so those vehicles lock up in the same way as AVs; the difference is that someone is monitoring the AV all the time and can send help right away.

Another common criticism of AVs is that individuals have been injured in collisions involving AVs. One commonly cited incident involves a child who was run over by an autonomous vehicle. What the critics conveniently leave out of the story is that a human-operated vehicle actually caused the collision, forcing the child into the pathway of the AV. No human operator would have been able to avoid that particular collision either. Moreover, these critics fail to account for the safety records and the comparably very low incidents of collisions involving AVs compared with human drivers.

Another criticism of AV technology is potential job losses for human drivers. There will always be a role for human drivers, including for those who prefer a human, for food delivery services, for functions requiring security, for medical transport, and so on. It is simply unacceptable to hold the disabled community and others hostage to an industry that has consistently failed us, particularly due to discriminatory practices and behavior. This bill is essentially about giving riders choices.

The bottom line that those who subscribe to the theory that a human is necessary to operate a vehicle are out of touch. Farm equipment, airport equipment, construction equipment, and other industries have been using AV technology for years.

For those reasons, we ask for a favorable report on HB1295. For questions, please contact me at President@nfbmd.org or at 443-426-4110.

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