

Testimony
of
United Spinal Association

Submitted by

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For the

Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Transportation and the Environment
DC Taxicab Commission Performance Oversight Hearing

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Chairperson Cheh, and other distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding the District of Columbia's Taxi Commission and efforts to increase the numbers of accessible taxis. My name is Carol Tyson. I am a Senior Policy Associate for United Spinal Association. Founded in 1946 by paralyzed veterans, United Spinal is the largest disability-led nonprofit organization serving and representing the interests of more than a million Americans living with spinal cord injuries and disorders. United Spinal has dedicated its energy, and programs to improving the quality of life for these Americans of all ages and advancing their independence. United Spinal has a long history of advocating for equal access to transportation.

In the interest of full disclosure, I currently serve as the Vice-Chair of the DC Taxi Commission's Disability Advisory Committee. The Committee was mandated by the DC Taxicab Service Improvement Act of 2012 (the DC Taxi Act) and is comprised of city agency officials, disability advocates and taxi industry representatives. This testimony reflects the views of United Spinal Association only.

As required by the DC Taxi Act, the Committee recently submitted its full report on increasing the numbers of accessible taxis in the District. The report includes: recommendations for financing, low or no-cost incentives for the city's hard working taxi drivers, and recommended plans for transforming the District's fleet to a fleet of 100% accessible taxis. The report also recommends that digital dispatch service companies be required to offer accessible taxis and sedans, and contribute to making the fleet accessible; and advocates for an accessible design standard that would allow the District to drive innovation and provide the most inclusive taxi experience for all riders. The report states, and United Spinal fully supports the belief that, access to taxi service for all people in the District is a civil right and is mandated by the DC Human Rights Act.

As you may know, the District's taxi fleet currently includes 20 wheelchair accessible taxis comprising only .3 percent of the District's fleet of more than 7,000 taxis. The accessible cabs were put into service through the rollDC pilot program, the result of a partnership between the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, Yellow and Royal Cab. United Spinal is grateful for their leadership and the service they continue to provide. The pilot program; however, is coming to an end, making renewed efforts to increase the numbers of accessible taxis in the District an imperative.

United Spinal is also grateful to the DC Taxi Commission and Chairman Linton for their commitment to increasing the numbers of accessible taxis in the District and to improving the quality of service. United Spinal commends Chairman Linton, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), and the participating taxi companies, for their efforts toward establishing a pilot program that would allow taxi companies to offer service to paratransit-certified riders; and lead to increased numbers of accessible taxis. We hope that the pilot program agreement can be made available to the public, that decision-making about the program going forward can include the disability community and be more transparent, and that that there will be plans for oversight of the program.

Currently, the DC Taxi Act requires that all taxi and sedan companies that own 20 or more cabs in their fleets acquire an increasing percentage of accessible vehicles over the next 5 years. We understand that the DC Taxi Commission has had a great many regulations to implement, but are hopeful that regulations concerning the new accessible taxi requirements are forthcoming. We also look forward to compliance with, and enforcement measures based on, the requirements that the new payment systems are accessible to people with visual impairments and other disabilities. We would like to note that the current law would only increase the numbers of accessible taxis at the end of 2018 to 234, still only 3 percent of the District's fleet. We believe the District can, and should, do better.

The DC Taxi Act requires that the Disability Advisory Committee continue to meet and provide an annual report to the Mayor and the City Council regarding the accessibility of taxi service in the District and how it can be further improved. United Spinal has been deeply honored to serve on the Committee throughout the year, and makes the following recommendation so that the Committee may remain sustainable and productive into the future.

The Committee should be supported by a separate District agency, perhaps the Office of Human Rights. We propose modest funds for staff that could ensure the Committee's continued efforts, and provide basic administrative support such as note-taking, ensuring the Committee's meetings and materials are available to the public, and provision of a consistent, accessible and centrally located meeting space.

The Committee's meetings, membership application process, and decision-making rules should be open and transparent to District residents, including DC taxi industry representatives. United Spinal suggests a structure similar to the WMATA Accessibility Advisory Committee which provides meeting times, locations, agenda items and notes on a web site, along with membership rules and vacancy announcements. United Spinal proposes that the Committee establish a transparent membership application process, and that respected, District disability advocate organizations such as the DC Center for Independent Living, the DC State Independent Living Council, Quality Trust, Project Action, and taxi representatives comprise an advisory board that would approve members.

To date, all meetings have taken place during the work day and the meetings have moved around the city. United Spinal suggests meetings take place in the same location each month, and that meetings are held in the early evening so that advocates and taxi industry representatives who may work during the day may attend and participate.

United Spinal thanks Mayor Grey, the Transportation Committee and the DC Taxi Commission for its efforts to increase the numbers of accessible taxis in the District. We are eager to continue to work in partnership with all stakeholders and will continue to advocate for a 100 percent accessible fleet that will benefit all who visit the District, and those who work and live in the District.