



August 24, 2023

Jessica Herron
Legislative Clerk
Subcommittee on Innovation, Data, and Commerce
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: National Federation of the Blind Responses to Additional Questions for the Record

Dear Ms. Herron:

We greatly appreciated the subcommittee's invitation for me to testify at the hearing entitled "Self-Driving Vehicle Legislative Framework: Enhancing Safety, Improving Lives and Mobility, and Beating China" held on July 26, 2023.

Pursuant to the Rules of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, I am attaching my answers to the additional questions for the record, in the required format.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, answer questions, and provide the perspective of the nation's blind on autonomous vehicles. If there are any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Riccobono, President
National Federation of the Blind

Attachment—Additional Questions for the Record

The Honorable Jeff Duncan

- 1. Mr. Riccobono, since the last time this committee considered comprehensive AV legislation, the use of autonomous shared use vehicles has emerged as a mobility solution for millions of Americans of all abilities. One of the draft bills under consideration today effectively bans the use case of autonomous shuttles in public transportation. If Congress bans that particular use case, are we missing a major opportunity to make public transportation more accessible?**

Yes, excluding shared shuttles would be a significant missed opportunity. We should continue to explore opportunities for increasing the prevalence and affordability of public transportation options. The testing of autonomous shuttles would encourage manufacturers to create modern solutions for the public including people with disabilities. The testing would provide blind, low-vision, and people with other disabilities the opportunity to share feedback about how our population experiences the use of autonomous mass transportation and to identify areas where changes are necessary to improve accessibility.

The Honorable Russ Fulcher

- 1. You noted in your testimony that both the Rep. Latta and Rep. Dingell bills include allowing for an “exempted class” for manufacturers if they provide “exempted components” that help blind or otherwise disabled drivers gain transportation access. Can you elaborate on how “exempted components” are used by manufacturers, and the benefits and impact they bring to blind or otherwise disabled drivers?**

Standard automobiles are required have a number of components that are used for the purpose of driving a vehicle, such as: steering wheel, turn signal and headlight levers/switches, gear selector, brake and gas pedals, and rear and side-view mirrors. These components are specifically designed to be used by the person controlling the vehicle. In level four and five highly autonomous vehicles these components are unnecessary, because there will be no mechanism for the vehicle to be operated by a human, so the manufacturer can apply for an exemption for the removal of these driving components from the passenger cabin. Any occupant of the vehicle would therefore be a passenger-operator with no control over the vehicle’s driving operations, meaning any blind, low-vision, or other person with a disability who does not currently qualify for a driver’s license would, for the first time, have the same freedom to operate a highly autonomous vehicle as any other member of our society.

- 2. Ridesharing is something that many of us have grown to love. It’s a convenient way to get across town without having to drive yourself or rely on public transportation. Mr. Riccobono, you note that blind and low-vision Americans are often denied transportation due to the discrimination of drivers can you speak more to this? How would autonomous vehicles change this?**

The blind and low-vision community love the concept of rideshare as well. However, we have found that the promise of freedom of choice in transportation has been halted by human bias. Our blind and low-vision population experiences rideshare discrimination daily. The segment of our population that is experiencing the most exclusions are blind people who choose to use guide dogs. Guide dog handlers are allowed to take their dogs anywhere that the public is allowed to travel, including a rideshare vehicle. Simultaneously, rideshare drivers view their vehicles as personal, even though they have opened their doors to the public.

Rideshare drivers frequently refuse to transport service dog users and sometimes refuse to transport blind people using white canes.

The April 20, 2023, edition of the Washington Post covered a high-profile incident illustrating the discrimination against guide dog users. United States Federal Judge David Tatel recounted the experience of being refused a ride to court by a rideshare driver simply because he was traveling with his guide dog, Vixen.

When you remove the driver from a vehicle and replace them with self-driving technology, you also remove the opportunity for discrimination to occur, because the software follows the laws and policies that have been programmed by the developer, rather than depending on the discretion of a human driver who may choose to ignore US laws and the policies implemented by a rideshare company.

The Honorable Earl L. “Buddy” Carter

- 1. AVs are being tested in 30 states; primarily in urban areas. Most of my district, Georgia’s first, consists of rural areas that must be represented during AV testing to ensure we aren’t cutting off transportation access to people who may need it. Why is it necessary for AV accessibility in rural areas, and how can we encourage testing AV systems in rural America?**

Highly autonomous vehicle technology is equally, if not more, critical in rural areas as it is in urban areas. Often people have less options for public transportation in rural areas and must travel longer distances, making it difficult to get to work, medical appointments, shopping, and recreational activities. If people are unable to access transportation in a rural area this may affect their ability to continue living in their home, limit work opportunities, or even impact their health and well-being.

At the outset it may not seem as profitable for manufacturers to operate autonomous vehicles in rural areas, so Congress may need to incentivize highly autonomous vehicle testing in sparsely populated areas of the country. In both the Rep. Latta and Rep. Dingell bills there are limitations placed on the number of exempt highly autonomous vehicles that can be manufactured each year. We suggest that Congress allow for additional exemptions of highly autonomous vehicles for the sole use of testing in rural areas. Additionally, federal grants and tax incentives may stimulate research and development for highly autonomous vehicles used in less populated areas.