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# Position Paper on Taxi and Rideshare Services

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## Background

The inability to hold a driver’s licence can be extremely limiting and isolating for some people who are blind or vision impaired. Ensuring accessibility of all forms of transport and supporting infrastructure can serve to eliminate these barriers, enabling people who are blind or vision impaired to enjoy increased mobility and participation; including increased opportunities for education and employment.

However, as it is not possible to access all areas of public life via public transportation (bus, train, tram and ferry services) alone, taxi and rideshare services (also known as Point to Point or PtP Services) have an important role to play in facilitating the independence of people who are blind or vision impaired. Indeed, in recognition of the fact that people who are blind or vision impaired typically experience much higher transport related costs, all states and territories have put in place various subsidy schemes for the use of these services.

Since the publication of BCA’s Taxi Services Policy in 2014, the arrival of Uber to Australia has led to a boom in rideshare services. While the disruption this has brought to the sector has created more opportunity for choice by consumers, and has forced improvements across traditional taxi services; the opaque business structure of many of these rideshare services has created additional barriers for accountability when people who are blind or vision impaired have negative, or discriminatory, experiences.

## Policy Issues and Solutions

### Booking Systems and Processes

It is important for PtP providers to have booking systems in place that are accessible to, and meet the needs of, passengers who are blind or vision impaired. Many bookings are now made using smartphone applications, which can provide a high level of access for people who are blind or vision impaired, with Apple and Samsung both including in-built text-to-speech software that allows a user to navigate the screen independently. While this software is usually able to integrate with applications quite seamlessly, this is dependent on third party applications being developed (and updated) in line with specific accessibility guidelines, including the World Wide Web Consortium’s ‘Web Content Accessibility Guidelines’ which have recently been updated to version 2.2.

However, there are also a number of factors that may prevent some people who are blind or vision impaired from being able to utilise computer or smartphone technology – such as age, newly acquired vision loss or lack of access to the appropriate technology due to it being cost prohibitive. Even in instances where an individual does have access to the appropriate software, if they are not a proficient user the booking process may take significantly longer than it would for someone who is sighted. Given these factors, Blind Citizens Australia stresses the importance of taxi services retaining call centre staff to be available 24 hours to assist with bookings, regardless of the increase in the uptake of internet and smartphone technologies. It is also important that call centre staff, whether physically located in Australia or offshored, are given detailed training and support to ensure they are familiar with the areas they service, and the types of assistance that might be required for a passenger who is blind or vision impaired.

It is also important that drivers are aware they may need to alert the passenger to their arrival. A passenger who is blind or vision impaired may not be able to see or hear the vehicle, or differentiate between a PtP vehicle and another car. This is becoming increasingly important with the rise in the uptake of hybrid and electric vehicles, which often emit little or no noise and can pose a risk to the safety of a person who is blind or vision impaired; and with rideshare services, which are often unmarked.

Similarly, drivers must be made aware of their responsibilities to assist a passenger who is blind or vision impaired when required - whether parking directly outside the destination when safe, confirming which side of the road they are parked, providing any wayfinding information the passenger will find useful, etc. While a driver should never make assumptions about the needs of passengers who are blind or vision impaired, a polite enquiry allows the passenger to articulate any special requirements they have as a result of their vision impairment. This can be something as simple as asking the passenger “Is there anything I can do to support your journey today?”.

### Service Refusals of Passengers with Dog Guides

People who are blind or vision impaired are still frequently denied access to taxi and rideshare services when seeking to travel with their dog guide. Even when informed that they are in breach of Section 24 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), some drivers continue to deny service to people with dog guides. Some taxi and rideshare drivers have gone so far as to lock their doors to deny access to dog guides, including an incident witnessed by BCA staff.

In consultations sessions, and through calls taken by BCA’s Advocacy Team, we have heard that several BCA members with a dog guide now only travel with Uber Pets – the surcharge of $6-7 being considered less bothersome than the risk of being argued with or left stranded on the roadside. Others rely on support worker funding to secure reliable transport or have personal contacts with specific taxi drivers, limiting their options and sometimes causing delays. Fear of not being able to return home and dependence on friends and family for transportation are also common concerns. Furthermore, many face reduced access to available taxis and have had to seek alternative means of transportation. BCA’s position is clear: people who are blind or vision impaired should not have to pay more money, just to avoid illegal discrimination.

Additional education for taxi and rideshare providers and drivers on the rights of passengers with disability is needed, but will not be a panacea. One action that can be taken to help reduce the incidence of dog guide refusals is to amend the Australian Disability Standards in Accessible Transport (DSAPT) to explicitly include both taxi providers and rideshare services, and to make both companies and drivers responsible for complying with the Standards. Stronger enforcement is also essential, and we encourage state and territory governments across Australia to follow the lead taken by the NSW Government in increasing the fines for refusals from $300 to $1000 (or a maximum court penalty of $3,300)[[1]](#footnote-2).

### Vehicle Design and Fare Information

The ability to be able to access and identify a taxi’s vehicle identification number is extremely important. The DSAPT Standards should be amended to require all taxi and rideshare providers to affix identifying information on both braille and tactile lettering decals to their vehicle door exteriors and within a QR code sticker on the rear windscreen. Polycarbonate tactile decals are cost effective, lightweight, heavy duty and easy to install. They should incorporate the name of the company and the driver and the licence plate details. The decals should be affixed to the exterior of the passenger doors forward of the handles. Rideshare providers typically have their brand name advertised on a sticker affixed to the rear windscreen of the vehicle. Incorporating a QR code – along with clear tactile markings indicating where to scan – which provides a link to the company name, driver’s name, and licence plate details would be straightforward. Upon passenger request, the driver must be able to provide the same information – the company and driver’s names and licence plate details – in standard print format, large print and braille.

Similarly, it is a customer’s right to know how much they are required to pay at the completion of a journey, as well as to be able to monitor the fare as it accumulates during transit. At present, however, most taxi meters used in Australia only display a visual read out and do not provide auditory information for the benefit of passengers who are blind or vision impaired, or with other print related disabilities. Government, in collaboration with taxi owners and operators must take action to mandate the introduction of accessible talking fare meters into all taxi vehicles.

### Taxi Subsidy Schemes

While all jurisdictions across Australia currently recognise the importance of subsidised PtP travel for people who are blind or vision impaired, there remain inconsistencies and variations in how these subsidies have been implemented by various state and territory governments. Some states include journeys made using Uber and other rideshare providers in the subsidy programs, while others limit its use purely to registered taxis. The various schemes also have differences in the ‘cap’ (how much money) and ‘mileage’ (the distance travelled) that is allowable under the subsidy. Most frustrating for people who are blind or vision impaired, especially for those who travel frequently for work, or who live in ‘Border Towns’ (e.g. Albury/Wodonga, Tweed Heads/ Coolangatta, etc) is the difficulty in getting a subsidy pass in one jurisdiction recognised in another.

BCA calls on all State and Territory Governments to work together to establish a nationally consistent framework for these subsidies, which allows for reciprocal recognition across state borders. The nationally consistent subsidy scheme should be expanded (where it hasn’t already) to include rideshare services, and should be available for all people who are blind or vision impaired, regardless of whether they access the NDIS.

### Complaints and Resolutions

It is important that when things go wrong, passengers have a simple, and meaningful way to share their experience and get redress. At present, while several taxi operators have taken measures to improve their quality of service for people who are blind or vision impaired, many drivers continue to unlawfully discriminate against people who are blind or vision impaired. The complaints process for rideshare operators is even more opaque. In the absence of a nationally consistent reporting framework, public transport users who experience discrimination may not know which agency or company should take responsibility or to whom they should complain.

A nationally consistent reporting framework is required, acting as a one-stop shop where people with disability can lodge a discrimination complaint that can be seen and investigated by federal, state and territory authorities. This should include a telephone hotline, an accessible website and an accessible smartphone app. Discrimination complaints made directly to taxi operators and rideshare providers should be automatically funnelled to the one-stop shop for investigation.

This could be facilitated by a new body, or by the Australian Human Rights Commission, but whichever body has this function must be empowered and funded to proactively monitor compliance, conducts reviews and audits, investigate potential breaches, issue fines and compliance notices to public transport operators and providers, and apply to the federal courts for orders to direct compliance with the compliance notices.

## Recommendations

To ensure a safe and accessible travelling experience for people who are blind or vision impaired, Blind Citizens Australia encourages the federal, state and territory governments, along with taxi operators and rideshare services, to work collaboratively on lifting the standards in the industry. This should include the following actions and reforms:

1. Ensure all third party apps are developed and updated in line with the latest WCAG;
2. Retain call centre operators for taxi providers to support passengers who struggle using smartphones;
3. Improve driver education and disability awareness, especially around their responsibilities to support and assist passengers who are blind or vision impaired;
4. Amend the Disability Standards in Accessible Public Transport (DSAPT) to include both taxi and rideshare services, and to make both companies and drivers responsible for complying with the standards;
5. Increase the fines for drivers and operators for incidents of dog guide refusal;
6. Amend DSAPT to require all taxi and rideshare providers to affix identifying information on both braille and tactile lettering decals
7. Mandate the introduction of accessible talking fare meters into all taxi vehicles
8. Establish a nationally consistent PtP Subsidy Scheme
9. Establish and resource a nationwide ‘one stop shop’ for complaints.

Further, business planning for any new or existing services must include consultation with people with disability or their representatives to ensure optimal accessibility. It is important that individuals who are blind or vision impaired are involved and have the opportunity to provide feedback on all forms of service access to ensure that systems best meet their needs.

Information about user trials and consultations should be distributed to blindness organisations in a timely manner to ensure that there is adequate time to gather interest and prepare a large sample size of participants.

Finally, there should also be transparency of reporting of the outcomes of these consultations and trials so that people with disability can be informed of the decisions made.

1. NSW Government. Fine Hike for Assistant Animal Refusal. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/fine-hike-for-assistance-animal-refusal> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)