

Orlando Sentinel

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Disadvantaged community empowered by mobility options

By: Judy Mathews, Guest Columnist
 April 6, 2017

Blindness often classifies individuals as transportation disadvantaged. By Florida law, this means, “unable to transport themselves or purchase transportation, and are, therefore, dependent upon others to obtain access to health care, employment, education, shopping, social activities, or other life-sustaining activities ...” For many of us who are completely blind and use a guide dog, transportation options are vitally important to everyday life.

So, when a national trend of transportation network companies denying service to passengers with guide dogs emerged in Florida, we were shocked, worried and outspoken. Since this news broke, we, along with many other advocates, have worked with TNCs to train drivers on how to properly accommodate passengers who are blind and visually impaired, and who may be traveling with a service animal.



Ridesharing companies greatly increase transportation options by offering flexibility, convenience and on-demand service to transportation-disadvantaged communities. However, today not everyone in the state has access to ridesharing, which devastates disadvantaged communities even more.

Senate Bill 340 and House Bill 221 establish a statewide regulatory framework that would ensure everyone in this state has access to ridesharing. The legislation focuses on three main components: riders’ safety, minimum insurance standards and consumer protections.

Kudos to members the House for approving their version of the bill this week by a 115-0 vote margin. We’re optimistic the Senate will follow suit and do the right thing.

The measures most relevant to the community of blind and visually impaired codify rules requiring TNCs to adopt nondiscrimination policies. This legislation unambiguously lays out what is required of a TNC and the drivers who use their platforms. Specifically, the bill requires a TNC to adopt a policy of nondiscrimination with respect to riders and potential riders and to notify TNC drivers of such policy; it requires TNC drivers to comply with the nondiscrimination policy and certain applicable laws regarding nondiscrimination and accommodation of service animals; and it prohibits a TNC from imposing additional charges for providing services to people who have physical disabilities.

Although many TNCs already have anti-discrimination policies in place specifically relating to service animals, codifying these rules is a tremendous step for our community.

This issue is of paramount importance to all of us. This is why we are heartened at the prospect of a bill passing this year, which would regulate ridesharing companies in all 67 Florida counties. Having access to many different transportation options is empowering people through mobility.

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Paratransit systems are often the only realistic means of transportation available to the transportation disadvantaged. However, regional paratransit is a shared-ride service that comes with its own challenges. To overcome these challenges, some local Florida communities have developed pilot programs that include ridesharing companies. Having a fully regulated rideshare alternative provided by TNCs, though, expands our options.

TNCs could play a role in helping make our regional paratransit options more convenient and flexible with their on-demand capacity. This would be a win-win for everyone.

Our work won't end, though, once a statewide regulation is passed. It's our mission to continue to educate lawmakers, businesses and organizations about the needs of the disadvantaged community.

Judy Mathews is the adult services supervisor at Lighthouse Central Florida, a private, nonprofit agency offering a range of vision-specific, rehabilitative services to Central Floridians of all ages who live with blindness and vision loss.

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