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**Imperative 2: Autonomous Vehicle Legislation**

# **Background**

The auto industry continues to develop and test the use of autonomous vehicles (AV). Large companies such as General Motors and Cruise Automation are developing their own lines of autonomous vehicles. Such vehicles require no direction from a driver and can make decisions on their own. This may provide significant opportunities to the blind community. Sight will not be required to drive a car; cars may lack steering wheels and other steering functions altogether.

However, Congress must first address the questions that may arise from the new and unthought-of industry. Currently, driving laws require drivers to pass certain vision tests. But, if a car is self-driving, a vision test should be superfluous. Yet, it is difficult for many governments and agencies to let go of such policies. These circumstances have served as a roadblock to advancing the development and use of AVs.

Numerous states have begun to draft their own state policies on autonomous vehicles. As a result, policies vary widely from one state to another. This complicates interstate travel; an AV may not be able to move across state borders, depending on the differing laws. The varying policies also slow down the development process of such cars. Auto companies have to consider the state policies on a case-by-case basis. Instead of slowing down the creation process, it is imperative that the development of autonomous vehicles move forward.

The AV START Act was introduced in Congress in the fall of 2018. The new law would have affected the advent of autonomous vehicles at the federal level. But, at the end of 2018 and the 115th Congress, the House of Representatives and Senate failed to agree upon a federal framework to regulate autonomous vehicles. The failed legislation attempted to clarify regulations for such vehicles. The federal regulations would have pre-empted state regulations and given AV manufacturers clearer guidance as they develop autonomous vehicles. Furthermore, the new law would permit automobile companies to deploy fleets of autonomous vehicles that would be exempted from some regulations currently required for traditional vehicles; these regulations were written for human-driven cars. The AV START Act would loosen up some policies to allow for further exploration of autonomous vehicles.

Attempts were made to reintroduce the AV START Act in the 116th Congress. However, congressional leaders were unsuccessful in bringing the bill forward again in 2019. Members of Congress continue to work on new language to bring forth a new, and similar bill to once again push for the proliferation of legislation surrounding autonomous vehicles in the United States during the second half of the 116th Congress.

In 2019, numerous disability advocacy organizations were brought to the table to discuss issues surrounding autonomous vehicles as they related to disability access. The American Council of the Blind was one of those organizations. The committee is a bicameral, bipartisan committee. This means the group is composed of both Republicans and Democrats from both the Commerce Committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The committee is busily working on language that could potentially make up the next version of an AV bill. Such organizations have even had the opportunity to offer comments and advice on the language of various parts of the bill. Specifically, ACB has offered input on portions of the law that would impact people with disabilities and their access to such vehicles. Consequently, there is great excitement that a bill may be reintroduced in 2020.

# **Call To Action**

Congress must ensure that autonomous vehicles are built with accessibility in mind from the very beginning. Consequently, ACB members should stress to their members of Congress the importance of the accessibility provisions being considered in the bipartisan, bicameral Commerce Committee draft legislation. ACB members should discuss the multiple facets that are needed to make a vehicle fully accessible for those who are blind and visually impaired. This accessibility must include accessible human-machine interaction, or HMI. HMI includes functions that allow people to successfully communicate with the vehicle. Any form of HMI, such as screens, must be made accessible for people who are blind and visually impaired. Technology that enables blind and visually impaired users to initially locate the car and then safely exit and successfully locate their final destination are also important technological facets of AV that must be included. The interaction with AV does not just include the ride itself, but also discovering the car and finding the intended destination.

Furthermore, attendees should talk about the need to prohibit state license requirements that would still require people to pass a vision test before owning or operating a fully autonomous and accessible vehicle.

For more information on this issue, contact Claire Stanley, ACB’s Advocacy and Outreach Specialist: cstanley@acb.org, (202) 467-5081.