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December 18, 2024

Andrew Byrne, Vice President, Global Public Policy

Uber Technologies, Inc.

1725 Third Street

San Francisco, CA.

Dear Mr. Byrne,

The American Council of the Blind (ACB) is writing to express our concerns about Uber’s proposed self-identification procedures. Guide Dog Users, Inc., (GDUI) is the largest guide dog organization within the United States and a special interest group of ACB. It is our understanding that Uber seeks to address and mitigate the issue of blind and low vision individuals being denied transport by Uber drivers due to the presence of a guide dog with the platform’s new self-identification feature.

As the nation’s leading national membership-driven advocacy organization, the American Council of the Blind and its 66 state and special-interest affiliates, have been in existence for more than 60 years, working to increase the independence, security, equality of opportunity, and quality of life for all blind and low vision people. Integral to ACB’s mission of increasing independence and quality of life is ensuring a safe and welcoming environment in which people who are blind or have low vision can obtain access to transportation from the game-changing service Uber provides across the U.S. GDUI strives to promote civil rights and enhance the quality of life for working guide dog teams. Drawing on the experiences and varied knowledge of its members, GDUI provides peer support, advocacy and information to guide dog users everywhere. In addition, GDUI works with public entities, private businesses and individuals to ensure that guide dog users enjoy the same rights to travel, employment, housing, and participation in all aspects of life that people without disabilities enjoy

Over the past two years, ACB has worked with Uber to resolve a number of accessibility issues, including proposing several ways that Uber could help mitigate the genuine problem of guide dog denials and make the process of reporting such denials to Uber easier for blind riders. Among several of our suggestions, ACB recommended that Uber implement the ability for blind riders to indicate their use of a service animal in their profile or preferences, enabling the platform to notify drivers about the rider’s service animal and to remind them of Uber’s policy and the law, which requires transporting riders with service animals.

This option for self-identification was proposed with the belief that, even if some guide-dog users chose not to use it, all riders would benefit, as those who did use it would help quickly identify drivers who discriminate against service dog users. ACB’s understanding has always been that this self-identification process would only reveal the presence of a service dog to the driver after the driver-rider match was confirmed.

However, our members and the Board of Directors are under the impression that Uber plans to provide an option of notification to a driver before they accept the ride. If a driver receives the notification that the rider travels with a service dog within the offer card, they can simply decline to accept the ride without any ramifications for discriminating against a service dog user. This would not resolve the denial issue and would potentially allow drivers to evade any consequences for ride denial. If drivers are notified before a ride is accepted, the same notification of the law should appear on the screen, and, if the driver denies the ride, an investigation of discrimination should immediately be started by Uber.

Many believe that by allowing service animal disclosure on the offer card before pairing, Uber would be establishing a discriminatory system that enables drivers to discreetly refuse rides to blind individuals with service animals. This approach appears to deflect accountability from Uber for discipline or possible warning or removal of perpetrators of such discrimination. It fails to reduce the number of law-breaking drivers from Uber’s platform who decline service to riders with service animals, thus allowing these drivers to continue working without consequence.

ACB and GDUI believe that Uber’s system could be configured to discipline or suspend drivers who cancel rides upon being notified of the rider’s service animal status. It would also be very possible for the Uber platform to automatically file a report of alleged denial, capturing details on the specific rider/driver involved, so that proper investigation and remediation/disciplinary action or deactivation of non-compliant drivers could then occur. This would be a helpful practice because when said discrimination is occurring, it is not in an environment that is conducive to blind riders attempting to file complaints. A proactive denial reporting process on Uber’s side of the equation would be possible and extremely helpful to stemming unwanted occurrences of discrimination and ride denial. We do support Uber’s adoption of policies to have an initial level of disclosure of service animal users for corporate information for data gathering and tracking purposes only, and at that initial level not available to drivers. Subsequently, disclosure after pairing would then allow for strong corporate accountability, benefiting all riders with service animals whether they opt for self-identification or not.

ACB would like further clarification on Uber’s self-identification process, and to engage in collaborative conversations surrounding the new program. Please reach out to Claire Stanley, ACB’s Director of Advocacy and Governmental Affairs by January 10, 2025, to discuss these concerns. In addition, ACB would request more information about the current pilot of self-identification that is being conducted, in what areas it is taking place, and how a representative from the American Council of the Blind could be included in the process for information-sharing and transparency.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this important access issue.

Sincerely,

Scott Thornhill, Executive Director

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Sarah Calhoun, GDUI President

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