

Testimony of Taxi and Limousine Commission

ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CITIES ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CORPORATIONS, AUTHORITIES & COMMISSIONS ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION ASSEMBLY TASK FORCE ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Good morning Chairmen Brennan, Brodsky, Gantt, Cusick, Assembly Member Kellner and the members of your Committees. I am David Yassky, Chairperson/Commissioner of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission. I want to thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about wheelchair accessibility in New York City's yellow taxi and for-hire vehicle industries. Accessibility is an important priority for the Taxi and Limousine Commission, and we are fully committed to ensuring that wheelchair users can access the diverse transportation options provided by our regulated vehicles. Before we discuss today's proposed bills A. 5224 and A. 7842, I would like to briefly discuss what the agency has done to address wheelchair accessibility in New York City's yellow taxi and for-hire vehicle industries.

As you know, the Taxi and Limousine Commission Accessible Dispatch Program was a two-year temporary (pilot) demonstration project that was funded by the City Council and launched in the summer of 2008. TLC demonstration projects allow us to pilot new technologies - the goal of this program was to test how a central dispatching facility would work to dispatch yellow taxis and to measure the demand for wheelchair accessible taxi service. We are currently working on a report – a draft to be completed later this summer – that will outline what we have learned about these issues and discuss the best ways to regulate the yellow and livery industries to provide service for people with disabilities.

Though the report is not yet ready, there are some statistics that we have gathered from the Dispatch Program that will be helpful to discuss today. Generally the program was very expensive and unfortunately not well-utilized. When working with disability advocates to develop the plan, we originally anticipated a call volume of at least 250 calls per day. However, the actual call volume hovered around 8.1 calls per day – this average is based on 5,828 total dispatches for the entirety of the program.

With a two-year budget of \$1,000,000, that comes out to about \$177 per call. Additionally, there have been 2,701 unique users of the program, which unfortunately pales in comparison to the estimated 60,000 wheelchair users in New York City. Although usage was low, we strived to ensure that drivers who operated wheelchair accessible yellow taxis were properly trained, and to date, we have issued 4,444 summonses to drivers and medallion owners who have not complied with our training requirements. We will continue to enforce this training requirement even after the program ends because we believe it is important that all drivers be properly trained to provide the highest level of customer service.

Clearly, the Dispatch Program has not had the reach we anticipated and wanted. One factor could be the economics of the service, some wheelchair users are on a fixed-income, and the quick, on-demand service of yellow taxis is out of many individuals' price range. Our report will discuss this further, along with other topics relating to wheelchair accessibility in our industries, but I felt it pertinent that the members of the Assembly present here today get an overall picture of what has been happening with the Dispatch Program.

Now I would like to discuss our efforts to provide for wheelchair accessibility in the For-Hire Vehicle industry. In 2001, the TLC passed rules requiring the industry to provide accessible service under rule 6-07 (f). This rule requires that all for-hire bases must be able to provide service to people with disabilities as requested, at equivalent prices and response times as non-accessible service. When this rule was passed, we believed it would help ensure passengers that use wheelchairs would have access to service whenever and wherever they needed it. Now, we know the rule has not been fully effective.

To address these concerns, we have conducted enforcement operations – both in the field and through a secret shopper program – where we have issued 80 summonses, each carrying a \$1,000 fine, to 72 For-Hire Vehicle bases since July 2009. Wheelchair accessible service is simply not available on the same terms as for non-wheelchair users. We will continue this enforcement effort until the industry comes into compliance.

I also want to mention our recent work with the MTA's Access-A-Ride program. We are working closely with the MTA to establish a pilot program for approximately 400 of their non-wheelchair subscribers that would allow each individual to use an MTA-issued credit card in a yellow taxi in lieu of using an Access-A-Ride van. We hope to help reduce Access-A-Ride's operating cost and improve its ability to serve its wheelchair subscribers. We hope that this pilot will be a success so it can be expanded to additional customers.

Finally, I would like to tell you a little bit about the Taxi of Tomorrow Request for Proposals. With one of our long-term goals being 100% accessibility of all our fleets, we believe that the Taxi of Tomorrow Request for Proposal will help us get very close to that goal. One of the stated goals of the Request for Proposal, or RFP, is "universal accessibility for all users with a goal of meeting ADA guidelines". We recently received responses for the RFP, and a committee of stakeholders is currently reviewing and evaluating them. We anticipate selecting the successful proposal by the end of this year, and the first vehicles must be on the road no later than the fall of 2014. We are excited for the possible vehicles this RFP may bring to New York City's streets, and what it could mean for all of our regulated industries.

Within the context of what we have done for wheelchair accessibility in New York City's yellow taxi and For-Hire Vehicle industries, I would like to discuss proposed bills A. 5224 and A.7842. Bill A.5224 requires the Taxi and Limousine Commission to create a demonstration project involving 1,000 taxicabs that are wheelchair accessible and "ecology friendly" within six months of the bill's passing. Bill A. 7842 would require that all yellow taxis in New York City be wheelchair accessible by June 2012. To our knowledge, there currently is no vehicle that exists on the market today or even in production that is both "ecology friendly" and wheelchair accessible and would meet the needs of the taxicab industry. Furthermore, requiring that 1,000 medallion owners replace their vehicles with one that is wheelchair accessible six months after A.5224 is signed, or requiring all medallion owners to replace their vehicles with a wheelchair accessible one by June 2012 will cause disruptions in service and negatively affect many medallion owners, as well as drivers, both of whom would have to bear the

financial burden of purchasing a new vehicle before their anticipated retirement date. Though the goals of these bills are laudable, they are currently impractical.

The Taxi of Tomorrow RFP is a process that can help us get closer to some of our most important goals of both greater accessibility and creating a vehicle fleet that is environmentally sustainable. We think it is the appropriate way to get there because it asks automobile makers, those with the most knowledge, to create a taxi for New York City that is, among other things, wheelchair accessible and environmentally sustainable. As I stated earlier in my testimony, we have received responses to the RFP, and a stakeholder committee is currently evaluating them. We believe this process offers the best opportunity for bringing an accessible, clean vehicle that also meets the needs of the taxi industry to market.

This concludes my testimony. I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify today on these proposed bills. At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.