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# **National Council on Disability**

# **Quarterly Board Meeting**

## August 28

## 9:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. ET

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## **NCD Quarterly Meeting**

## **August 28, 2025**

## **9:30 a.m.**

NICK SABULA: I'm going to start the webinar. When you hear "recording started," that will be your cue to begin the meeting.

ANNE SOMMERS McINTOSH: This is Anne Sommers McIntosh just doing a quick sound check.

We can hear you, Netterie, on the Zoom side. We're just trying to connect to the room.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Okay. We're going to start the meeting here in just a minute, so if we could have everybody take your seats. And we'll have Stacey go through some housekeeping.

Nick, you're starting it?

(Screen reader in background)

ANNE SOMMERS McINTOSH: Hoskie, I think that your --

[Recording in progress]

SHAWN KENNEMER: Those of you online, we can hear you in open forum, so just be advised while we get this up and running.

All right. With that, we are live. We're going to go through -- Stacey, will you do some housekeeping?

STACEY BROWN: Yes, sir.

Good morning, everyone. A few housekeeping announcements before we get started for today's meeting.

First, as a friendly reminder, today's meeting is being interpreted and transcribed for the Deaf and hard of hearing. Captions are being provided by a manual captioner, and any remote attendees can turn on the closed captioning through their Zoom settings, or all attendees can access the StreamText link we will drop in the chat.

Secondly, our chat is for purposes of sending messages to NCD members and staff only but is disabled to send messages to everyone.

Finally, all Zoom attendees will remain muted throughout today's meeting.

We are very glad you are here to join us today. Thank you for your attention to these matters. And that concludes our housekeeping announcements.

Acting Chair Kennemer, you are all set to formally begin the meeting.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Thank you, Stacey.

I want to welcome and thank everybody who is present here in D.C. and the Council Members who are live on our Zoom or whatever format we're using; I'm not quite sure.

Welcome to the August 28-29 quarterly Council meeting for the National Council on Disability.

At that, I would like to do a roll call for Council Members present.

Stacey, will you conduct the roll?

STACEY BROWN: Yes, sir.

Vice Chair and Acting Chair Shawn Kennemer.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Hoskie Benally.

HOSKIE BENALLY: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Sascha Bittner.

SASCHA BITTNER: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Theo Braddy.

THEO BRADDY: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Kim Ridley.

KIM RIDLEY: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Risa Rifkind.

RISA RIFKIND: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Staff, Joan Durocher.

JOAN DUROCHER: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Kimie Eacobacci?

Kimie Eacobacci?

Netterie Lewis?

NETTERIE LEWIS: Can you hear me? I can barely hear you. If you can turn up the volume, because I can barely hear.

Present.

STACEY BROWN: Anne Sommers McIntosh.

ANNE SOMMERS McINTOSH: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Amy Nicholas.

AMY NICHOLAS: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Nick Sabula.

NICK SABULA: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Amged Soliman.

AMGED SOLIMAN: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Ana Torres-Davis.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Keith Woods.

KEITH WOODS: Here.

STACEY BROWN: Back to you, Chair.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Thank you.

So with that, I will call for a vote for the acceptance of the meeting agenda, if the Council Members have read it and approve. I need a yea or nay vote.

SASCHA BITTNER: I move that we approve the agenda for the August meeting.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Sascha moves.

Is there a second?

RISA RIFKIND: Second. This is Risa.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Risa or Kim seconded. I'm not sure which one.

RISA RIFKIND: Either one.

SHAWN KENNEMER: And then all in favor, say aye.

Opposed.

Hearing no opposed, the motion carries.

Thank you.

For our second vote, we need an acceptance of the draft minutes from the May 29th-30th Council meeting. Is there a motion to approve those minutes?

SASCHA BITTNER: I move.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Sascha moves.

Is there a second?

HOSKIE BENALLY: I second.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Hoskie got in on the second.

All in favor, say aye.

Any opposed?

Hearing none, then the motion to approve the draft minutes carries.

With that, I'll turn it over to our policy update with Joan.

JOAN DUROCHER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There are two things I'll be covering during this report. First, a brief update on our policy work since the Council's last meeting in New York; and second, asking for a vote on NCD's 2025 progress report.

First, since the last Council meeting, we've begun to put pen to paper on the projects voted on as priorities for FY26: State and local emergency management, and disability competency curriculum. We also intend to tackle access to courts in some fashion once we get a little further on the top two priorities, probably through a white paper.

You will hear more about this tomorrow, but we will be seeking public comment via RFIs, request for information, on both projects to complement what we hear from the public and our internal research.

We have kicked off our nursing home project under the leadership of Council Member Ridley. Ari Ne'eman, a former Council member, is assisting us with accessing some needed data from CMS and helping us analyze younger population numbers.

Chairman Kennemer gave a livestream presentation at the Department of Health and Human Services ADA anniversary event this week that closed with a speech by HHS Secretary Kennedy.

Amy drafted a letter in response to the Department of Energy's Direct Final Rule regarding rescission of a longstanding part of DoE's Section 504 regulations regarding new construction. Specifically the DFR intends to rescind Section 504 regulation. DoE received a substantial number of significant adverse comments pertaining to the DFR and have extended the effective date to consider comments submitted in response to the Direct Final Rule to September 12th. Chairman Kennemer was quoted in an article regarding the issue this month.

Anne, Kimie, and Amy met with congressional staffers from the transportation and infrastructure subcommittee to provide NCD comments and recommendations on the proposed bill titled Fixing Emergency Management for Americans Act in 2025, and tomorrow we will hear from a panel Amy has coordinated to discuss emergency management issues at the state and local level in furtherance of our upcoming 2026 project. The panel will inform the Council and assist in forming the scope of work for the state and local agencies' emergency management toolkit that was approved as a policy project at the May Council meeting for FY26.

On the accessible healthcare technology front, NCD sent a statement for the record to the House Ways and Means Subcommittee regarding the June 25th hearing "Health at your Fingertips: Harnessing the Power of Digital Health Data," citing four different NCD policy reports on technology.

The Office of Federal Contract Compliance has proposed rescinding the requirements for contractors to invite applicants and employees to self-identify their disability status and to analyze progress toward the 7% utilization goal for individuals with disabilities. NCD is examining the issue, and Amy has drafted comments in response. And those are under review right now by the Chairman. In the meantime, the current regulations remain in effect and must be followed.

Kimie and Amy met with the Small Business Administration to discuss a proposed bill, ThinkDIFFERENTLY About Disability Employment, that would require the SBA to collaborate with NCD to improve entrepreneur and small business employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Amy has reached out to SBA for a follow-up meeting.

And as we know at the last Council meeting, you voted to approve NCD's latest report on transportation. We have two exciting panels at this meeting as follow up to that report, and the LAO team has been holding a series of briefings on the report over the last several weeks. I hope you've all been able to join one or two of those.

Finally, I'll turn to the progress report, and I've asked Jed to come up and give a very brief overview. And then we'll turn it back to the Chairman for you all to vote on that report.

AMGED SOLIMAN: Thank you, Joan.

So this year is our second year of producing the progress report in house. As you all know, it is required by statute. And we have put together a succinct progress report that covers areas of health, employment, travel, and other areas. And we hope you will find it to your liking and approve it. Thank you.

JOAN DUROCHER: Thank you, Jed.

Does anyone have any questions for Jed on the progress report before the Chairman calls for a vote?

Or anything any of the Council members would like to say?

SHAWN KENNEMER: Quickly, this is Shawn. I'm drawing a blank, but which Council Members were involved with this?

JOAN DUROCHER: Neil -- oh, go ahead, Jed.

AMGED SOLIMAN: Theo, Neil, and Risa.

SHAWN KENNEMER: The reason I'm asking is, sorry, my mind just went blank and I could not remember who was.

You guys I think did an amazing job on this report. I just thank you for your time and work and the staff that worked on this. I think this is a great report. So I just wanted to put a thank you on that.

JOAN DUROCHER: Thank you.

Neil, did you want to say something?

NEIL ROMANO: Well, no. I just wanted to thank our friend over there who does the really heavy lifting, and we get to do a lot of, you know, knickknack kind of revision stuff. You did a wonderful job as always. I really appreciate your time.

AMGED SOLIMAN: Thank you, sir. Thank you, all.

JOAN DUROCHER: So thank you.

Mr. Chairman, feel free to call for a vote, and that will conclude my report.

SHAWN KENNEMER: A motion to approve the policy report?

THEO BRADDY: I make such a motion.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Theo.

Do I have a second?

NEIL ROMANO: Second.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Neil is a second.

I think we need a roll call for this, on this vote? So Stacey, will you read a roll call for this vote?

STACEY BROWN: Yes, sir.

Vice Chair and Acting Chair Shawn Kennemer.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Yes.

STACEY BROWN: Hoskie Benally.

HOSKIE BENALLY: Yes.

STACEY BROWN: Sascha Bittner.

Sascha Bittner?

Theo Braddy?

THEO BRADDY: Yes.

STACEY BROWN: Risa Rifkind?

RISA RIFKIND: Yes.

STACEY BROWN: Neil Romano?

NEIL ROMANO: Yes.

SHAWN KENNEMER: So I will hold the vote open if Sascha gets back on, to get her vote. We know we may just be having a communication issue. At this time we'll hold the vote open and we'll circle back to the vote later.

Thank you.

Thank you, Joan, for the report. And once again, I'll just say that the policy report, we're doing great things here at the National Council on Disability, and none of this is possible without the staff that are here. So I can't stress that enough. The team here is just amazing.

Okay. With that, I think we turn it over to Ana.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Vice Chairman.

Good morning, everyone. Let me make sure my mic is here.

First I would like to ask anyone that is going to be on our panel today to come forward and be seated at the panelist table.

Thank you.

I'm Ana Torres-Davis. I'm the Executive Director of the National Council on Disability, and I'm honored to facilitate the transportation panels that we are going to have today.

On July 23rd -- my mic is going out. Hold on.

Hi. Okay.

On July 23rd, NCD published a report titled Ground Transportation for People with Mobility Disabilities 2025: Challenges and Progress. The report examines the ability of people with disabilities to access the most common forms of transportation available today, including rideshares like Uber and Lyft, taxis, and shuttle services.

We also examined microtransit and autonomous vehicles, all of that through the lens of accessibility for people with disabilities.

We start the report by describing through data, personal experiences, and academic studies the significant transportation disadvantages of millions of people with disabilities -- I'm sorry, everybody. I must be really inept with microphones.

SHAWN KENNEMER: A little bit further away.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: I'm going to get further away and move it away. Thank you.

Okay. We start the report by describing through data, personal experiences, and academic studies the significant transportation disadvantages of millions of people with mobility disabilities. And especially those who use motorized wheelchairs and scooters. We discuss how people with travel-limiting disabilities are far less likely to own a vehicle, to have access to a vehicle, or to drive than other people, contributing to a cycle of poverty, lower employment, and the inability to participate in society on par with their -- (microphone going out) -- on par with their nondisabled peers. Can you hear that?

SHAWN KENNEMER: I wonder if you're in a dead zone.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Can you hear me now?

Okay. All the things that I prepared for, I did not prepare for the mic issue, so forgive me; I thought I was just going to stumble through the presentation, but we'll see what we can do.

At NCD, we can personally attest to having witnessed or experienced a lack of wheelchair-accessible transportation, particularly while traveling on official agency business. Half of our group is able to move forward to the meeting site while the other half get stranded, despite all of our best efforts.

Chances are very high that if you ask any wheelchair user, and particularly those with motorized wheelchairs or scooters, their transportation experiences, they will have many harrowing tales to tell you. That is to say that the content that we cover in the report shares a commonality of experience and importance among millions of Americans.

This morning's panel focuses on the accessibility of some of today's most common ground transportation modes, like rideshares and Uber and Lyfts and taxicabs, and we talk about microtransit. All of these are on-demand transportation. You can get them by using your app or making a phone call. Most people can get them in a relatively short period of time. But you'll learn today from our panel that that is not the experience --

SHAWN KENNEMER: Try it from that side.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: -- that is not the experience of many people that are trying to travel.

So let's move to the panel. I want to say that the majority of the panel is here today, contributing to our report, and we're very grateful for all of their input and for helping make this a comprehensive report on this issue.

So to begin today, it's really important for us to set the stage so that we can understand what it looks like to try to travel in a wheelchair in 2025.

35 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, our first two speakers have much to offer on this topic. Let's begin.

John. John Morris is an accessibility consultant and founder of wheelchairtravel.org. John travels and he travels a lot. He blogs about his experiences traveling in a wheelchair, from taxis to hotel shuttles, and more.

John, welcome and thank you for traveling to be with us at NCD today. And the floor is yours.

JOHN MORRIS: Well, thank you very much, Ana, and to the entire board for your invitation to be here today. Congratulations on the publication of your report. I think it is going to bring about hopefully tremendous results in the space of promoting accessible transportation across the country.

As Ana said, I'm John Morris. I'm the founder of wheelchairtravel.org, which is a website dedicated to sharing information and resources for disabled travelers to be able to make the most of their travel experiences both here in the United States and abroad.

I do travel frequently. I am often on multiple flights a week, traveling to cities all across the country and around the world. And so through those travels, I have gained a broad perspective on the accessibility of ground transportation in communities from sea to shining sea.

I have not always been disabled. I had a car accident in 2012 that led me to become a wheelchair user. And I was told by many that I would not be able to travel because of the inaccessibility of the world and the condition associated with my own disability. I'm a triple amputee and power wheelchair user.

But my belief at that time was that my experience should be no different from the experience that I had had as a nondisabled person. I adopted sort of a slogan that maybe is a demand for the world, that we should have equal access everywhere, and that everyone should be able to maximize their independence to the highest level of their ability and participate in everything that society offers.

I would first like to talk today about my view of what the current state of ground transportation is for wheelchair users. Some things that really stand out to me particularly in relation to this report are the fact that there are major U.S. cities and airports in this country -- major cities -- without accessible ground transportation provided by private companies. Some examples, a city that I just came from, Atlanta, Georgia. There are no wheelchair taxis. There had been a couple vehicles prior to the pandemic in the city, but that is no longer the case.

Dallas/Fort Worth. That's a major airport and a city where I cannot access accessible ground transportation.

My own hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, and Tampa, Florida, is one where the number of wheelchair taxis has dwindled significantly.

There are even more secondary airports without accessible ground transportation, including state capitals: Tallahassee, Florida, being one example, where my alma mater is located and where I am going this weekend to hopefully see a Florida State victory over Alabama. Am I allowed to say that?

But I think that that last point, the purpose of my travel, is varied. I travel for business. I travel for personal reasons. And I believe that I should have an opportunity to do all of those things and to have an accessible way to get around regardless of the city where I am in.

I think some of the challenges were very well outlined in the report. Some of the things that I notice is that where accessible taxis do exist, their schedules are often pegged to the hours at a doctor's office and not the hours of life. And as we know in the society in which we live, life is a 24/7 thing.

I have noticed in my research and through the data that I have collected from my own travels that there are the majority of cities where accessible transportation is just not possible. If my flight is delayed and I arrive after public transportation has concluded, for instance, in my own home city of St. Louis, I will have to spend the night at the airport. And not only will I have to spend the night at the airport, even if I wanted to stay at an airport hotel, there are no accessible shuttles available to take me to those hotels.

I have noticed greater than 90% noncompliance among hotels with regards to the equivalent service standards which the ADA holds them to for hotel shuttles.

The consequences of this inaccessibility are significant. Travelers are often unable to get transportation, accessible transportation, to events, flights, and so forth. I even missed my -- one of my very best friend's wedding reception because the accessible taxi that I had booked was not available, did not turn up, and there were no other alternatives.

I have had a couple of experiences where my flight has been canceled and I've had to spend the night at the airport because not even the airline was able to muster the resources to get me to the hotel for which they had given me a voucher.

Some other personal examples from these consequences. I once had an early flight out of Cleveland. I took a city bus to the airport and had booked an airport hotel. The airport hotel had no accessible transportation. The city had no wheelchair taxis available. And so I slept on a bench in the terminal and garage, parking garage connector, overnight. I was awoken at about 3:00 a.m. by a police officer to verify that I had a ticket to travel that day.

In Jacksonville, Florida, I did make it to a wedding reception. While public transportation was running and had reserved a taxi to pick me up, that taxi never showed up and I was very far away from my hotel. So I rolled to the nearest place from the venue where I could go and as far as my wheelchair's battery power would allow, that was a gas station, where I spent the night.

In Fort Lauderdale I was staying in a hotel with a shuttle, a shuttle that provided service in an area around the hotel and to things like the hotel's private beach. I had planned and spoke to the hotel in advance about my intention to take the hotel shuttle to the Amtrak station at the conclusion of my stay. They agreed to set up an alternate transportation mode because their shuttle was not accessible. It did not arrive. I missed the train. And so my only alternative was to book a flight for hundreds of dollars for the same day, and the hotel refused to reimburse my expenses and claimed no violation of the ADA.

In Louisville, a hotel shuttle was not accessible and I had to roll there on my own, which involved me crossing a bridge at night in the path of oncoming traffic. Had a police officer not received a call from a motorist, I may not have made it past the night.

In countless other cities, I have been forced to make my own way, driving my wheelchair on streets or even state highways where accessible ground transportation has not been available. This could open up another conversation which I think Heather may bring up in her presentation about the accessibility and availability of sidewalks, which are an important mode of transportation.

There is, obviously, an insufficient supply of accessible ground transportation, even in cities that have it. Once I was in Nashville, Tennessee, seeing a show at the Grand Ole Opry. And I had taken a taxi there. That taxi was supposed to pick me up but didn't turn up after the show.

So I called for another taxi, and there was only one taxi driver operating at that time. He said that he would only pay -- he would only come if I paid him $100. I refused on the grounds of my belief that that was extortion, and I decided to book a night at the hotel next to the Grand Ole Opry at a higher cost than $100 but to stand on principle.

In Los Angeles I was in a wheelchair taxi and I saw that my taxi driver had received a message: A wheelchair user had been waiting an extended period of time for a wheelchair taxi and no one had picked up his call. He made an offer to pay double the fare so that a driver would accept his call.

These are the sorts of things that are happening around the country even where accessible taxis do exist.

Now, oftentimes I advise my readers to file complaints with the Department of Justice about clear ADA violations. Some years ago, before the pandemic, I supplied data points for what was a robust DoJ investigation into hotel shuttles and their inaccessibility. That investigation to me showed a lot of promise, but ultimately stalled due to the pandemic and perhaps a lack of willingness on the part of DoJ leadership to follow through.

Disabled people, my readers often ask me, what is the return on the investment of the time that I will expend on filing complaints about the many ADA violations I encounter. And the challenge is in responding to that is if the DoJ will not act to prevent even a financial loss that occurs such as with that hotel in Fort Lauderdale, they passed on my complaint, if they will not act on these undeniable civil rights violations, what good are complaints?

These are fair questions to ask, and yet I still encourage people to file those complaints so that there is a track record.

I would like to talk finally about the recommendations found in this report and how I think that if implemented, they could make a real difference and chip away at the inequity and inaccessibility of ground transportation in this country. Specifically we need both new regulations to account for the innovation that is occurring in the transportation space, such as with rideshare operations and autonomous vehicle operations, and we also need enforcement of existing regulations.

As the report so aptly points out, taxi operators are not specifically required to purchase accessible vehicles, but when they do purchase vehicles that are vans or not automobiles, they are required to offer an equivalent service to disabled people. That equivalent service, so far as I can tell, with the exception of a few cities in this country, does not exist, and more than 90% of hotels, it does not exist.

We need enforcement of these regulations. I would encourage the Department of Justice to continue forthwith the investigation into hotel shuttles, because I believe these are critical steps that should be taken to improve accessibility and the experience of disabled people.

With respect to new regulations, I think that they should end loop holes in the requirements for purchasing accessible vehicles. I would encourage the Access Board, the DoT, to mandate wheelchair-accessible vehicles from the very first vehicle as a condition of providing transportation services in this country.

For shuttles, we need to enforce the existing ADA standards which are significantly more clear than with taxis. Hotel operators, if they provide a shuttle, must serve disabled people. There is no question about that. An equivalent service is required only in the sense that if a hotel operator or any other public entity, other private business, if they are providing a shuttle service and do not purchase an accessible vehicle outright, then their alternative must be equivalent.

I specifically believe, though, that the NCD's most important recommendation is an engagement with state legislatures, which like in the case of the state of Florida, have retained all policy making authority on TNCs and rideshare. That has served as a firewall against local regulation for wheelchair-accessible vehicles. Many cities around the country, we've seen them step up and say to Uber and Lyft and other operators of the like that if you are going to operate here, you must provide service to wheelchair users. That is not the case in states that have preempted local authority on regulation of transportation services. Florida is a great example. I used to live there. There's not a single wheelchair-accessible vehicle operated by Uber, Lyft, or other rideshare operators.

And I think another example, it's not in my remarks that I had prepared but I experienced just earlier this week in Atlanta, Georgia, we may have heard of the autonomous vehicle company Waymo which operates in San Francisco and Phoenix. I've used Waymo in San Francisco. The company doesn't have a wheelchair-accessible autonomous vehicle, but they do provide a relatively equivalent service to wheelchair users with a driver-operated wheelchair-accessible van. However, their operation in Atlanta provides no such accommodation; only the autonomous vehicles which are inaccessible are available. As I was outside my hotel plotting my journey on public transportation to a conference I recently attended, I saw three or four Waymo vehicles pass by, and there's not a single wheelchair taxi in the city of Atlanta. So this is the real impact of regulation falling behind innovation in this country.

I think maybe as a final statement I will say that I recently moved from the city of Boston, which has wheelchair-accessible vehicles and not only the traditional taxi completes but in Uber and Lyft, and I was able to get around very well in that city.

I moved to St. Louis, and that is now a city where sometimes if my flight is delayed, I have to spend the night in the airport even though I have a home to go to.

This cannot be acceptable in our country. We can do better, with thoughtful policy and regulation. And I hope and pray that NCD's report will be taken seriously by government agencies responsible for setting policy and legislation to guide accessible design and infrastructure.

If these policy recommendations are enacted, I am confident that we will create a more accessible and more equitable world that allows people to enjoy equal access -- maybe not everywhere, but in more places than we currently do -- and to help people truly open their world as they enact, interact with society at large.

Thank you very much.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so very much, John. Everything you said was so much of what we have learned, what we have experienced, and we really appreciate your coming and your contributions to this and to the national conversation that we're having right now.

JOHN MORRIS: Thank you, Ana.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Our next panelist is Heather Ansley, the chief policy officer for PVA, or Paralyzed Veterans of America. Heather's years at PVA have given her a close up and personal view of what the state of ground transportation is for wheelchair users. From PVA events, to work travel with colleagues, to PVA's advocacy efforts, Heather is an important contributor to the national conversation as well.

Welcome, Heather. I'll turn it over to you.

HEATHER ANSLEY: Thank you, Ana. Good morning.

And good morning to the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to be here to discuss this important issue.

As you mentioned, I am with the Paralyzed Veterans of America or PVA. We are a congressionally-chartered nonprofit veteran service organization. We started nearly 80 years ago by paralyzed veterans who were returning from WW II ready to live with their injuries and illnesses thanks to medical advancements, but they discovered a world that was not ready for them and decided to form an organization that would fight for the care, benefits, and the rights that they had earned through their service to our nation.

Today, our organization has approximately 16,000 members across 33 chapters in the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico. All of our members are veterans with spinal cord injuries or disorders such as ALS or MS, and the vast majority use wheelchairs, scooters, or other assistive devices for mobility.

As an organization, we provide free assistance in helping veterans obtain their benefits and care from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and we also work to break down barriers that prevent people with disabilities from living full lives in their community, and that's the work that we do more broadly on transportation that brings us here today.

So as John has so eloquently already stated, a major barrier that we hear from our members -- and other individuals with mobility disabilities -- is the lack of wheelchair-accessible transportation options. And this includes every form of transportation, from sidewalks that are broken up, inaccessible, don't exist, all the way to developments in things like autonomous vehicles and advanced air mobility that is going to whisk people from airports to city centers, don't include the needs of wheelchair users.

Those are so -- as we look at some of these exciting new opportunities coming online and are emerging, many wheelchair users, particularly those who use power chairs or who are simply unable to transfer from a manual wheelchair don't have that level of accessibility.

As I said, problems include not just barriers with things like sidewalks but also the lack of accessible taxis and rideshare vehicles all the way to buses with lifts that don't work, inefficient and unsafe ways to try to access rail or subway stations, elevators are out or don't exist, low-level boarding, lots of opportunities.

And what happens is we see people with disabilities often drive great distances because of the lack of accessible transportation. They want to know that they have their vehicle and they have a way to get around wherever it is that they're going, even if that means driving from Maine to California, which some of our members do, to participate in our events.

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with several PVA members who use wheelchair for mobility. I just got back from our healthcare conference yesterday in New Orleans and took the opportunity to talk to some of our leaders who were there. As you can expect, when I open the conversation, everybody had -- they didn't have a story; they had multiple stories.

THEO BRADDY: Yes.

HEATHER ANSLEY: Can I get an amen from Theo.

[Laughter]

So it was the opportunity to really get that feedback on the state of ground transportation for wheelchair users in America. So for example, our Senior Vice President, she uses a power wheelchair. She was the first to tell me about an experience she had trying to rent an accessible van for a business trip earlier this year. She knew there were two companies in this large metropolitan area on the west coast that rented accessible vehicles, and she called the first one. She was going to arrive on the weekend, and they said, well, we don't work weekends and we don't deliver vehicles to the airport. She said, what if I change my travel time; maybe I'll come in on Monday. They said, well, we also don't pick up customers who are renting vehicles; you have to call another company to get yourself to where we are to get your vehicle.

So then she's like, okay, thanks.

Called the other company. And they were willing to deliver a vehicle to the airport and on the weekend. Nearly $200 just to deliver the vehicle. Over $100 a day for the rental. There's also many times mileage. A rental car, good old standard compact car, you can drive that thing anywhere you want. Not the case with the accessible vehicle. For many folks that is cost prohibitive because that also doesn't incur the parking fees and so forth for the rest of the week as you're traveling around.

Our Chief Operating Officer who travels extensively uses a manual wheelchair, and he relayed a situation that happened just a few weeks ago. He was trying to attend a business dinner with some outside partners. He said he called every number he could find for a wheelchair-accessible ride, taxis, in this, again, large metropolitan area in a Midwest city.

Because the dinner event was associated with a larger PVA event, he finally just gave up and called our colleague who we normally have come along with the accessible vehicle and said, I'm sorry to impose after hours but can you take me.

And he's like, it frustrated him that he had to do that. It frustrated him that he couldn't figure out on his own how to get to a business dinner that he was more than capable of traveling to independently, simply because there was no transportation available.

He also relayed numerous problems that he had in attempting to rent a vehicle with hand controls. He's been told that he shows up and that his car with hand controls has been rented to another customer. He always wonders how that's going to work. He's been told that his reservation can't be guaranteed because they can't guarantee there will be an accessible vehicle. And it's very limited in the types of vehicles that are even available to rent that rental companies will install hand controls then. And of course none of this is just I show up and do it. I've had to tell them in advance that I'm coming. They also don't install hand controls on the weekends. I guess people with disabilities don't travel on the weekends so we don't have that option.

Another example that's personal to me, one time I flew with a colleague of mine from Washington, D.C., all the way out to San Diego. Or, I'm sorry, San Francisco. So excited. Never been to San Francisco.

After getting there, we were assured that the airport hotel shuttle was accessible, so we went out to wait for it. Thank goodness, it was San Francisco, weather was nice.

First shuttle approaches. Is this accessible?

Oh, no, but the next one.

So we waited an additional 30 minutes. Oh, no, it wasn't accessible either.

So we called the hotel to find out the accessible shuttle was broken. Which led to our next odyssey of trying to find a wheelchair-accessible vehicle we could find. No such luck. So then we ended up in the regular taxi line. Many of the taxis were SUVs. My colleague, who uses a manual wheelchair, can't transfer into an SUV; he can only transfer into certain types of vehicles.

We finally found one of those vehicles. It took us hours to get off the airport property to go one mile to the hotel who then when we arrived told us that they had a shuttle that could take us to the accessible transit, the BART, the transit station, to which we had to remind them that the accessible shuttle was broken so we would not be taking it over there.

Now, my colleague who uses a manual wheelchair for over 40 years was resigned to being left at the curb. He's like, I'm left waiting. I'm just used to it. Whereas I was like, what do you mean? We can't get off this airport property. We could have flown there faster.

We had an event earlier this year, to echo what John was saying, flight canceled late at night, we won't get into the issues with the air travel, but once the flight got canceled at 1:00 a.m., those with power wheelchairs couldn't transfer to the baggage area. They had no way off the airport property. It's just unacceptable in the year 2025.

So again, that's why many of our members who have accessible vehicles choose to drive. Our national President who uses a power wheelchair told me that it's just too much trouble otherwise.

Other times individuals who have like a manual wheelchair and a power wheelchair will travel with their manual chair even if it's not the best option for their mobility because it increases their transportation options. It's also why wheelchair users sometimes resist moving to a power chair because it just severely limits their options for travel.

So it's really hard to narrow down, you know, what are some of the greatest areas of need as there are just quite frankly so many transportation barriers that continue to make life difficult not only for people with disabilities, but their families, their colleagues, and their friends, anybody who is traveling with them. People with disabilities have communities with them.

And this makes it so difficult to complete every day work tasks like going to work, accessing healthcare, which I'll talk about in a few more minutes, flying, picking up groceries, being able to take your kids to sports practices. All of the things that many of us do on a daily basis and just take for granted.

You know, mentioning healthcare, there are some particular benefits for veterans as relates to transportation I'll talk about in a moment, but not all veterans are able to access some of those. I attended -- we do site visits every year at the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorder Centers around the country. There are 25. We were in a major metropolitan area. I was on the site visit. And while we were there, we speak to doctors, social workers, cleaning staff, we talk to everybody. And every single group of people coming in, the top thing they were raising to us was the transportation problems they were having getting the veterans to care. Which while VA has some programs that can provide transportation support, many veterans have to depend on the transportation options in their community.

And so, again, particularly for veterans with power wheelchairs, these options can be limited. And just like you can be stranded when you don't have the taxi that you reserved show up, we have veterans who contract to go pick them up to get a therapy appointment at the VA only to get a call 30 minutes before their appointment to say, oh, the transportation isn't coming. And so now you not only didn't get that but you've missed your appointment. And all of that has ripple effects.

So we really want to make sure that we're trying to address these issues. And really the top issue, again, that people face is that they need access to whatever the main transportation options are in their community.

I grew up in a town where my great aunt, when she wanted to go do her shopping, she had to rely on an older American bus that came to town once a week to take you to the town that had the Walmart and the grocery store and be able to get your daily needs met. That was it. There is no taxi or public transportation. And that is still the case today. So you either need a personal vehicle to depend on something like that, or you do without.

Now we have you can order things online, stuff like that, but sometimes that's also more expensive. So then that creates additional costs for people with disabilities. So that means we need access, better access, for everything from sidewalks if you have to get yourself uptown to buy whatever you need from the store there. Public transportation, rideshares, personal vehicles, whatever the predominant form of transportation.

Now if a payer is a violation of the ADA, we do try to work with the entity, address the issue, or file a complaint with the relevant jurisdiction agency. One area that we have filed complaints in in recent years is with the FAA regarding inaccessible airport properties. We chose this topic because, as John mentioned, the DoJ is quite frankly overwhelmed with ADA complaints. I've learned if you didn't file a complaint, it didn't happen, so we encourage folks to file them, but we try to look for whatever other avenues we can use. And in this case, while we were attempting to get reservations to attend a conference, we kept calling hotels. Do you have an accessible shuttle? We were trying to make our arrangements.

Nope.

Well, the ADA applies to airports which regulate entities that come on to their property. Many times they have contracts with them. Well, guess what? If they're contracting with folks who are not meeting the requirements of the ADA, the airport can be held accountable. So we filed ADA complaints against the airport with the FAA office, and we got them to take action on those complaints, and to enforce against the property by going to the airport. So sometimes we try to be creative in looking at where is the issue that's happening and what can we do to try to resolve it.

Now, we consistently advocate on Capitol Hill to try to improve accessibility and compliance. We've worked in recent years in particular to try to improve access to accessible vehicles for veterans with significant disabilities. A few years ago we were able to successfully advocate for additional access to vehicle grants through the VA. Previously, the Department of Veterans Affairs, if you have a disability related to your military service and you have a disability like a spinal cord injury or ALS, one time in your life they would give you a grant to buy an accessible vehicle.

Now, still today it doesn't meet -- it doesn't give you enough money to buy the vehicle. It's kind of like here's a down payment to buy a vehicle, and that grant helps with the purchase of that vehicle.

We were able to get the law changed so that now it will be if you haven't received a grant for 30 years, you can receive an additional grant, and then in the future as we get toward the 10-year spending window, it will be every 10 years you can get a grant.

The VA does already pay for the full cost of adapting a veteran's vehicle and will do so on a more frequent basis, so our members more likely have more access to an accessible personal vehicle than many people with disabilities.

But as I mentioned, that's also for veterans who have their disability related to their military service. VA will provide healthcare for any veteran who is deemed what they call catastrophically disabled. That means if you have like a spinal cord injury that occurred later in life, it's not related to your military service, they're not going to provide you with an auto grant. They will pay to adapt your vehicle, but only so you can get in and out of it; they will not pay for you to drive it. So even if you hear a veteran sometimes has access to things, it can depend on the veteran's status. And so this is a great benefit obviously to particularly our veterans who live in rural areas, but there are still limitations in the private vehicle market.

And one of our PVA Vice Presidents who I just spoke to tells me she sunk $20,000 into her decades' old van because she is very limited in the type of vehicle she can access due to her height. She's a tall woman and she has a very large power wheelchair. She hasn't flown in years because her chair was damaged and she was injured the last time she tried. She told me that even though she will soon be able to access her second grant from the VA, she's only been able to find one van that will allow her to sit in the passenger space of her vehicle next to her spouse. And our Vice President has no ability to use her limbs, so having someone next to her who can assist her is very important to her. She also wants to be able to sit next to her spouse when they're driving, not, you know, back in the back. And the only option that she's been able to find that would allow that won't allow them to tow the trailer of equipment that she needs to travel for the work of the organization. That's why she spent money on rehabbing her decades' old van. And she is very frustrated that she effectively has no choice in the private vehicle market because of her disability. So she's actually working with her medical professionals to see if she can reduce her wheelchair height by I believe it was an inch and something, something minute, because it would give her more options.

So I throw that in there just to say sometimes even if you have the ability to access vehicle equipment, her disability is related to her military service, she has had a lot of difficulty navigating that.

In addition to our work with the VA, we are also interested in improvements that can be made through the next service transportation reauthorization bill. This legislation addresses transportation options from highways to buses to trains to sidewalks. Last reauthorized in 2021. And we're really fighting for dedicated funding in that next reauthorization to remove barriers including sidewalks, curb cuts, crosswalks, other modes of travel, because really most modes of travel are related; they're all interconnected.

That includes, again, trying to get funding for communities related to sidewalks that often have decades' long waits to try to be able to get all parts of sidewalks and curb cuts to looking at extending programs that would make fixed guideway public transportation systems more accessible.

We also support legislation that would improve access to paratransit and help communities identify gaps in accessible transportation.

We also weighed in on accessible transportation not only with filing complaints or trying to work on Capitol Hill, but we have been active in the courts. We did join two amicus briefs class actions against Lyft in New York for their failure to provide services, and I know Sabrina will talk more about that case.

Travel remains difficult for many wheelchair users, difficult and expensive for many wheelchair users, 35 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. There's still far too many barriers in travel, and people with wheelchairs in particular are not being included in the development of new transportation forms, whether that's autonomous vehicles or, like I said, advanced air mobility which is the next thing happening in the air. And we must address this gap in order to ensure that people with mobility disabilities are not left depending on just a few forms of transportation to be able to navigate when many other people have an ever-growing number of ways that they can navigate their community.

Some of the recommendations in the report that really spoke to me in terms of the work that we do are asking that Congress would pass legislation to require all transportation network companies, taxi companies, and companies that deploy robotaxis to provide and maintain an active percentage of wheelchair-accessible vehicles in the community. This will ensure the process isn't piecemeal. It's just so much work to try to figure out what are the transportation options going to be that are available. And people with disabilities shouldn't have to do that.

I traveled to an air travel conference in Madrid, Spain, in April. And when I landed, I pulled out my app and used the same rideshare app that I use here in the U.S. and I knew when I get there, it will pull me up in Access Mode, translate it to euros, here we go, I'm off. You can't do that in America traveling as a wheelchair user.

The other recommendations that I thought were extremely important were for the DoJ and Civil Rights Division of enforcement for equivalent services for taxis and also as it related to shuttle services that are offered by hotels or rental car companies, whoever the case may be that have this requirement. Because without the possibility of enforcement action, too many regulated entities are not going to prioritize the requirements of the law. Customer service and the right thing to do only take you so far. And the example I like to give is that if you drive a car, you're more likely to let up on the gas if you see a police officer setting up there because you think I might get caught. Even if my best intentions are to go the speed limit, it does give me pause to double check the speedometer.

If you don't have that in terms of the regulations you set out, well, if you don't know there's a stick out there, while we love carrots, human nature says it's probably not going to be your top priority amongst all the priorities that you have to do.

So again, we thank NCD for this important report and for raising this issue. I always say, when I can go into a room of our members and just throw out a question and I am inundated with responses, that's my crowdsourcing. This isn't an individual, oh, that part of the country. This is everywhere in the country. And we're grateful for the progress that has been made, but we are here today to say that much more needs to be done. Thank you.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you. Thank you, Heather. That was excellent, and we appreciate you being here today and the work that PVA does every day on behalf of the American people. Thank you.

So in our report, we discuss transportation network companies. Most of us understand that to mean rideshares like Uber and Lyft. We pay them quite a bit of attention in the report because of how much they've grown over the past 13 years. They started out as a small business, and they have become a multibillion dollars business, not just in the United States, but all over the world. People are able to catch an Uber or a Lyft within minutes in most places in the United States. But we describe -- and we recognize that this business model, this new transportation model, built on technology, did not exist when the ADA was enacted. So it wasn't contemplated at that time. So there is no real regulation that addresses them in the way that I think we would like to see these entities regulated.

We do describe the fact that Uber and Lyft provide wheelchair-accessible vehicles in only 10 cities in the U.S. right now. These are larger cities. In the rest of the country where the majority of people live, they do not have access to those vehicles. And as we've heard from our panelists today, even when you are in a place where they may have those services, they're often not available.

We describe the class action lawsuits that have been filed against Uber and Lyft regarding wheelchair accessibility in the report. We did invite Uber and Lyft here today to speak with us, but we did not hear back from them. But we feel like it's very important for everybody to understand the impact that Uber and Lyft have in today's transportation market and their impact on the ability for people with wheelchairs to get transportation through those services just like anybody else.

So today we are very, very fortunate to have Sabrina Merold. She is an associate at the law firm of Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll, here to talk to us about the important case of Lowell v. Lyft.

I won't go into any details of that case. I will leave it up to you, Sabrina. Just suffice to say, it's a very important case to people with disabilities, and we're grateful you're here.

SABRINA MEROLD: Thank you so much, Ana, and to the panelists and to the Council. I just want to congratulate NCD on this critical focus on access to ridesharing services.

My name is Sabrina Merold. I'm an associate at Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll in Washington, D.C. And as Ana mentioned, I'll be speaking today on behalf of ongoing litigation involving rideshare access for people with mobility disabilities.

As rideshare apps such as Lyft and Uber continue to grow in popularity and displace other forms of transportation such as taxis, cases like Lowell v. Lyft are credible places for wheelchair users, particularly power chair users and scooters, to have meaningful access to ridesharing services.

I along with my colleagues recently represented disability rights organizations in an amicus brief they filed in support of plaintiff in Lowell v. Lyft. Amicus briefs are not a party to the lawsuit but people who have a strong interest in the case. Here, these organizations, PVA, the African-American Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities, the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living, the Center for Disability Rights, the National Council on Independent Living, the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, and United Spinal Association all filed their brief to support the plaintiffs in Lowell v. Lyft and continue to ensure that the rights embodied within the ADA are not diminished by Lyft's refusal to provide accessible vehicles in most areas.

This is a class action lawsuit filed in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York back in August 2017. The plaintiffs who brought the case are Harriet Lowell, a Westchester resident with fibromyalgia what uses a power chair, and Westchester Disabled On The Move, a nonprofit organization advocating for individuals with disabilities in Westchester County.

The lead lawyer in the case is Jeremiah Frei-Pearson. In nine cities in the United States, Lyft provides accessible vehicles through their app. But just over the border in neighboring Westchester County, Lyft does not display Access Mode on the app, leaving wheelchair users unable to use Lyft to request WAVs. This violates the Americans with Disabilities Act, the New York State human rights law, and the New York City human rights law. As a class action lawsuit, Lowell and Westchester Disabled On the Move represent a class of individuals who use wheelchairs in Westchester County who cannot use Lyft without the Access Mode feature.

The plaintiffs sought injunctive relief seeking to require them to develop and implement a remedial plan to ensure full and equal access to its services for riders who require accessible transportation.

So the case overcame two procedural hurdles. First, surviving Lyft's motion to dismiss the case and then the judge's motion to certify a class. As a class certification stage, disability organizations, PVA, United Spinal Association, National Council on Independent Living, and Association for Rural Independent Living, represented by my colleague, filed amicus briefs in support of the plaintiffs and really conveyed to the court the impact of their policy blocking WAV service on the millions of Americans with disabilities who they advocate for.

The case proceeded to a bench trial on the plaintiff's claims they failed to make reasonable modifications under the ADA and New York State human rights law.

At the bench trial plaintiffs proposed several modifications that they argued on their own or together could address the inability of people who use wheelchairs to use Lyft's ridesharing service. I wanted to highlight a few of the modifications that plaintiffs and their experts proposed at trial, including one, displaying Access Mode in their app in regions that do not currently have Access Mode without implementing the toggle feature. The toggle feature refers to the fact that Lyft's default settings is not to display Access Mode. So users of the app can only see Access Mode by choosing a toggle to display WAVs.

Two, asking current and onboarding drivers if they have an accessible vehicle that could be used for WAV rides.

Three, allowing drivers to receive and accept ride requests for different ride modes and continue to earn money if demand is low.

Four, allowing cross dispatching to reduce the availability of WAVs, meaning drivers are matched with a request from an individual seeking a WAV rather than a standard Lyft ride if two requests came in at the same time. And providing bonuses and incentives to drivers of accessible vehicles.

Plaintiffs at the trial presented evidence, and I wanted to highlight a few of those pieces of evidence.

So Lyft offers WAVs in neighboring NYC but not within Westchester County. Plaintiffs showed evidence of the presence of 500 WAV drivers from nearby regions that access Westchester each month, but the rides are not accessible to individuals who use wheelchairs in Westchester through the app.

Plaintiffs also showed evidence of the demand for WAVs in their county. They have roughly 100 members who are wheelchair users that would directly benefit from WAVs.

Plaintiff Lowell testified how this would allow her with, quote, freedom and independence, end quote, and allow her to be by her husband's side as he undergoes medical care which she has been unable to do in the past when he was in the hospital. Having rideshare access as a form of transportation, Lowell testified that, quote, it's easier for me to make plans if I have more options and that's really what I'm looking for, end quote.

At the conclusion of the bench trial, the district court judge found for Lyft. The court concluded the plaintiffs had not met their initial burden of establishing the proposed modifications were reasonable in terms of cost, effectiveness, and benefits. And the alternative, that even if plaintiffs had met the initial burden, Lyft's rebuttal of evidence was effectiveness and cost.

They are currently appealing before the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. On appeal, plaintiffs argue that the district court permitted legal error in ruling for Lyft and asked for the decision to be repealed.

A few of their arguments on appeal, plaintiffs argue that the district court set the bar too high in requiring plaintiffs to prove that their proposed modifications were reasonable. Plaintiffs argue that they presented sufficient evidence to the district court to meet their initial burden that Lyft could implement cost effective modifications that would provide wheelchair users meaningful access to its ridesharing service.

Plaintiffs also argue that in analyzing their evidence of the proposed modifications being effective for individuals in Westchester, the district court applied the wrong standard for effectiveness under the ADA. Plaintiffs argue that Title III of the ADA does not mandate that an individual with a disability must achieve an identical result as persons without a disability, but that reasonable modifications must be made to assure meaningful access. That is the right to participate and to have an equal opportunity to attain the same results as others to the extent possible with accommodations as may be required by the ADA.

And for nondisabled customers, Lyft service can be far from perfect, requiring users to deal with longer wait times. Yet its rideshare services are still provided. But currently individuals using wheelchairs in Westchester cannot use Lyft's app to request a rideshare. Plaintiffs argue that with its current categorical denial to wheelchair access users, it is clear that increased access would be meaningful. Plaintiffs testified that, quote, any service is better than none, end quote.

Plaintiffs also argue that they sufficiently showed the cost of the proposed benefits would be minimal in relation to the benefits.

And I want to now spend a few minutes focusing on the amicus brief back in May by PVA and the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living, the Center for Disability Rights, NCIL, the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, the National Disability Rights Network, and the United Spinal Association in support of plaintiff's appeal.

The amicus brief highlighted how the refusal to provide WAVs, including in Westchester County, has excluded people with disabilities who use wheelchairs from a vital mode of transit and how Title III of the ADA sought to address the discriminatory harms. Title III was enacted to prevent private providers from engaging in disability-based discrimination. The lead response sort of ADA remarked that, quote, in order to ensure independence and integration into the community for people with disabilities, it is necessary to adopt comprehensive civil rights legislation. I say comprehensive because transportation is a linchpin to ensure access to jobs, access to a social life, the ability to even go to a restaurant, or to participate in community activities, end quote.

In hearings in Congress, members heard testimony from disability rights advocates about how inaccessible transportation prevented people with disabilities from attending school, having a job, and participating in society. Disability rights advocates describe their experiences being unable to enroll in a 4-year college and complete their degree because of the inability of the transit systems. Being a veteran. Unable to travel because not every bus has a wheelchair lift. Access to employment. Being a teenager. Unable to travel with friends because the bus is not accessible.

As we heard today, the stories of disability rights advocates seeking to access transportation prior to the ADA mirror the stories of wheelchair users today who are unable to meaningfully access rideshare services to attend work, doctor's appointments, school, social events, and take spontaneous events.

Lyft described rides as having, quote, dramatic impact on their riders' lives and rides to healthcare centers 248% more likely to be WAV rides relative to all other Lyft rides and WAV riders more likely to end up at the YMCA, for example, than other riders. Yet most remain inaccessible to wheelchair users in vast parts of the country.

Lyft harms people with disabilities who use wheelchairs across geographic landscapes. Rideshare access is important in rural areas like Westchester, where research shows that approximately 40% of suburban residents have used a ridesharing app. And the harms are more pronounced in rural areas where accessible transit is already scarce.

The legislative history of the ADA makes clear that the discrimination people with disabilities face, Congress sought to cover with private entities like Lyft. The ADA was described as with respect to transportation provided by private entities in the business of transporting people, this bill sets forth the basic policy that in the future people with disabilities will have ready access to the use of private transportation services provided to nondisabled persons.

Plaintiff's appeal in Lowell v. Lyft remains ongoing with oral arguments likely to be heard in the coming months, and a decision from the appellate court thereafter.

As rideshare services continue to expand in popularity and displace other forms of transportation, it is critical to continue to advocate for people with disabilities to have meaningful access to this form of transportation.

And I want to thank NCD for all the really critical recommendations including in the report specifically focusing on enforcement of the ADA and rideshare services.

It's been an honor to be with all today and for those of us joining virtually and to speak about legislation for people with disabilities and their access to ridesharing services. So thank you, NCD, for inviting us to speak today.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so much, Sabrina. I just wanted to ask a quick question. If this case is decided in favor of the plaintiffs, what would that mean nationally? It's a class action lawsuit. Can you just tell us what would that mean for people like her?

SABRINA MEROLD: Sure. So it's a class action lawsuit, and plaintiffs are appealing the certification of the class of individuals who are in Westchester County who use wheelchairs and are unable to use ridesharing services, so plaintiffs are asking the Second Circuit to reverse the decision of the district court which found in favor of Lyft.

And so that would then send the case back down to the district court where further proceedings would be ongoing. Plaintiffs are appealing the Westchester class that was certified. So, you know, it's likely that future decisions in the case would be specifically around Westchester, but if there was a positive decision on appeal for the plaintiffs here, it definitely could impact Westchester and set a precedent that could be relied on for future lawsuits. Other lawsuits have been brought in different regions of the country, and it's a precedent that could be relied upon as plaintiffs could bring lawsuits in other areas challenging the denial of access to ridesharing services.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so very much for explaining that. And thank you so very much for coming here today. This is an important case, and we will keep our eye on it.

So let's move forward to taxis. You know, in this report, we point out a lot of problems. We've identified so many problems with ground transportation in so many different forms. And one of those forms, we examined taxis. We look at localities across the nation that have worked to develop programs to improve taxi services.

We also talk about the problems that taxis have gone through with the growth of Lyft and Uber, which really caused taxi companies across the nation, based on our interviews, to suffer quite a bit.

So today we also wanted to include some of the bright spots. So today we have someone here from one of the localities that we think is a bright spot to talk to us about what makes them stand out as a promising and a program that can be replicated across the country.

So I am very, very pleased to introduce Walton Harris. He is a program manager at the Montgomery County, Maryland, Taxicab Regulation Unit. He's here to talk to us about what Montgomery County did to create a successful wheelchair-accessible taxi service for its residents. Montgomery County's plan, like I said, could be replicated by other localities that want to improve accessible transportation with their taxis.

With that, I will turn it over to Walt.

WALTON HARRIS: Good morning, and thank you, Mr. Chair, Council, thank you for having me here today.

Just as background, when you hear the word "modern," you often think of something current or cutting edge, but if you do an online phrase for "modern taxicab era," that period happened more than a century ago. Taxicabs is older than teddy bears, talking films, and foldable wheelchairs.

For decades, nothing changed. Drivers were making good money, companies could select the best drivers of the company, and customers knew exactly what to expect from the industry.

So everything was going great until of course one day it wasn't. And about 10 years ago, a new transportation service hit the space, the transportation space, TNCs, companies like Uber and Lyft, with new technology, user-friendly apps, and aggressive pricing power. They quickly transformed curb-to-curb service, not just operating on the margins. They drew huge chunks from the taxicab's market share.

Then in 2020, COVID-19 delivered another crushing blow. Streets emptied. Offices closed. And for a time, transportation nearly stopped altogether. But in the middle of that was some constants, residents who needed to support public health and welfare as well as residents who still needed to continue their critically important medical care. Many of these residents were disabled.

And that began to shift who taxicabs were serving the most, and it made reliable accessible transportation options even more important.

So Montgomery County government has long recognized the need for accessible transportation. Our approach to increasing the number of wheelchair-accessible taxicabs has been steady. For years our regulations required a certain percentage of taxicab licenses be for accessible vehicles, but policy alone wasn't enough to make a real difference. We instead decided to add targeted financial incentives to taxicab operators to provide WAV trips. Accessibility is about more than vehicles. It's about independence, dignity, and equal opportunity. When a person who uses a wheelchair -- when a person uses a wheelchair can call for a ride and know that it will arrive promptly, it changes their possibilities. It means they can make it to a doctor's appointment, visit friends, go to work, or simply live life without expecting transportation to be a barrier. We do this work because no one should be left behind or left waiting because of the type of vehicle they require.

The combination of regulations and incentives has made the difference. Today, we have more WAVs and taxicabs on the road than ever before, and we have seen stronger partnerships between the county and industry. Both sides understand that accessibility is a shared responsibility. These are not small (inaudible) -- they represent a real progress in building a transportation system that works for all residents. Currently Montgomery County has more WAV taxicabs on the road than Arlington, Fairfax, Alexandria, and PG County combined.

Still, there's work to do. While WAV taxicab numbers are up, availability and customer service don't always meet expectations. Riders sometimes report long wait times or difficulty finding a WAV when they need it. And with multiple players in the marketplace, balancing the reality with the public service mission of accessibility remains a challenge. Montgomery County is working to keep pace with the technology and changing rider expectations. The same tool that once disrupted the industry years ago can, if embraced, be part of the solution.

The modern taxicab era may have started more than 100 years ago, but today we have the opportunity and the responsibility to redefine what modern means. For Montgomery County, it means inclusive, reliable, accessible, customer-focused transportation system. Together, Montgomery County government and taxicab stakeholders are working to build the next chapter of the taxicab story, one where no rider is waiting on the curb. Thank you.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so much, Walt.

I was going to ask if you could point out how it is that you get the money to fund your accessibility fund that's given to the taxi drivers. Where does that come from and how does that work?

WALTON HARRIS: I talked about this a little bit in the slides. The Maryland General Assembly passed enabling legislation that would permit any jurisdiction that regulated taxis to impose a 25% surcharge on all TNC trips that originated in that district. Currently in Maryland, there are a few jurisdictions that do this: PG, Howard, Ocean City, Annapolis, Baltimore city, and Brunswick and Frederick County. Montgomery County is the only jurisdiction that has earmarked funds to address accessibility issues, to my knowledge.

THEO BRADDY: Does that surcharge apply to nonaccessible taxicabs?

WALTON HARRIS: It applies to any TN trip.

SHAWN KENNEMER: This is a county or state surcharge?

WALTON HARRIS: County. The money goes to the state and the state then allocates the money to us.

SHAWN KENNEMER: So how has that been guaranteed in law that that money has to go to that? Because I can tell you from experience in California, we do surcharges all the time on stuff, and it always seems the same amount of money comes in and the state just removes that money and goes back.

WALTON HARRIS: So we have a bill which established the mechanism of how we collect the money. We get this 25% and what do we do with it. We allocate it for three targeted populations: Individuals who are disabled, seniors, and limited incomes. That tends to come together on the Venn diagram. So the local legislation actually is what gives us the authority to kind of direct those funds out. And the state just provides us with the funds.

I'm not sure if I'm answering your question. Let me know.

SHAWN KENNEMER: We all know how taxis work. We say like we're going to put a surcharge on the road and the state removes the money and the road doesn't get that money. They just use that money. So I'm asking how you guys guaranteed that and is there language that guarantees that that goes to that without any other money being removed from anywhere else.

WALTON HARRIS: Okay. So the state provides us with money. The bill actually provides us to distribute the money that way for those target populations. There was another bill because these kind of novel programs aren't linear, right?

SHAWN KENNEMER: How are you protecting that money to go to where it's supposed to go to? That is my question.

WALTON HARRIS: That is through bill 3215, where the law states it has to serve these particular populations.

SHAWN KENNEMER: At any time the assembly could come back and say, we're going to spend that money elsewhere.

WALTON HARRIS: No. So -- no. Well, so, so that -- they could not, no. This money has to go for transportation services. And we passed the law that allows it to go to these targeted populations, so that money is earmarked for transportation in the Act.

SHAWN KENNEMER: The reason I'm asking is how do we do this in other states to protect that. In California, it seems to be the only way we ever can do it is it has to be a constitutional amendment. It's the only way it gets protected. So that's just the concern, yeah.

THEO BRADDY: What is the name of that bill again?

WALTON HARRIS: So it's Senate Bill I think 868 in 2015 at the Maryland General Assembly, and then Bill 3215 at the county.

THEO BRADDY: Thank you.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Did we just jump into your slide show?

WALTON HARRIS: It's okay. Life happens. It's all right.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: I think that one of the things that really struck me when I was doing the research, what we wrote in the report is very detailed, detailing the history of what you went through and the state law and the local law. And then we met with your team in Montgomery County and you shared all the additional information. It was really a unique situation because I heard a lot of other jurisdictions say, yes, we can get money from the state but we don't designate it to go to accessible transportation. We could, but we don't.

So you do. And because you do, and you have committed to that, I love the fact that you have given incentives to taxi drivers that are pretty substantial to drive the cars, to get the cars. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

WALTON HARRIS: Certainly. We offer up to $45,000 reimbursement for purchase or retrofit of a taxicab. We also provide $20 per WAV trip. And we provide 40 cents per mile driven while in service from point of pick up to the point of drop off for any passenger. So that allows just the WAVs to be on the road more and addresses any type of mechanical issues that come up through the daily wear and tear.

We also allow a few reimbursements for licensing, which is important in the sense that you could have a passenger vehicle license. You have a passenger vehicle license associated with the vehicle. So you can have a traditional sedan or a particular PVL, and you can convert that to a WAV, but once you do that, you cannot convert it back to a standard sedan. There's no dipping your toes in both.

The transfer fee is substantial. $3,900. But we reimburse that if you put that PVL on a WAV, so it's beneficial for you to convert that PVL to a WAV.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: I can say that in the research on other localities, one of the most successful things we have found is to provide incentives like Montgomery County is doing, but meaningful incentives to allow people to either convert a van to be WAV accessible or a WAV, to ramp it, to put in the securement devices, and whatever else is needed to help them with cost, to help them in any way they can to get these on the road but also to keep them on the road, because we find that in some jurisdictions, there are some taxi WAVs that sit unused because the drivers simply can't afford to keep them running. And there's a lot behind this and a lot of this is explained in the report. There's a lot in this story.

But what we're pointing out today is just the success of Montgomery County, and I think a lot of that has to do with the incentives that you're offering and that this is money that you absolutely have designated for this and that you have kept up with.

Do you -- I know that earlier John said something about how we often find ourselves calling a taxi in the evening and we can't find out. And you told us something very interesting in our interview about why that is. And we also heard that from D.C. It's about not being able to control private independent contractors.

WALTON HARRIS: Correct.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Can you say something about that? What is the reason it's so hard to find a taxi at night?

WALTON HARRIS: Sure. And just somewhat to Mr. Morris' point too, it does go to the quality versus quantity thought for many drivers. All drivers actually are independent contractors. So when they -- if they want to knock off at 5:00, they can. Anecdotally, if we ask them why, they'll say, there's no doctor offices open after a certain hour. And we're saying, bars, restaurants, night life, nighttime economy is open. So there's a lot of quality of life things that we want to make sure residents who are disabled can go out and do.

So we're actually looking to increase the meter rate for taxicabs in the coming months. And one of the things that we've added is an additional surcharge on the customer unfortunately that would encourage nighttime service. So the driver gets a little bit extra if he works at night. Not too much, but just enough to incentivize them to provide service, because we need them.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: One more little thing and I'll let you go. I feel like I'm hogging all the air time here. But when we talk about the fee that is charged on the rides that go to this fund, those fees are attached to Uber and Lyft rides, correct?

WALTON HARRIS: Correct.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Not on taxi rides?

WALTON HARRIS: Correct.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: So Uber and Lyft, all of those pennies going into those rides are coming into this fund and coming back and helping the taxicab industry to survive and to be able to supply increased WAV transportation for wheelchair users.

WALTON HARRIS: Correct. Yes.

THEO BRADDY: Can I say one more thing? I got to acknowledge this. All of my experience and all of my years of doing this, I always say this comes down to people who just want to make a difference, decision makers who want to make a difference and can do the work. So I acknowledge that you all are doing that.

WALTON HARRIS: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Yes. Very much so. And that's why we're very, very happy to find you as a bright spot. So thank you so very much for coming today.

Okay. So next. In the report we also found another bright spot. I will always remember this meeting for, one, for the fabulous panelists and for this microphone that has humiliated me all day long.

[Laughter]

Okay. So another bright spot that we found in our research was microtransit. Let me look at my notes here. As we learned more about it, it became very clear that this mode of transportation has already improved accessible transportation options in communities all over the United States. It is a unique, on-demand transportation model that is growing, and we consider it a very bright spot and a hopeful spot for the future, today and the future. The company is called Via, and we describe it in our report. We encourage you to look them up.

I'm very, very happy to introduce you to another panelist, Aparna Paladugu, Vice President of Public Policy and Government Affairs for Via, who will talk about what microtransit is and give us some example of their projects.

And Aparna, welcome.

APARNA PALADUGU: Thank you. Good morning. It's wonderful to be here.

Thank you to the other panelists. Thank you to all of you at NCD for inviting us to be here.

As a company, we are very committed to providing accessible products and solutions, and I was very thrilled when NCD reached out to me to discuss the report and to see the final report and to see that our work was identified as a bright spot. We were just excited and thrilled to be here and be a part of this conversation.

I think I'll start today by talking a bit about Via and what we're doing across the country and around the world. I will explain what microtransit is for those of you who are not familiar.

So let me get started by talking about Via. We can skip to the next slide, if that would be okay.

Great. So Via is a technology company that is focused on public transportation. We've been around for about 13 years, and we have been working to really help communities across the country improve their public transit. So we work with over 650 transit agencies, cities, county governments, state DoTs, school districts, any type of public agency or public entity who can use our software or our operational services we work with.

And we can move to the next slide.

So this slide shows what capabilities Via can provide. So we're really an end to end for public transit. We can provide transit planners with the ability to plan out their networks and really schedule, you know, all of those rides. Microtransit and paratransit, which I'll talk about in a minute, that on-demand dynamic routing capability that's discussed a little bit in the report is definitely something that's cutting edge technology that we work on at Via. And of course we're focused on journey planning, helping riders get from point A to point B.

And then of course data is really important to us. We share all of our data with our public sector partners. They don't even need to wait on us. They can access it without our help through a program, and they can still meet what types of data and trends they are seeing which we discuss with them frequently.

So yes, we can also move to the next slide again.

So I will talk a bit about what is microtransit. So for the vast majority of folks who have heard about Via, we are known for the work across the country we have done on microtransit.

So microtransit is public transportation. It uses smaller vehicles like minivans or minibuses. And the riders use the service on demand. So they're paired together with other riders and a driver who are headed in the same direction. So our dynamic routing algorithm helps sort of pair those riders and those drivers together. So this is not going to be your fastest trip; this is going to be the most efficient ride. So we work to make sure these vehicles are efficiently traveling through the area they are serving.

We work with that local public transit agency or city that's launching this service to make these tailored to the local community. So some services -- we work in urban, suburban, and rural communities. So some of these services are really focused on that first and last mile. How do you get to and from existing transit, where there is no bus or it doesn't make sense to have a fixed route service because there's not enough people riding it.

And then in other areas it's to fill gaps where there is no transit. So that's why we're providing the service. And we try to really make these services feel local. They are branded as that entity. So for example in Montgomery County we operate a service called Ride On Flex in conjunction with Ride On and the Montgomery County Department of Transportation. So you really wouldn't know that Via's software powers that service, but it does.

So these are public transit services. Their fares are similar to public transit. We offer wheelchair-accessible vehicles. In some cases Via just provides the software, that dynamic routing capability, so that the riders and drivers are paired together. And the public entity operates the service. And in some cases we actually operate the service ourselves.

So it's a really exciting innovation in the last I would say 7ish years, 7-8 years -- some of our earliest pilots were around 2017, 2018 -- to now where we are working with several hundred agencies to provide these services, and we see this only growing.

And one thing I should note too is that you can request these rides like you do an Uber or a Lyft with an app from the Apple App Store or Google Play, or you can call in if you do not have a smartphone. We also have web tools available to riders as well.

We can jump to the next slide as well. I kind of skipped over this a little bit. But this kind of illustrates what microtransit is. On the left you're seeing a fixed route system. You can't get everywhere on the bus, right? For example, in Wilson, North Carolina, this is a more rural community. They had a bus system that was very limited. But instead, on the right, now any resident or visitor can travel to any point within the city and it makes what may have been an hour and a half trip requiring two buses into maybe a 25-minute trip for riders. So it really makes a dramatic impact.

We can move to the next slide.

I want to highlight, you know, the accessibility and safety components that we focus on. So a huge component of this report is focused on accessible ground transportation. And that spans from us focusing on an accessible mobile app, alternative booking methods like the phone option, we offer WAVs in the fleet, and we work with fleet providers to procure those, retrofit them when needed, and ensure that we have the appropriate number of WAVs in every fleet. We study the data, we watch requests, we want to make sure that the wait times are similar for riders and that wheelchair riders are receiving the vehicles they need to travel around in a reasonable time frame.

We also offer alternative payment options if riders are unbanked. Whether that's cash, or we use vouchers that can be purchased at local entities, if a locality in that area, the regulations don't allow us to use cash.

And then of course safety is hugely important to us. We follow all federal transit requirements for safety, including drug and alcohol testing. We have a robust safety and training program for our drivers so that they are trained to provide these services and to work with customers who have accessibility needs. So that's another component of our work.

I would love to give a few examples of how this works. I'll try not to take too long here. But the first example, we can switch to the next slide, is in Jersey City, New Jersey. So Jersey City, as most of you may know, is a pretty urban area, right outside New York City. It has a lot of great transportation. There's PATH, there's New Jersey Transit, there's lots of ways to get to Jersey City.

Oh, I'm sorry, I actually brought Arlington. I'm sorry. I didn't mention earlier but I am visually impaired so I'm kind of doing this -- I can't actually see the screen so doing this a little bit off memory. So apologize. I will move to Arlington.

Arlington, Texas, is a mid-sized city of around 400,000 people. They were one of the first adopters of the Via microtransit idea. You can see the vehicle in the top right of the screen. And that's typically how the vehicles look. They are minivans or minibuses.

And Arlington launched their first pilot in 2017 with Via in just a small part of the city. Over time it has expanded so we are now the only public transit and the entire public transit provider for the city of Arlington. So you can go anywhere in the city in a Via Arlington vehicle.

We've seen tremendous results here, a lot of folks accessing healthcare, jobs, educational opportunities, getting to the grocery store, really important life activities. And we've had -- just this March we reached the big milestone of 3 million rides in Arlington. We view this as one of our earliest and most successful partnerships.

It also illustrates how an area that has very limited transit can really provide a accessible, effective transit solution for its residents.

Now we can move to Jersey City. Apologize for that.

So as I mentioned, Jersey City is a lot more dense, a lot more urban than Arlington. We started working with Jersey City in 2020. The mayor was concerned about some cuts that New Jersey Transit was making to their bus routes in Jersey City. And as you can see, in that map in the center right of the screen, there's an outer zone and an inner zone. The inner zone is where all of the transit currently is. So we have PATH, NJT, there's light rail that leaves from there. But that outer area is where there is a lack of transit. So a lot of folks were struggling to come in from that outer area to the downtown area. There are a lot of folks who are seniors, who are low income, who have accessibility needs, who have really been able to access the service.

And just to illustrate, in Jersey City, fares range from $2-3. $3 is the standard cost. $2 is the discounted rate if you are low income, over the age of 65, I believe. There's a few other concessions that you need to get approved by the city.

So this is really, truly similar to a public transit service. We work to complement the existing fixed route, get people to it. We work to make sure that we're filling in gaps where they do exist.

And we can move to the next slide as well.

I wanted to highlight a little bit just the impact we are having in terms of people being able to get from point A to point B. You'll see some rider quotes on the right and some stats on the screen that help illustrate this. The vast majority of riders don't own a personal vehicle. Many are, you know, really just trying to get around and they struggled before this service. I believe 30% have a disability, and we have a lot of seniors who are riding the service. And you can see one of the quotes on the top is from a rider who is legally blind.

So the impact we are having with these accessible, more flexible transit services is definitely truly important in this discussion about ground transportation.

You know, I'll just kind of as an aside say there's a lot of discussion of TNCs and the impact they can have. That is huge if they are providing more WAV accessibility and accessibility generally, but these services, the microtransit services that are public transit where the fares are more akin to public transit, are more accessible to many people who maybe cannot afford a WAV or a taxi ride. So I wanted to just mention that as well.

The other area, and I think in the report we talked about this a little bit. But it's been a greater focus for us over the last few years is really improving paratransit.

We can switch to the next slide.

So paratransit is hugely important for riders with disabilities, as all of you know. And we want to help use technology to improve it. There are tools including software for routing. So we take that same routing capability of carrying riders and drivers together and apply that to paratransit to really help improve the customer experience and the efficiency of how a transit agency runs a paratransit system. So we provide a lot of different tools for an agency when they're operating a paratransit service. So we can provide that dynamic routing algorithm and pair riders together so they either can update the software they're using. A lot of them use antiquated older softwares or they don't use software; maybe they use pen and paper. We've definitely run across that a lot at Via, and over the last few years we've seen increased interest in using this technology because it helps dispatchers not have to kind of figure it out and let the technology figure out who lives close to each other, where are people headed, how can we get them there without keeping them in a vehicle as long as they have been before.

And the other important thing, very importantly, is on-time pickups. Paratransit, we've heard a lot about being given a window for a vehicle to arrive, and often times that vehicle is late and riders are either waiting outside or they don't have enough time to get outside and then they're considered a no show.

We really, using this technology, have helped improve on-time performance for transit agencies operating paratransit services because we can get it down to including, you know, traffic, thinking about the entire ride plan for a driver who is operating a vehicle. So we can really improve that there.

And then we do a lot for the riders.

We can switch to the next slide, which shows some of our tools.

Obviously apps are really important. They can help riders not have to call in if you don't want to and you would rather book on the app.

We also offer web booking portals because sometimes apps' accessibility can be challenging for some people so we want to be sure if you're using a screen reader or just rather prefer to use the internet, you can do that.

Obviously the phone booking option continues.

And then we've recently launched more caregiver functions. We know a lot of caregivers are involved in paratransit. And so we want to make sure they're able to book and track rides for customers and know that the person has a ride booked, is on the way, and when they'll be arriving so they can plan for that. So that's another important component in paratransit.

We can move to the next slide again.

So I wanted to talk through a few paratransit examples as well. In 2020 in Green Bay, Wisconsin, they brought us in to help improve their transit system. And that was really by adding that software layer. And they saw a really increased improvement in on-time rides.

And then later on they asked Via to work with them to introduce a microtransit service as well for some parts of their area. They have a lot of great fixed route, but they wanted to complement with microtransit.

And what we did, and this is a little bit innovative, is really commingle the microtransit and paratransit rides so that riders who are in paratransit or microtransit can be in the same vehicles, just to improve that vehicle efficiency and that driver efficiency. If someone is in the same area, they can pick up a microtransit and a paratransit passenger. And this helped bring about a lot of efficiency gains for the transit agency overall, whether that's in terms of the cost of the drivers or the vehicles or, you know, just overall how much they're spending.

So that's one good example.

The next example is in Suffolk County, New York. It's a large area with a large paratransit service. They began using Via software about a year ago and saw some really dramatic improvements. It was definitely a tougher project for us because it's such a large geographic area that we really had to think a little bit creatively about how do we get folks, you know, across the entire county in an efficient and quick manner. The technology, you know, has to really service that.

So we did see some great gains, as you can see, increase in trip volume. People are seeing that paratransit is arriving on time, the routes are much better than before because they're being done with cutting edge software. So people are trying to use paratransit more. It's reliable. You can see the increase in on-time performance. And the decrease in average time on the bus and a decrease in average trip distance. That means that that software is making really smart decisions and not taking people further than they need to.

And the next slide.

This has meant we see a reduction in no shows, a reduction in complaints, and a really high rating for the transit agency on how they're operating paratransit.

So yeah, that kind of gives you all an overview of the work we're doing at Via.

In addition, we do a lot of work in school transportation. We are working with autonomous vehicle providers to have them become part of our public transit offering. So that example in Arlington, Texas, we did include autonomous vehicles with a safety driver in one part of the city, and that was a 3-year pilot that just concluded and it was highly successful. So if you're in that zone, you could actually receive a proposal to take an autonomous vehicle and say yes or no. So we're hoping to encourage more transit agencies and public agencies to start incorporating autonomous vehicles into the fleets as well.

I just want to state that one of the most important things for us is really improving transit in all of the areas across the country, whether that's urban, where you would traditionally think there is good transit, but that accessibility as we've discussed today may not be there or there just are gaps in certain areas, whether that's in a suburban or rural area. I didn't give you guys a highly rural example, but we have worked in many rural areas, including Indian reservations. So we've worked with tribes to really improve transportation on their reservations. We've worked in areas that have limited access to broadband. So our technology, you know, our drivers have to stop at certain places where they can get Wi-Fi and update their sort of driver plan.

So we are using a lot of cutting-edge technology to improve public transit overall and then make it more accessible. So we were thrilled, as I mentioned, to be a part of this report and to be identified as a bright spot. We are just seeing, I mean, since we've spoken with NCD and in the time that the report was written, just increased interest, increased excitement about microtransit across the country, and increased interest in the paratransit technology as well. So we're really heartened to that fact, and we hope to continue to work. There's a lot of people in this room that I've met and some that I hope to chat with, and we want to continue as a company innovating especially in the area of accessibility. So, you know, this report is really important to that, as are the conversations we're having today, to really understand what's needed out there for individuals with disabilities. So we want to continue to engage on that front.

And the recommendations identified in this report, you know, one of the things was really thinking about microtransit and how do we provide enough funding from public entities, whether federal, state, or local, to ensure these services keep running is a critical one.

So thank you all, and happy to answer any questions about Via or any of the recommendations focused on microtransit or paratransit.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: I just wanted to say thank you again, and I wanted to bring up the fact that very quickly, I know we're a little over, but we bring up in the report that how challenging paratransit is for so many people. And yet how important it is.

So a lot of the complaints were about long wait times, having to reserve in advance, the no shows, the trying to wait after work to be picked up, waiting before you left work to get picked up, not knowing when you would arrive because you would have to share that ride with a lot of other people.

And it sounds like what Via does through your technology is route people that are all going in the same direction or close to the same direction so that you're not driving all the way around the city and then ending up at work an hour late or having to go in an hour early so that everybody else can work on that, right?

APARNA PALADUGU: Absolutely. You can let us know if there's a time you want to leave or time you need to arrive by, and then we can factor that in. We always ask people to have a little buffer of course, maybe like 15-20 minutes; you just never know. But one of the things that I think is important that I didn't mention is that we really want to see transit continue to improve and to provide more same-day and on-demand rides because typically and historically it does not. So that's a huge challenge for riders, and we want to see more of that, the ability for people to rely on it. I know making a stop has been something important that I've heard from the community, being able to, you know, stop at the grocery store and then get home. Well, ideally you wouldn't even need to book a ride with a stop. You would just book two rides and they would reliably show up for you.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Right. And the last thing I want to say is, just to point out, this is on demand. It isn't having to reserve 24 hours in advance.

APARNA PALADUGU: So in microtransit, yes, it's all on demand. It's always on demand.

In paratransit, some of the agencies we work with are still doing prescheduled rides, and they're starting to use our technologies and want to preschedule but they want that dynamic routing capability so they can improve the pairing of the riders with the drivers and make sure those routes and route efficiency. Some agencies are doing same-day rides, on-demand rides. We're seeing that come through with improved technology, so that is our hope for the future, that more agencies will look at technology to provide same-day rides.

The other thing I would say, in some localities there is both microtransit and paratransit, so some riders ride the paratransit for their prescheduled trips and use microtransit for same-day rides.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Excellent. Excellent. Well, thank you so very much for coming today and talking to us about Via and your good work. We hope to hear more from you in the future and to watch this grow. And especially thank you for looking out and planning for accessibility for wheelchair users. We appreciate that.

And with that, we are going to end the panel. I appreciate all of you being here, and I will ask you if -- let me catch up with you right before you leave. I'll skirt around the table and be able to say goodbye to you in person.

SHAWN KENNEMER: All right. Thank you. Great panel. I think we're doing good work, and only by talking and getting this going.

I have some other questions, mostly for the NCD team that we'll address, and I think there's some add ons to our transportation study that maybe we need to look at. Just some thoughts that occurred. We'll get the whole Council involved in that.

But thank you to the panelists who are here. We really appreciate your time to spend with us.

And with that, we are headed for lunch, our lunch break. We were originally scheduled for 11:35-1:00. We're going to try to pick up probably about 1:10. So if you'll be back, that would be great.

Thank you. We are suspended.

[Lunch]

SHAWN KENNEMER: Okay. It is 1:10, and I think we will get this started again and call the meeting back to order.

Ana has to get her stuff together.

Thank you for coming back to the National Council on Disability for the August meeting. Really appreciate it.

Our next panel I will turn over to Ana.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for being here this afternoon. It's great to see you all. We just came off of a panel this morning that spoke about taxis and Ubers and Lyfts and microtransit and other types of ground transportation, looking for greater accessibility for all people with disabilities and particularly too people in wheelchairs.

So I'm so happy that you're here. Let me start the panel now that we have everybody in the room.

So this afternoon's panel focuses on autonomous vehicles, AVs: Where We Are Now and the Future Outlook for Serving People with Disabilities.

For a long time it has been said that autonomous vehicles would be a game changer for people who cannot drive, allowing greater participation in community life, greater opportunities for employment, and general independence.

But it's not a given that AVs will be accessible to all people. This can only happen if they are designed for accessibility for people with disabilities, and that would include wheelchair accessibility.

To begin, let's watch a video created from the ground up by General Motors Cruise division. Although GM made this vehicle, we are using it as an example of what can be done when creating inclusivity in design.

Let's see if we can pull that video up.

[Video]

>> Cruise has built a robotaxi. The prototype is set to undergo course testing starting in October. Developed in collaboration with GM and BraunAbility, this vehicle marks a significant milestone in providing inclusive transportation solutions.

The Cruise WAV is the culmination of 3 years of design, development, and testing, taking inspiration from the purpose-built Origin vehicle, the prototype showcases seamless accessibility experience. The Cruise WAV will be capable of accommodating popular wheelchair models; however, manual wheelchair users may require a companion to secure the straps effectively.

Cruise acknowledges that this is only the first generation of the vehicle and aims to work closely with the disability community to expand in future iterations.

Prior to commercial operation, the Cruise WAV must overcome significant regulatory challenges. Cruise and GM have filed a petition with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to produce AVs without additional controls such as steering wheels or pedals. While a decision has not yet been made, the company is on track to receive regulatory approval. It is worth noting that federal safety regulators are expected to introduce new rulemaking in September, which could shape AVs like Cruise. If implemented, these regulations would pave the way for innovative transportation solutions.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Great. Great. Thank you.

It's also an example of when we use the word "purpose-built vehicles," which we use a lot in AV talk, I think a lot of people don't understand what that means. We'll talk about that a little bit more later, but this is an example of a vehicle built with the purpose of being accessible from the ground up.

Right now the United States and the world is experiencing a surge of research and development in automated driving technologies and fully autonomous robotaxis are in use across many states. Many states allow AV testing now.

NCD found in our research that currently there are no WAVs in the robotaxi fleets that are in operation. We did identify GM's Cruise, and we were sad to see that they had paused production on that. We had hoped to see something more like that again in the future.

AVs like robotaxis are not a thing of the future. They are here, they are now, and this is only going to grow and become more common in communities across the United States. And they are on their way to becoming another convenient on-demand transportation option for everyone. We hope that they will include people with wheelchairs.

One moment.

Because if they don't design from the beginning, it will end up being yet another inaccessible transportation mode for millions of people with disabilities, and we don't want to see that happen.

Our panelists today offer a broad range of information and perspectives on autonomous vehicles, and the majority contributed to the development of this report. And we are very grateful to all of you for your participation in that.

To preface our first presenter, NCD has been advising on employment of people with disabilities for a very long time. The workforce participation rate of people with disabilities has remained stubbornly low over the years. In comparison to workers without disabilities. And it's a big issue. And it's one where access to transportation plays a big role. The better the transportation that all people have, the more access to employment opportunities they will have.

So let me introduce our first panelist, Elizabeth Layman. She's the Director of Health-Wealth Innovations at the National Disability Institute, and she is here to discuss an NDI study on the potential impacts on the nation if all AVs were accessible. This report is discussed in our report, and we believe it has fascinating results.

Thank you so much, Liz, and feel free to start when you're ready.

ELIZABETH LAYMAN: All right. Let's see how this mic goes. Cool. Everyone can hear me?

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Yes.

ELIZABETH LAYMAN: Very good.

Thank you, Ana, and thank you to everyone else on the Council for having me. As you said, I'm Elizabeth Layman. I also go by Liz, if that's easier.

And I'm the Director of Health-Wealth Innovations at National Disability Institute or NDI. NDI is a national nonprofit -- ooh, I see what you're talking about, Ana, goes in and out. Sorry, y'all.

It is a national nonprofit focused on economic empowerment for people with disabilities and their families.

What's the trick?

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: I haven't figured out the trick yet.

ELIZABETH LAYMAN: Okay. We'll keep working on it.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Back up a little bit.

ELIZABETH LAYMAN: Is that better or worse?

Okay. Sorry, y'all. Bear with me.

So NDI focuses on economic empowerment, and today I'm going to talk a bit about the potential economic impacts of AVs, or autonomous vehicles, in terms of disability employment.

But first I would like to offer a disclaimer. For those of you who cannot see, I have a picture here of a very sad service dog in the back of a trunk. I will say no animals will harmed in the making of this PowerPoint. However, I did ask one of my artificial intelligence tools to create this image based on a true story, which I will share with you shortly.

So I have been working in the disability nonprofit world for about 10 years. During that time I have had the pleasure of traveling this beautiful country, with many of my colleagues who have a wide range of disabilities. And I cannot tell you how many times we've been stranded due to transportation issues. A wheelchair-accessible taxi that never comes. A metro station with a broken elevator. An airport that mishandles a mobility device. And the list goes on.

One morning in particular, I remember my colleague and I were rushing to a conference. It was our job to make sure the live captions and American Sign Language interpreters were ready to go for the event. This was an important partnership with an important funder. And in the world of nonprofits, as I'm sure many of you know, this was a big deal.

So we got dressed nicely and we called our ride early and we were waiting on the curb. I'm sure you know where this is going. And we had called a rideshare that morning, like an Uber or Lyft. Once the car pulled up, the driver refused to take us due to my colleague's service animal.

Now, this has happened to us before and I'm sure it will again unfortunately, so we tried to remain calm. However, this particular driver insisted repeatedly that the only way we could get into his car is if we put the dog in the trunk. And no, we did not put the dog in the trunk. We actually found a different way to get to the event that morning. We cried about the ADA and we cajoled and we pleaded, but eventually we had to get a different option.

I will pause. For effect.

Is that any better?

Maybe. I'll have to be a little taller for this mic. Thank you.

And so we did eventually get to the event, but we were late, and the person who was in charge was not happy with us, the funder, the partner we had wanted so badly to impress.

And perhaps then you can all imagine why we were so excited when a few years later that same colleague and I who were stranded were approached by Cruise to do research on what access to on-demand and fully accessible AVs would mean for the disability community.

Now, when we say fully accessible, I will let the rest of the panelists describe what they mean by that, and today I will focus on distilling some of the research we did for you all today.

And while we did not disaggregate by disability type in this research, I will do my best to point out a few mobility-specific insights.

Next slide.

As I mentioned, my colleagues and I already had plenty of firsthand and anecdotal stories of struggles with transportation. We also wanted to understand the bigger picture. During work from home in 2020 and 2021, people with disabilities were the only group that gained labor force participation instead of losing it, and this told us something about transportation.

Also in late 2021, we were struck by some research on several hundred people with disabilities who listed transportation as their top barrier to employment. So in early 2022 when we began our research in earnest, people with disabilities had a notably lower workforce participation rate, as Ana said, and nearly double the unemployment rate of their nondisabled peers.

On the screen we have two graphs. The one on the left is unemployment rate with people with disabilities at 10% and their nondisabled peers at 5%. And the graph on the right is labor force participation rate with people with disabilities at 21% and people without a disability at 67%.

Now, this is a snapshot using 2021 data. However, the stats have not greatly shifted since then. And as has been said before, we are more than 30 years after the ADA. This really should not be the case. So the fact that a new accessible type of transportation like AVs could possibly get more people with disabilities to work was something we were excited to learn about.

My team at NDI as well as our friends at ICF did AV research on three cornerstones: A literature review to examine the status of people with disabilities and transportation; a macroeconomic analysis; and a set of over 30 interviews from experts and people with disabilities in the community. If this sounds familiar, as Ana said, it may be because NCD has kindly cited our research in their recent report on transportation, and we're very grateful for that.

Next slide, please.

So here are a few highlights for those who maybe have not read the report. We ran the numbers for the macroeconomic analysis at three levels: Low, moderate, and max. We chose the moderate scenario in our final report because otherwise the numbers frankly felt too big.

From this analysis, the adoption of AVs could promote 4.4 million jobs for people with disabilities, and those are just direct jobs that are filled by people with disabilities. This number did not include the jobs upstream such as manufacturing jobs needed to make school supplies for new teachers or the induced jobs which are downstream like the grocery store clerks or coffee shop baristas who support people with disabilities in the workforce.

If you combine the direct, indirect, and induced jobs created by the adoption of AVs, it would amount to 9.1 million new jobs per our analysis.

I think the microphone doesn't believe me either. Can you still hear me?

Okay. Good.

In that first year of accessible AV adoption, again at the moderate level, our analysis predicted there would also be an increase in GDP by nearly $870 billion and an increase in economic output of $1.6 trillion.

As a quick aside, GDP for us was the value added which was output minus the intermediate input, while output was the final value of all products produced in the country.

So not only would access to accessible AVs mean new jobs for people with disabilities and their communities, but it would also mean more financial success for the U.S. as a whole.

There are several other interesting numbers in the final report. As you can probably see on the screen, we have several hovered around this image of the WAV Origin, and I invite you to check it out online if you're curious about numbers. I know some folks are probably numbers people. And you can find them under the reports on our website, nationaldisabilityinstitute.org.

In the meantime, though, I would also like to talk about a few of our qualitative findings. In addition to running the economic analysis, we spoke to more than 30 interviewees to hear their lived experiences. These interviewees ranged from young entrepreneurs with mobility disabilities, and veterans with disabilities, to Fortune 500 employers and transportation experts and aging Americans.

The five main themes we found in those interviews were that access to accessible AVs would lead to an increase in employment, entrepreneurship, personal safety, independence, and access to healthcare.

Several interviewees with mobility disabilities told us that requiring a job near reliable public transportation restricted their job searches not just to certain companies and roles but also to certain cities, barring them from accepting otherwise favorable job offers and even promotions. For many interviewees, owning and operating a modified vehicle was not an option due to physical or monetary constraints. Several mentioned that paratransit services were nearly impossible to use around planned travel, and several others specifically with mobility disabilities complained that relying on friends and family for rides to job interviews, work, or conferences made them feel like emotional and financial burdens, while paying for taxis or rideshares ate into their incomes, and in the case of small business owners, into their profits.

NICK SABULA: Let's try this one. See if it works a little better.

ELIZABETH LAYMAN: All right. Testing. Testing. Testing.

NICK SABULA: I'll tell you what. We'll give you that back and swap it out.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Try it farther back.

ELIZABETH LAYMAN: Better? Let me see where we are. Hold on.

All right. So based on past NDI research, we knew that a higher percentage of people with disabilities start small businesses versus that of their nondisabled peers. For that reason, we allotted one-third of our interviews to entrepreneurs with disabilities. Many did not -- testing. Testing. Yeah? I'm too deaf for this.

Okay. Based on past NDI research, we knew a higher percentage of people with disabilities start small businesses versus that of their nondisabled peers, and for that reason we allotted one-third of our interviews to entrepreneurs with disabilities. Many did not open brick and mortar stores, and for them having access to on-demand accessible AVs meant they could carry their heavy wares to pop up events independently.

The interviewees also told us that having the ability to travel spontaneously was especially paramount to sustaining their small businesses and their overall financial health.

I am rounding the corner here to the end, which is I will close out with a quick story. One young entrepreneur had started her own business with her mother when no one else would employ her due to her disability. She started packaging and sorting coffee supplies and then expanded to roasting beans in small batches and directly selling cups of coffee to her community. She was now employing a staff of about two dozen people with disabilities when I talked to her. And she told us that getting her rapidly growing staff together was invaluable for team meetings, networking events, and retreats, but it was also a logistical nightmare. They were just not enough accessible, available, affordable transportation options for wheelchair users and service animals unless she planned very far in advance, which was not always possible. She was excited by her business' growth but was frustrated that transportation was limiting herself and her colleagues.

During our research we spoke to dozens like this business owner, and the story was always the same. Access to accessible AVs could mean the difference between landing a new job, maintaining a current one, getting a promotion, building financial security, starting a business, or impressing a new funder. It is no question that people with disabilities can contribute to GDP and output and jobs and strengthening the U.S. economy. But people with disabilities can't do that if left on the curb or service animals shoved into trunks.

So hopefully AVs will be a piece in this puzzle. I am very excited to continue down this road with you all. Thank you.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so much, Liz. Thank you so much for coming.

I'm still experiencing the same thing you are, as you see, so it's okay.

I just really appreciate, we appreciate the great work you did on this report. It's very enlightening. And I think it really goes to show, you know, what transportation can do for employment. You think of all of the people in rural areas that already don't have very good transportation opportunities. So any additional ground transportation that's accessible would be fantastic. Thank you.

And now I'm so delighted to introduce Jeff Farrah, if you can still hear me. Jeff Farrah is the Chief Executive Officer of the Autonomous Vehicle Industry Association, or otherwise known as AVIA. AVIA does share the belief that autonomous vehicles offer an opportunity to enhance mobility for the elderly, the disabled, as well as make roadways safer.

Jeff, we are so very glad you have joined us today, and we would love to hear all about the state of AVs and mobility and safety. So the floor is yours.

JEFF FARRAH: Ana, thank you very much. Appreciate the opportunity.

Thank you to NCD. I hope everybody can hear me okay. Otherwise I might be borrowing Liz's backup microphone, her third microphone.

I have a number of slides here. This is a title slide with the title of the presentation talking about the need for AVs to enhance mobility and roadway safety.

And if someone could advance to the next slide, I would appreciate it.

Wanted to give a little bit of a sense of who we are and who we represent. This is a slide that has various members of our organizations' logos on it. I won't read all of these, but I think I can provide a little bit of bucketing of some of the main categories here. We do the best we can to bring together the entirety of the AV industry. There are a number of companies out here pursuing robotaxis. People are beginning to take rides in a variety of American cities. Companies like Waymo and others are up here. There are logos for a variety of AV truck companies. This is something where a bit of a separate discussion from today but certainly when it comes to a lot of the supply chain challenges out there, there are autonomous trucking companies that are really trying to make a big impact.

There are also a number of logos here for traditional OEMs or car manufacturers like GM. Obviously there was mention before in the context of the Cruise Origin. Ford Motor Company. And some others.

There are more logos here for companies that can probably best be described and bucketed as being end users of AVs, companies looking to integrate autonomous technology into their business.

And then if you go to the next slide, please, we do not do this work alone. We are strong believers in partnering with allied organizations that share our enthusiasm for AVs. There are a variety of logos on this screen. Special call out to my friend Kent on the panel here with us today and his organization United Spinal Association. There are a number of other organizations here such as National Federation of the Blind and Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Blinded Veterans Association. Don't want to leave anybody out, but want to give you a sense of the types of groups we partner with. These groups all have their own stakeholders in mind in terms of why they think AVs will be impactful in the future.

Next slide, please.

So I wanted to talk a little bit about the state of AVs, to Ana's point. Quick commercial that we produce an annual report called literally State of AV, available on our website, theavindustry.org. This report comes out in the spring. It came out in May of this year. We do a lot to profile the progress of the industry, talk about things our partners and members are engaged in.

One of the things the State of AV does is it comes out with data about the AV industry. We do surveying, for example, of CEOs of AV companies to talk about sentiment, their challenges in the market, and how they're advancing these vehicles.

But one thing we do each year is track the total number of autonomous miles driven on U.S. public roads. This number does not include closed track testing or simulation. These are vehicles that are sharing the roads with every day drivers, and a year or so ago, that number was 70 million.

In May, we released it; it was 145 million. So think about an industry 10-15 years old or so and the number of autonomous miles has more than doubled in just the last year. And frankly this being August now and this number released in May, this number is already out of date. There's probably been tens of millions additional miles driven in American cities. This is something that we are starting to see a real inflection point here in a lot of the adoption and enthusiasm for these vehicles.

Next slide, please.

Wanted to talk a little bit about the state of where you see a lot of these vehicles when you talk about something like a robotaxi. Obviously they are deploying very deliberately and in a variety of U.S. cities. If you go to places like the greater Phoenix area, Dallas, Austin, Atlanta, you see these robotaxis already on the roads. And from our members' perspectives, they want to know there's a regulatory regime in place in a given state. They want to make sure they are welcome on those roads. Ultimately they are able to engage with local regulators and law enforcement and first responders.

So the good news is that we now have 26 states across the country that have passed AV deployment statutes. This map on the screen is a map of the United States, and in the color green, there are 26 states shaded in. They span western side to California and Nevada and states in the southwest stretching all the way across the southwest and southeast United States all the way to Georgia and Florida on the eastern seaboard, going all the way to the north up to North Dakota, and the most recent state to pass an AV deployment is in the state of Montana. So we are very excited about this progress. Obviously we still have a lot of work to do. The 26 states I mentioned represent more than 57% of the U.S. population, so obviously we have a lot of work to do. Nearly half of American citizens do not live in a state where an AV manufacturer or developer has an AV deployment statute in place, so especially when you think of a lot of the population centers in the Mid-Atlantic and in the northeast and whatnot, that is an area that our industry really needs to tackle.

Next slide, please.

So I wanted to talk about the need for a federal policy framework. I touched on the fact that you have these 26 states that are in place. So this is just a title slide that says federal AV framework.

We can move to the next one.

So I want to talk about why it's so important to have a federal policy AV framework. And I think that the video that was played before that talked about the Cruise Origin, it really tells a story that is an incredibly frustrating one for our industry and very tragic in a lot of ways. And what I mean by that is when we look out at the regulatory framework that exists in the United States, we see an incredibly strong role for state governments but also federal government. States are able to authorize vehicles on the road, set up minimum insurance requirements, set up protocols for engagement of law enforcement and first responders, but only the federal government can set uniform rules around vehicle design, vehicle construction, and vehicle performance. Essentially when you talk about the need for accessibility, the question of vehicle design is an incredibly important one because if you look out at the vehicles on the road right now, these vehicles need to be compliant with federal vehicle safety standards. They need manual controls. Mentioned in that video at the beginning, I know they highlighted things like a steering wheel and few others that were there.

So when we think about the need to build purpose-built accessible vehicles from the ground up that can be able to accommodate wheelchair users and others that you saw in that video, there are core design issues that need to be overcome, so we are pushing hard at the federal level to put in place a federal AV framework that will allow for the Department of Transportation and its sub agencies like NHTSA to be strong regulators of the vehicles but also make sure that we can design these vehicles in a way that's accommodating the most amount of the American citizenry.

Next slide, please.

This slide here talks a little bit about the need for a federal policy framework. I wanted to give a little bit of insight in terms of where we are as an industry association. We spent a considerable amount of time in the last few months of 2024 really thinking about where the industry was, what some of the experiences were, and how it is that we could best go about getting in place a federal AV framework. Again, to reference once again the video played before talking about, for example, the exemption process that the Origin was pursuing. That was a very frustrating process I think on all sides is fair to say. That is something where the end did not ultimately put the Origin on the road, so we have gone back and rethought what the approach might be to dealing with things like manual controls for AVs. How it is that there might be better ways of addressing that that we can ensure safety but also ensure we have vehicles on the roads to meet people with disabilities across the entire country.

So that workstream if I remember is culminated in a document that you can again find on our website called Securing American Leadership in Autonomous Vehicles, a series of policy proposals at the federal level. Some will be things that Congress will need to tackle. Some will be things that the Department of Transportation can and should do through rulemakings at NHTSA or at FMCSA on the heavy duty side of things.

So we went out of our way to make these action oriented. This is not a think piece about our reasons we think AVs will be great. This is very much specific things that people can take action on.

So we have gotten a lot of good news from Secretary Duffy. There is an automated framework they're moving forward on, so we've been enthusiastic supporters of a lot of the early items that have come out. But frankly more work needs to be done, so we're very much rolling up our sleeves and doing that.

Next slide, please.

So this is just a title slide that says "Enhanced Mobility." Obviously a lot has been said about mobility and accessibility, the promise of AVs, and I've certainly cited Liz's numbers many times in terms of her great research. Yesterday, as a matter of fact.

This slide here is a picture of Teresa Galgano from Blinded Veterans Association talking about how AVs will open doors for people with disabilities like herself. In her case, she is visually impaired, so they are very passionate about the ability of rideshare, of AVs, of robotaxis specifically to really unlock a lot of the opportunities. So I won't belabor the economic impact Liz went through because she did a great job and I commend her research to anybody.

Next slide, please.

And this again is a title slide that says "Roadway Safety."

Next slide.

I wanted to just spend a moment talking about really one of the driving forces of AVs, which is the reality that we lose far too many people on our roads every single year. I know that many people know this, but we lost nearly 40,000 people that died tragically on our roads just last year. To put that in context, that's about the entirety of Nationals Park, the baseball stadium here in Washington, D.C. And we reject the status quo. We don't think it needs to be this way. We think our roads are far too dangerous. We know that human deficiencies such as distraction and impairment, whether through intoxication or drug use, these are leading causes of a lot of these crashes, and we think that AVs have a lot to do to ultimately make our roads a lot safer.

Next slide.

So I just wanted to level set for everybody and explain a little bit about how the technology works because I think that these days there's a lot of confusion about different levels of autonomy and different types of technology that is out there. For a lot of people, they are familiar with the various levels of autonomy that begin with zero, basically meaning no technology in the vehicle at all, ending with level five. For a lot of Americans they are either passengers or buying vehicles that have enhanced levels of technology in them. So when we talk about some of the driver assist features that are commonly in new vehicles today, those are referred to as level two vehicles. And the important thing to understand about those vehicles is that they can have a lot of safety-enhancing features, but ultimately they need an attentive human to be at the steering wheel at all times, ultimately being able to take over the dynamic driving task.

When we talk about AVs, we are talking about level four vehicles where insofar as there's a human in the vehicle, that person is merely a passenger; there is never an expectation that they need to take over the driving task.

So how do we do this? I always think of AVs as being a marriage between hardware and software. This slide here is a picture of a vehicle and it has a number of sensors that are there. The hardware that's in these vehicles tends to be a suite of three different types of sensors pointed out in this picture: LIDAR, radar, and cameras. We are strong believers in our industry that each of these sensors play really important roles in ultimately feeding information into the autonomy driving system, and we use all these types of sensors because they all make up for deficiencies of each other. Cameras do a great job of replicating what humans are seeing. Radar can see very effectively through buildings. LIDAR can see and judge the distance of objects. They all have advantages and disadvantages, but they work in concert to ultimately see a lot further, to be able to judge things a lot smarter, and much more advanced notice than humans could ever hope to do. So that's why we're so enthusiastic of these vehicles being able to take a gigantic step forward in terms of roadway safety in the United States.

Next slide.

So that is the entirety of my presentation. I'm happy to explain anything else or answer any questions.

Again, I want to thank NCD for the opportunity here. This is something we're very enthusiastic about and appreciate the excellent report that came out.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so much. Thank you for what you're doing and your efforts in this area. We hope to keep in touch and follow what you're doing in the future. We are obviously going to closely follow what AVIA is doing and look for a future where we can all be really included in the AV transportation mode.

Thank you so much, Jeff.

Okay. So next up are copresenters Carol Tyson and Cathy Chase. Carol is the government affairs liaison for the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, otherwise known as DREDF. And Cathy is the President for Advocates of Highway and Auto Safety. Our report talks about the lack of requirements for accessibility in AV laws. Both democrats and republicans have introduced AV legislation in the past with hearings and debates amongst stakeholders. And advocates Carol and Cathy will share how some disability safety and civil rights advocates have engaged in those conversations and the legislative efforts, share disability recommendations and responses, and provide an overview of the AV tenet framework and its accessibility and equity provisions.

So we're very excited to hear all about this, and welcome to you both.

CAROL TYSON: Thank you.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Push the button.

CAROL TYSON: Tell me that too. Okay. Good. I'm not going to worry about it. You just tell me.

Hello, everybody. And hello everybody who is watching and not in the room. Thank you to Ana and to all of NCD, to the Council, for having me here. It is really an honor, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for all of the work that you do. And thank you to the staff who is supporting us to make this possible to do the livestream. Really appreciate that too.

I'm going to post these remarks on the DREDF website in the coming days. We don't have slides. So bear with me as I read this because my nerves are shot.

So first I need to make an acknowledgment before I talk about AVs. Because I live here in D.C., just north, about 4 miles north in D.C. proper, I need to acknowledge that D.C. sits on the land of the Anacostians and Piscataway peoples.

D.C. residents are currently being occupied by increased military and law enforcement from around the country. As I travel in my city, as I traveled here today, downtown, I observed Waymo vehicles mapping our streets followed by ICE and law enforcement, including unmarked cars.

My neighbors next door are being arrested literally. Checkpoints are routinely deployed. Please consider learning more what is taking place here in the neighborhoods just north of downtown. DREDF has issued a statement and we hope you'll read it. Thank you.

Now my remarks about autonomous vehicles.

DREDF demonstrated an early interest in the development of AVs' policy in its drafting of the 2015 National Council on Disability report Self-driving Cars: Mapping Access to a Technology Revolution. That was written by my colleague and mentor Marilyn Golden and Susan Henderson. I do this work in her honor and memory, and we continue to participate in the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities.

DREDF published a brief on addressing disability and ableist bias in AVs. We continued that advocacy, calling for assurances from the industry that AV software can recognize people with disabilities, especially wheelchair users, outside the vehicle on the U.S. Department of Transportation's Transforming Transportation Advisory Council, all of last year. There is a final report that was published and we talk about these issues in that report.

And the main issue is that the vehicle, as Jeff so kindly shared how it works, there's software that also teaches the vehicle how to recognize people and objects outside the vehicle. There's data sets, and those need to be inclusive. Oftentimes we hear they do not include enough people with disabilities to train the vehicle to know to stop if it sees a wheelchair user outside the vehicle. We've heard really troubling anecdotes of vehicles actually speeding up instead of stopping, so we're calling for rules/regulations for inclusive data sets.

I'll keep going.

As we all know, in the disability community, gaining access to transportation has not been easy. The industry -- and I'm talking about the public transportation industry -- fought back against demands for lifts on buses, and the government stalled, often claiming that lifts were too expensive. I think those conversations have been had, with NCD, the Access Board, in whose room we're sitting right now. We know now that access is possible and separate is neither cheaper nor equal.

We have advocated as a community for wheelchair-accessible transportation network companies and taxis for more than a decade now. DREDF believes that the promise and safety of autonomous vehicles will only be realized if the vehicles and the surrounding infrastructure are fully accessible, and that means fully accessible to somebody with a sensory disability, who is blind, or Deaf, or low vision, hard of hearing, to somebody who has an intellectual or developmental disability, and anybody who uses a wheelchair, a scooter, or other mobility device. So fully accessible for all of us, our entire community.

AV testing and deployment time lines of public and passenger AV companies often fail to mention full accessibility, especially wheelchair access. Legislation, both introduced and proposed has not included accessible vehicle requirements for people with mobility disabilities, and I think that's true in every state that has AV legislation and definitely for Congress.

In 2023, Congress held a hearing on a self-driving vehicle legislation framework. A republican and a democrat submitted the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities, CCD, task force recommendations from 15 organizations, a cross-disability effort. We all came together on that. Members of the task force urged the committee to consider essential provisions that would ensure access. These included explicitly including accessibility and the needs of disabled travelers of all disability types at each U.S. DoT rulemaking related to AVs; ensuring federal law does not prohibit state or local accessibility requirements or performance metrics if they're better than what we have at the federal level; ensuring AV-related ADA or other civil rights claims can be filed in court; ensuring U.S. DoT and the U.S. Access Board have the resources and staffing to adopt and implement necessary research, rulemaking, and standard setting; ensuring AVs complement and improve public transit access rather than replacing it, as we've seen with some TNCs. And also currently AV companies can request an exemption from U.S. DoT to deploy their vehicles on streets, as referenced by Jeff. Proposed legislation has allowed for additional exemptions based on improving accessibility. We are recommending that requiring those exemptions only be allowed if the AV fleet includes wheelchair-accessible vehicles. We don't see that anywhere right now.

We also asked Congress to retain the provision prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability by states and any other governmental authorities in licensing and insuring and in the creation of a highly automated vehicles advisory council. And I want to give full credit to the National Federation of the Blind and other advocates who really have been fighting for those two provisions for quite some time, and I think those are settled so we don't have to keep fighting for those. Those are in.

For this Congress, DREDF also has draft language in addition that we will be working to get adopted with some partners. So hit me up if you're interested.

Finally, I want to be honest and acknowledge the different needs and strategies that have always existed in our broad disability community. People with sensory disabilities have different access needs than people with mobility disabilities or people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We talk about the competing interests and needs, but that often ignores the reality that many members of our community have more than one disability. You can be a wheelchair user and be blind. So you need vehicles that work for that person.

And while we can have an impact on the inside, DREDF is concerned that the industry has used the potential for AVs to increase access as a talking point, sometimes paying for research, sometimes having us on their advisory councils, while not prioritizing deployment of wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

DREDF has chosen to work with safety, consumer, and civil rights advocates in drafting and advocating for the AV tenets framework that Cathy is going to talk about as a guide for Congress. We do not believe accessibility will be provided unless it is required. We urge our fellow disability advocates to join us in holding the industry accountable in all of our partnerships.

Thank you.

CATHY CHASE: Good afternoon. Can you hear me?

My name is Cathy Chase, President of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. It's a true honor to be here today before this board. Thank you, Ana, for the invitation. Thank you, Carol, for giving me a few moments of your time. I really appreciate it. I really value our years' long partnership.

For those of you not familiar with Advocates, we're a nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. We work in state legislatures as well as Congress and U.S. Department of Transportation in furtherance of safer vehicles, users, and roadway environments.

Some safety facts. Jeff mentioned one. About 40,000 people are killed every year. Also 2.4 million people are also injured in motor vehicle crashes. More than 7,000 were pedestrians and about 1,000 were bicyclists.

The annual economic cost of crashes is approximately $340 billion. This means that every person living in the U.S. essentially pays a crash tax of over $1,000, whether you are in a vehicle or not.

The leading contributing factors are impaired driving, speeding, unrestrained vehicle occupants, and distracted driving. This is tragic news. AV manufacturers and proponents often claim that AVs are safer because they don't drive drunk, disabled, or tired. But no one is disputing that. AVs may also cause crashes that sober, alert, and engaged drivers would routinely avoid. AVs, which are essentially billion-dollar pieces of equipment with years of research, should not drive better than only our worst drivers on the road.

Another fact that AV proponents frequently assert is that AVs drive the equivalent to between the earth and Mars but just to be clear, in the entire totality of AV operations as of May 2025, these vehicles have driven 145 million miles, which is .004% of what humans drive in a single year. Just so you know what's happening.

This all said, Advocates is not for or against AVs. Rather, we've been working to make sure they are developed and deployed safely for all occupants and all road users, and to deliver on the numerous societal benefits we've been promised. We believe proactive approach is needed, not just accepting what is offered.

In that vein, we have been advocating for minimum performance standards for safety technologies. Through 2019, NHTSA, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's safety standards have prevented more than 860,000 deaths, 49 million nonfatal injuries, and damage to 69 million vehicles. Most people don't realize there are no safety standards for newer safety technologies. Minimum standards are essential because they ensure that auto manufacturers all have to meet a baseline of safety by a certain date. These upgrades can help protect those inside and outside the vehicle.

Potentially these technologies are the building blocks for AVs. An AV will need to detect and respond to all users, vehicles, and infrastructure in all conditions. That's automatic emergency braking. To monitor and react to blind spots; blind spot detection with intervention. To stay within its traffic lane; lane keeping assist. To follow speed limits. And to know if the vehicle is occupied; occupant detection. Among other responsibilities.

Many promises have been made about AVs bringing less crashes and deaths, traffic, congestion, and vehicle emissions. Claims have been made that AV will expand accessibility, improve efficiency, and create more equitable transportation options and opportunities.

However, these potentials remain far from near-term certainty or reality. Without common sense safeguards, these possibilities are imperiled at best and could be doomed at worst.

Additionally, the absence of protections could result in adverse effects, including safety risks for all people in vehicles on and around the roads, job displacement, degradation of current options, infrastructure problems, marginalization of certain users, and others.

Requiring on the front end of this process that AVs meet minimum safety standards and that operations are subject to adequate oversight through development and deployment will better ensure the myriad promises about AVs are delivered. This is why we developed the AV tenets. I brought copies of the tenets on the table in the back. For those of you not in the room, they're on our website, saferoads.org.

The AV tenets are a blueprint of how these goals can be achieved, broken into six categories: Protect all road users, prioritize safety, guarantee accessibility and equity, preserve consumer and worker rights, retain local control, and ensure sustainable transportation.

We are not subject matter experts on all of these areas, so we collaborated with a number of other organizations, including DREDF. The section on guaranteeing accessibility for all/access for individuals with disabilities and older adults in summary states: Autonomous driving technology has the potential to increase access and mobility for everyone, including older adults and individuals with disabilities, including those with sensory, cognitive, and physical disabilities, wheelchair users, and people with neurological conditions who have varying needs, as well as traditionally underserved communities. This goal must be realized with appropriate federal action. Access for underbanked populations. Access to on-demand transport services is often predicated on the ability to make digital payments. AV-based transport services must consider a variety of ways in which payment for services could be made to ensure that this technology supports equitable access and inclusion for all.

Equity. As new modes of transportation continue to grow and evolve, investment and development must include a process for all people to safely participate.

And lastly, accessibility and transportation services. There must be clear plans to ensure safe transportation for all people, in particular those who currently require assistance to do so or are part of marginalized communities in the implementation of these transportation services.

This is a high-level summary. There's more detail in the actual AV tenets document.

The tenets have not been converted into legislative language, but we have been involved in the legislative process since AV language was first considered in 2017. Currently we support the AV Data Safety Act, which is -- and this is in Congress -- HR 4376 by Representative Kevin Mullin from California, which would improve incident reporting with automated driving systems.

We oppose two bills currently in Congress, the AV Acceleration Act, S 1798 by Senator Lummis in Wyoming, which would modify existing safety standards to support mass deployment of AVs as outlined in 2016 in a report called review of federal motor vehicle safety standards for automated vehicles.

We also oppose the America Drives Act by Representative Fong from California, which would preempt state laws requiring a human driver or remote operator in commercial motor vehicles operating with an AVS level 4 or 5; in other words, driverless trucks. The bill would inform future regulations to make them favorable for ACMV operations including emergency vehicles.

Lastly, it's our understanding that Representatives Bob Latta and Debbie Dingell, cochairs of the AV congressional caucus, have been having ongoing discussions about a potential bill.

In addition to advocating for needed safeguards, we have urged any legislation on AVs not be folded into the upcoming reauthorization bill expected to come up next year when the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act expires.

There's a tremendous amount of time and money at stake. From our perspective, this is an opportunity to improve safety and ensure societal benefits are delivered. There is no doubt that federal AV legislation will continue to be a priority for many stakeholders, and we hope it will be done safely.

Thank you again for this opportunity.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so much, Cathy. We appreciate you being here today. It was really great information.

And you said that you brought the tenets with you and that they're on your website. What was your website?

CATHY CHASE: Saferoads.org.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Okay. Thank you.

CATHY CHASE: Thank you.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: We may end up having some questions going around, but for now I want to move to our next presenters. When we were doing the research for this report, one of the things that we kept hearing was that we needed to have securement devices for wheelchairs if we were ever going to have truly fully autonomous purpose-built AV. Right? So we kept hearing this over and over and over again. And we spoke with some engineers and some other folks about what had been done and what was going on in this area.

And so right now we're going to take a bit of a turn in the panel to talk about the actual vehicle, what the actual vehicle would need. And this is critical because without this piece of equipment, we are not going to be able to accomplish what we're setting out to do, like what Cruise was setting out to do and hopefully others will in the future.

So I want to introduce our next two panelists that are going to talk about how to design and what they're doing to design a securement device, a universal securement device, and your partnerships between private industry and organizations and all of the good work you're doing.

So I'm going to turn it over to you now to get us started.

So let me just introduce you two first. William Nixon is policy integration manager for global transportation technology at General Motors. And Kent Keyser is a public policy fellow at United Spinal Association.

Gentlemen, I welcome you both. I thank you for being here. I look forward to hearing what you have to tell.

KENT KEYSER: Thank you. Thank you, Ana.

I would say that what is lacking in your microphones is more than made up by your (inaudible).

For those needed, I'm an old bald white guy in a white shirt and orange tie for United Spinal's colors. The engagement? Taylor Swift.

[Laughter]

United Spinal advocates for wheelchair users. Like me. Especially for our quality of life issues from A to Z, and we've always advanced accessible transportation.

It's always a privilege to be with the Council. I thank each of you for your service and for your advocacy. A special thank you for the recent ground transportation report. And thanks to Ana Torres-Davis for your meticulous interviewing people like me for the report. Ana did a great job in the report with an overview of what we want to accomplish with our secure ride coalition.

And I would like to do a quick flash poll. Who has ever heard of UDIG?

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: How many people in the room raised their hand? Two? Three?

KENT KEYSER: How many people have heard of UDIG?

Okay. We'll get back to that. As our first slide says, secure ride is a stakeholder led coalition. Initially our goal was to develop a wheelchair securement system that could be operated independently, or with assistance. It soon became obvious that automated independent securement was the way to go. And here's why. To secure our wheelchairs when we travel on roads and highways, we have to rely on somebody else who we hope has been well trained to tie down two straps from small O rings on the rear sides of our chairs and anchor those to the floor. And then two more straps in the front sides of our wheelchair. And all that can take several minutes.

That is something my fellow bus riders and even the drivers know well because there's a lot of eye rolling and sighs when I roll on board. And most drivers ask, so, do you need to be secured?

I feel guilty delaying everybody. But that four-strap tie down has been a standard for decades and probably would be for decades in the future. But several years ago companies got serious about putting AVs on our roads. Wheelchair users said, we have to figure out how we can roll on to the vehicle and secure ourselves automatically.

Then about a year and a half ago, UVA got a call from GM. William Nixon, the Policy Integration Manager, as we heard, my colleague here, explained they were working on creating a truly accessible AV. And within a matter of months, SecureRide was born. And I must thank GM for its strong and continuing commitment to SecureRide, and for allowing us to work with Bill, who is presenting with me today. Bill has been a true godsend. Bill is an engineer, always eager to learn, and to offer multiple leadership talents. I'm proud today to call him one of our community because he's extremely committed to both accessibility and to our community.

Also in the audience today is Wayne Grua, another convening force ready to lend his many talents and expertise on all things wheelchair, our Executive Director of NCART, which is our wheelchair manufacturers and suppliers, spending a career helping the wheelchair community. His knowledge and insights are invaluable. Thanks for being one of us, Wayne.

I lost my place.

Another point on our slide is we did not want to reinvent the wheel. We've been working with Bill on existing work to develop standards designed for more seamless multimodal transportation. That way wheelchair users can work to transfer to a bus, a train, and back again. An automated securement system would save me almost an hour on a round trip like that, having to have different people to tie down 48 straps in six vehicles.

So imagine a world where wheelchair users can use a single attachment feature to move independently across modes to get where we want when we want to go without having to worry if someone is correctly securing us. Our securement would be safer, we'll be able to quickly know we are properly secured, and the whole trip becomes much more efficient, which saves time and money.

From the start, we make every effort to make sure we have impact to the chair, meaning it can't weigh very much. Extra weight means extra work, and adding extra weight for some people means they may not be able to make it up a ramp and it means we do not increase the footprint or the size of the wheelchair. I know in my tiny townhouse, you add an extra inch to the rear of my wheelchair, I probably would not be able to make the sharp turn I need to get through the front door.

Finally it means maintaining our ground (inaudible). Most of our current systems have a post on the bottom of the wheelchair that catches on the door thresholds or cords or anything that is raised in our pathway. While we initially focused on securement in AVs, it became obvious this would work well for the vehicles today as well as those tomorrow. Like I described in that paratransit bus train ride, anchoring devices need to be integrated into various transportation modes to accommodate all needs. A single solution for multiple transportation modes will speed adoption of its increase and scale.

And I'll now turn it over to Bill.

WILLIAM NIXON: Thank you, Kent.

I'm William Nixon, middle-aged man in a suit.

I work at General Motors, but today I'm here with my colleague Kent and Wayne to discuss the SecureRide Coalition.

Thank you for inviting us here to discuss this important topic and the work you do on accessible transportation. Kent has done a great job describing why we pulled together the coalition.

Now I will tell you who we are, what we do, and how we can apply it to AVs as well.

Who we are.

Next slide, please.

So we recognize that this challenge that Kent described couldn't be solved by any one company or industry. In order to drive the changes required in policy and funding requires a coordinated and cooperative effort from manufacturers, standards organizations, vehicle outfitters, transportation providers, and most importantly advocacy groups.

So across the top here, we broke it down right from the start into three different phases. The first stage was to develop a concept design that could be supported by all the manufacturers and the stakeholders who would have to deliver on that design, whether they were primarily the party who had not been as engaged yet or the wheelchair manufacturers surprisingly.

So we needed to try to get the solution that could be applied broadly across different chairs, power, manual, front wheel drive, rear wheel drive, all with different characteristics. And the best experts for how that could be integrated is the wheelchair reps, like United Spinal, we had another vehicle partner here, you can see Volkswagen, but if you read across, Wayne was mentioned as key in bringing NCART in. These are the largest wheelchair OEMs in the United States, all global companies as well. So correct me if I'm wrong, it's 85% ish of wheelchairs sold in the U.S. are by these manufacturers, so we have the group telling us what the chairs are capable of.

Once we got that around -- and I'll talk a bit more about the work that we've been doing that Kent mentioned over the last year and a half -- we realized that we really need to get the whole ecosystem involved to develop and test the standards and get the advocacy groups in there to support the policy changes, which will take a bigger team. But we wanted to be sure we had a core of a solution. So that was the stage 1.

Stage 2 you can see we have started to involve additional groups. NMEDA, who converts vehicles for wheelchair users, along with a number of other transportation providers and a lot of the partners you can see listed here with PVA, spina bifida, MDA, etc. We have the testing and standards bodies as well, and we're constantly growing on this.

We didn't start with the UDIG, but we did evaluate all the different options as well as their strengths and weaknesses, with workshops to talk about ideas and debate them among the wheelchair OEMs to make sure what we were going to push forward could be delivered by industry. The things that maybe have been considered before didn't meet our criteria of broadly addressing a broad range of wheelchairs in a secure manner and independent securement and so forth, and Kent pointed out many of the shortcomings I'll say of many of the automated systems out there today.

We talked about robotics. We talked about airbags. We talked about a whole range of things. And really what boiled it all down, the UDIG was the most functional option; however, it didn't address all of our needs. So we went to modify the UDIG standard to fit the new wheelchairs and develop the technical requirements and designs to move this forward.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Bill, remind me again what UDIG is? Is it the securement that's typically used now?

WILLIAM NIXON: No. It's actually a standard. It's the Universal Docking Integrated Geometry. So a lot of letters. Really what it comes down to, I'll show you a picture in the next slide that will help. It's a standard that's been on the books for about 20 years or so but never commercialized. It's had extensive testing. UMTRI has done repeated testing with wheelchairs with this securement against the standards that are out there for wheelchair securement. It performed very well. In many ways exceeds and does a better job than the four-strap system because of -- I won't get all technical and engineering on you, but the way it grabs the chair, much more robust manner, it does a better job for protecting the occupant during a crash event.

So if you go to the next slide, I'll jump right to the picture here. What you see at the bottom, and then I'll back up because it's a great question. The two vertical posts that are shown on the back of this wheelchair is really what the standard is all about. Locating those two posts in space on a broad range of chairs so that you can have a device that can reach out and grab those two posts and hold the chair securely so you're not counting on strap angle and tension and did you attach it to the right spot on the chair, which is the challenge of a four-strap system. Much less the fact that it's not independent. You've got structure built into the chair similar to the WC19 hooks/loops that are on those chairs today.

The things that we've had to change is, you can see the bright yellow arrow so people understand those don't stay out there all the time. They're deployable. They maintain a good center of balance. They're not in your way, they don't interfere with the rest of the 95% of the time you use your chair that's not in a motor vehicle.

And then the anchor device itself is the other piece of it. And you can see a couple pictures of how it hooks on to those two vertical posts to secure the chair. So it's truly independent. Wheelchair user backs into it. Those two hooks on the anchor device go out and secure it. And this has been, again, in standards and test standards, proven out for over 20 years but not commercialized because in every case except the upcoming AV, you had someone there to secure.

So this opportunity here, the U.S. DoT sent out small business innovation research grants last year and awarded them to two different companies. One we knew about in advance and had worked with. Each was awarded a phase one concept 6 months $200,000 to develop the concept work that you see here.

We worked with them on developing solutions and incorporating the modifications that we believe are necessary to really make this a viable approach. They then developed the concepts you see here, developed the recommendations and the changes that we recommend to go into the next generation of the UDIG, and I submitted them as a phase 2 proposal.

Those proposals have been accepted, but they don't have all the paperwork signed, so contracts are not final. So you know how some of that business goes.

But the award, if it follows all the way through, is a million dollars over the next 2 years to each of these companies. One to commercialize the wheelchair attachment, and the other to do the vehicle anchor.

So we're working all the wheelchair OEMs, and as you saw, we have securement OEMs also as part of our coalition working with these companies to make sure that the concepts they're developing really fit into the general industry.

Next slide, please.

Did that help everybody visualize and understand the UDIG concept?

The great part of that is you can see it's a mechanical solution. It's independent. You can easily verify that there's a robust, accurate, complete securement within the vehicle. These are all things you don't really get with four straps. And it avoids the compromises in others on the market today. They're great. We call them one chair, one vehicle solution. It's modified for a given chair, given vehicle, and can't be shared among users.

So SecureRide is setting out to develop the UDIG system for how it would be modified -- I ran through all that stuff.

What I want to talk about is, we looked at that UDIG system and we recognized it wasn't exactly what we wanted, but we also realized that the only way to get the scale and penetration is to apply this across all different vehicle types and all different transportation modes. We don't want to create a solution where you have to have one attachment for an AV and another for an airplane, and on and on and on.

As we really looked at it, it does look like we were able to make some adjustments that would apply to all different vehicles or transportation modes. In fact, I'm speaking at an All Wheels Up conference in September about the SecureRide proposal. I think most of you are aware that All Wheels Up is about air travel. They will encounter some issues with the solution they're looking at today, which has a larger footprint, who will take on the responsibility of the securement, is it done right, is the chair properly outfitted. All those things have yet to be solved, and we think this may be a good answer.

KIM RIDLEY: Can I ask a quick question? When you're locking in from the back, that mechanism, your chair isn't ever going to tip backwards with only the two back locked in?

WILLIAM NIXON: They've run a number of tests with that, with the rebound in a front position, and at one point the standard included a bar. So the results out of UMTRI said it's not an issue. The big difference is you're grabbing it higher and closer to the center of gravity so you don't have that rebound moment arm. You know, if you were to grab something, if I didn't want this bottle to fall over, I wouldn't grab it at the bottom but right in the middle. This approach takes that. That's actually one of the changes we have in our modified UDIG standard is to move it up to grab it closer to the center of gravity. Great question.

KIM RIDLEY: I've had that happen, not bothering with the front two, so thank you.

WILLIAM NIXON: That's the other part. Those are 3 inches, if you saw the standard. There's a backup for that entire surface.

KIM RIDLEY: Thank you.

WILLIAM NIXON: So again, we started looking to set up autonomous WAVs. Some of the key things, we think this applies as an enabler in AVs. It provides independent wheelchair securement and occupant restraint. It accommodates a wide range of existing power and manual wheelchairs. We want to be sure we don't develop something 10 years in the future when they do their next iteration of wheelchair designs with a broad range of chairs out there. We want to make sure the attachment feature has minimal impact to the regular use of the chair.

The other thing important is maintaining clear floor space for maximum maneuverability. The Origin, you saw as the example, looked like a big vehicle. We saw when you try to accommodate various different chairs, they all have different maneuvering characteristics, which is why they are different, they provide different things. It was really challenging to have a floor-mounted system that they could all maneuver around and not just have to keep growing and growing the vehicle. So clear floor space is an important item.

Also we want to make sure we're minimizing the variation of occupant position. Not to get all technical, but if the occupant is moving forward and back in the vehicle depending on where you grab the chair, if you grab it in the front, the middle, or the back, it puts the belt in a different position on the body every time. And one thing we're trying to leverage is our experience in crash worthiness examples from, you know, driven vehicles. We always said you can tell if you've been in a chair, a driver's chair; it controls you very well and it always knows where you are. So we want to try to repeat that same approach so you don't have shoulder harnesses that come too low across the shoulder or high across your neck. So those are important things for the performance of the vehicle.

So with that, I would like to kick it back to Kent to kind of wrap it up on some of our advocacy approaches.

KENT KEYSER: Next slide, please.

So back to what the heck is a modified UDIG, back to the poll. You guys are further proof that what we need to do, we advocacy groups, need to do is educate first our community of wheelchair users on what UDIG is and what the benefits can be and the benefits to really the whole ecosphere of wheelchair travel.

So we're preparing to do that outreach campaign to wheelchair users to first explain what UDIG is and how it can improve not only our transportation but our quality of life.

As one of our colleagues put it, we need to inform our community so we can turn our community into advocates for UDIG. And she said we have to show that our users want UDIG.

But at the same time we're also doing a second track, an advocacy campaign, laying the groundwork so we're ready to roll. For instance, we're building out our secure web page and certainly invite you guys there. Certainly we'll add the Council's ground transportation report to our resources page. Any other recommendations we would welcome.

Another challenge is that we need to get insurance coverage to reimburse making our chair transportation safe. They're not insured. It's not right that wheelchair manufacturers and suppliers have to eat the cost of that. The cause of this is Medicare's, quote/unquote, "in the home" language. While publicly the Medicare folks say that their "in the home" language does not mean they're restricting wheelchair users only inside the home, just try seeking reimbursement for anything intended for use outside your home and see if you get reimbursed. And of course private insurance coverage just mirrors what Medicare covers.

Lastly, but not the last thing we need to do, we must continue to advocate for accessible autonomous vehicles. That's why we are partners with Jeff's advocacy group, AVIA, and why we work so closely with accessibility experts at DREDF like Carol. And we'll add Cathy to that mix as well.

Thank you all very much.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you so much, Kent and Bill, for that great presentation.

I wanted to just -- I know that we are just in the first iterations of autonomous vehicle development, right, and we're trying different things.

I wonder if I could just throw out there what you think. Anybody can join in. You don't have to answer this if you don't want to. But I'm wondering what do you think the future holds for accessible AVs? What is needed to achieve it? What are our biggest barriers right now? Cost? Technology that needs to be developed? Is it coalitions? Is it federal regulation? What are all the things? Or is it a group of things that have to come together for us to achieve some more accessibility?

WILLIAM NIXON: Yeah. I think the quick answer is it's going to be a whole range of things. I think Jeff's probably in the best position to follow up on the regulatory side of the business, but what we are trying to focus on with the SecureRide is even once that happens, if we haven't addressed independent securement in the autonomous vehicle, then we really haven't gotten it right. We won't have the whole solution.

But I think, Jeff, if you want...

KENT KEYSER: So Ana hit the nail on the head when she said critical issue is securement. That absolutely needs to be done before we have access.

And a second one is battery placement. And Jeff can do the technical thing on this. But in AVs, the designs that we've seen, the batteries are going to be on the floor, where we need to put a ramp. So the battery placement becomes all important, how you get a ramp into the vehicle so we can use it, which also could help other people, especially seniors and we're getting a lot more of them. I know because I'm one of them. But those two issues are absolutely critical. And to paraphrase Dr. Lori Cooper who loves to quote the Council, we have to be prepared now for tomorrow. So that's the short version.

ANA TORRES-DAVIS: Thank you.

RISA RIFKIND: Ana, are we --

JEFF FARRAH: Please.

RISA RIFKIND: No, please, you go.

JEFF FARRAH: I insist.

RISA RIFKIND: Then I have a question for you, Jeff, if we're playing ping pong here.

First of all, thank you all very much for this very informative panel discussion. It's been really great.

Jeff, I was actually thinking along the lines of Ana here in terms of your association. What are if any of the commitments that your partners have made for accessibility in AV? Is that part of the discussion? You know, just anything in light of you have a video in the beginning that prominently shows my good friend Michelle but then to close up their shop, what is happening? How is the association a part of that?

JEFF FARRAH: Thank you very much for the question. I'll answer that and say what I was going to say as well.

Obviously GM and Cruise are members of our organization and other logos of organizations that have been involved in the accessibility discussion. Something where a number of AVIA members have been involved in different ways of thinking about how they can build these vehicles, some purpose-built vehicles, some are safety standard compliant vehicles that are wheelchair accessible. So it varies.

I would say in response to the question posed by Ana, I think we all need to recognize that when you think about the entirety of the motor vehicles in the world, here to date we've always had a human that has been the one sitting, in the United States, in the front left of the vehicle who needed to maneuver a steering wheel and press an accelerator and a brake. That's been the way motor vehicles have moved in this country and every other country in the world.

Now that's different. It's no longer the case. Now we have figured out a way to have effectively a computer go into it.

So we have all of these federal motor vehicle safety standards that have done a tremendous amount to make vehicles safer. A lot need to be improved or need new versions. So a lot of those regulations need to take a step back and imagine a world that isn't just all about humans who are the ones driving the vehicles. The reason that's relevant, we've talked a lot about some of the federal limitations on making some of these accessible vehicles. We need to evolve federal law to give these companies the ability to make these accessible vehicles. The need is there, the vision is there, the desire is there. The regulations have just not caught up with it. But we are in a moment where we can change that.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Can I follow up? You're saying we need a law that mandates a certain amount of vehicles?

JEFF FARRAH: Not a certain amount of vehicles. I think right now our members are making AVs with vehicles that look very much like somebody could buy them today. They are better motor vehicle safety standard compliant. A Waymo Jaguar type. It's a regular vehicle someone could buy. If you wanted to make more vehicles that look like the Cruise Origin, those are subject to regulatory hurdles now that we don't think need to be there in the future.

THEO BRADDY: Example of that, if I may, because I was involved in the advisory council. They couldn't get past the fact that the Cruise vehicle did not have a steering wheel. And the federal government did not approve that. That's one of the barriers.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Right. Which I think our biggest thing going forward is, we're always in their community as advocates and so forth in the disabled community, we're always playing catch up. We have to look at what's going to be in 30 years and start with being accessible now for 30 years. So like as you develop.

So I'm going to say, so one of the issues I will tell you even in my own, I run a private nonprofit, securing vehicles that have accessibility has to go through second and third parties a lot of times. And then whatever vehicle we choose, they don't make a lot of them. So the cost goes up and up and up. And I can tell you we get Department of Transportation grants that serve disabled populations, and those grants are sometimes, well, I can tell you we're waiting on vehicles that we've got a grant 5 years ago. And we've got three other grants in the process, we're still waiting on vehicles that have gone every other year.

So that's why I'm asking. Does it need to be policy for the federal government to say you have to make a certain amount. If you make a million vehicles, you have to have a certain amount of those be wheelchair accessible. So I mean, we govern that in everything else. I'm just wondering. And where is that our role as the National Council. So it's an interesting topic.

Carol, please.

CAROL TYSON: Sorry. Yes. Please. What you just said is what DREDF believes needs to happen. That we will not have wheelchair-accessible autonomous vehicles -- passenger vehicles especially; we're already seeing the shuttles and the buses -- we will not have them unless it is required.

I firmly -- and I've been doing this for 10 years now, I've worked with a number of companies, been very excited at the beginning about all of the leadership and being all in and had amazing discussions, people who I am just so grateful for. And each time it falls apart. The company goes out of business, the leadership changes, and then you have new leadership, new staff, we have to reeducate, but also the commitment just isn't there.

And I understand, Jeff, that, with respect, all of the issues around exemptions and what is needed to allow for sort of innovation I think is the word, but we just, from my perspective, having been very involved in this for the past 10 years. I do not see that push with the U.S. DoT to try to put a wheelchair-accessible vehicle on the road. And if I saw that, I would be there and asking, and that's something we're asking for in the exemptions, is if you're going to ask for that on accessibility, make sure there's wheelchair-accessible options and that they're safe.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Yep. That brings me to my other question I had from a previous. And I think we had a panel when we were -- I don't even remember. Andres was there. We talked about autonomous vehicles before. Right?

And I asked the question and I think we had a GM and Ford representative. Is there any legislation that you know of or should there be legislation that the more autonomous vehicles you have on the road, just like plane safety, the planes are talking to each other, but there is not -- the companies aren't talking to each other when they're on the road. So the more autonomous vehicles you have on the road, if they can talk to each other, you get safer roads.

This is the future. Is there anything, are these companies talking about installing those types of technologies, where the cars are talking to themselves so you can have a 2-inch bumper gap even on a freeway doing 150 miles per hour and they're safer than any human driver could ever be?

KENT KEYSER: I could just respond to that. And I want to respond to the first one too. But vehicle-to-vehicle communication is a base deal. Yes, they do want to talk.

But I want to have wheelchair-to-vehicle communication. One study suggests that wheelchair users are 35% being killed by in auto accidents than everybody else. And it's primarily I think because of the low height. We're just not seen. And with SUVs, it's even worse, right?

But back to the first point. Just to fine tune your question. United Spinal doesn't support two fleets. We think that accessibility helps everyone, so we don't want a number of WAVs, wheelchair-accessible vehicles; we want the entire fleet to be accessible. And maybe that will come. Maybe it won't.

The city of London mandated accessible cabs. They have all kinds of manufacturers that produce accessible cabs for the city of London. Look at their contractor list. Approved vehicle list I guess is what it is. There are dozens on the list.

So it's not impossible.

SHAWN KENNEMER: I'll just share that I tried for the first time, I was in San Francisco last week, tried to use a Waymo. I didn't fit in the Waymo. I'm a big guy. I'm 6'7. So it's not just wheelchair accessible.

But I think as we move forward in the future...

Cathy, did you have a statement?

CATHY CHASE: I did. I first wanted to support what my colleague Carol said. If these are not required, it's not going to happen. I think it's important we learn from what happened with TNCs.

Then I also want to respond to something that Jeff said about getting rid of federal safety standards. Some of them --

JEFF FARRAH: That's not what I said, Miss Chase.

CATHY CHASE: I'm sorry. What did you say?

JEFF FARRAH: Federal motor vehicle safety standards need to evolve now that we're in a world with AVs operating alongside. That is not the same thing.

CATHY CHASE: Okay. Thank you for the correction.

So as the federal safety standards are evolved, it's important that some need to be retained. Might be in the future you don't need a steering wheel or brake pads, but there will be some that we need to keep, such as telltales. Is the tire pressure systems low. Anyone getting into a car is going to want that.

And also the directionals. You might think, well, an AV will know where it's going so it doesn't need to have a right-hand signal or left-hand signal, but everyone outside the vehicle will still need to know that.

So I guess my point is just that we should not be quick to say let's get rid of standards. We have to be really deliberate in reviewing them and saying, okay, well is the safety need being met with the new technology. I just think that's another thing that we need to talk about up front.

JEFF FARRAH: I 100% agree that there are certain manual controls that are inhibitors to making autonomous accessible vehicles.

There are others that are fine. We can accommodate certain telltales. She's exactly right.

Here's what I think. I think the people who want to have accessible AVs should find common cause with us to try to address some of these federal rules because the manufacturers, the developers want to make these. I want to underscore that. They want to make these. It is a serious proposition. It is not something they can just snap their fingers and do. There are certain federal rules that stand in the way of this.

SHAWN KENNEMER: And I agree. I think we're getting into subjects and areas that the National Council, it is not our area. Risa?

RISA RIFKIND: I wanted to close out my thought. I love that we have a balance on the panel, so thank you all for being here. I imagine there are dynamics going on.

But I just wanted to comment, thank you for adding that around like the content. My original question, Jeff, is because I'm wary but I'm excited about potentially being able to jump into an AV someday. I don't drive much so that would offer more opportunities for transportation.

But I'm also a realist. I'm a disabled person. So I'm often left behind. So policies and legislation I feel like always have to catch up to where innovation can happen. So that's why I'm asking is there commitment as part of the association, because innovation can help push policy. And I think we have opportunities as a Council to make recommendation for what policies would make sense to expand independence for people with disabilities. And so it would be, you know, incredible to have associations like yours also make public commitment that help push policy.

So just wanted to make that clear.

Neil, I know you were also jumping to get in.

NEIL ROMANO: Thank you. And thank you all very much for being here. And thank you very much.

I just wanted to say that safety is always the ultimate goal. Safety can also be the impediment. And I think when it's an impediment, in the minds of people, not in reality. You know, I often hear people who are very, very concerned about AVs. What does this mean for the safety of. And I have heard disability groups who have said, you know, this could be very dangerous for our people. This could be very dangerous. And both are true.

So, I mean, you reach a point where you have to go try and reach a degree of consensus about how do we move forward with those realities and understanding that in life you can Bubble Wrap people. You can do everything you can do. There's going to be something that, A, you're not going to ever think of; and, B, we have to only figure out, sadly, through finding out. It's the only way. It's the innovation and where safety is.

So I think one thing incumbent on the Council to do is to continue doing the kind of thing we're doing by saying this is a good idea. Let's move forward. Let's continue to do it. And I thank every one of you here for doing that. The part of the component that I would suggest you do is more education. More education across the board to the constituency that you think you know very, very well. And sometimes don't agree with you but they may sound like they're agreeing with you.

I mean, I could tell you, there are a lot of people -- I know you can't tell, I know you think I'm in my 20s, but there are people who are senior citizens who are terrified of this technology. Terrified. They're afraid they're going to get run over; they're afraid of this or that. And that's what I mean when I say sometimes safety is an impediment, but it's in our minds as much as anything else.

So it is a matter of communicating. I've been talking about this for 40 years on panels and things.

KENT KEYSER: And we also have to educate wheelchair users because they too are -- not everybody like you and I are on board with it, but a lot of, there's a lot of concern in our community about trusting, getting on a AV.

NEIL ROMANO: Kent, that's exactly what I'm saying. I was just telling someone where I live now, we have autonomous buses. I'm going to tell you, people won't use them. They are terrified. They're always looking downtown, will they get hit by this bus. Meanwhile, the thing goes about a mile an hour.

[Laughter]

I mean, I have neuropathy and can't walk and I get out of the way. But the fact of the matter is, that's all of our responsibility. That's the Council's responsibility. It really is. We do a lot about talking about this, but we have to do more about communicating with our constituencies that the potential benefit outweighs.

Employment, that's been my key thing for 40 years. We know that's the answer. That's a big part of the answer. So it's incumbent I think on all of us to just educate, educate, educate.

And by the way, forgive me. If it sounds self-serving for our group, for our company, for our business, our organization, so be it. As long as we're moving it forward, it's okay. Let's not be shy about saying, this is a good technology, we should do. And we should figure out what the faults are instead of just thinking that we're all on the same page. We're not. We're not.

KENT KEYSER: If I can put in an ad for an organization I'm on the board of, PAVE, Partnership for AV Education, they're trying to do just that. So maybe the Council would like to talk to them.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Theo, I'll let you go. I think Hoskie was trying to chime in.

Hoskie, did you have a comment? Hoskie, are you there?

HOSKIE BENALLY: (Inaudible).

SHAWN KENNEMER: I'm sorry. We didn't catch that. Yes. One more time?

HOSKIE BENALLY: I said I accidentally clicked the button to raise my hand.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Theo, go ahead. And this will be our last. We're running up on time. Theo.

THEO BRADDY: To Neil's point, I just want to point out, I was one of those persons who said I would never get in an autonomous vehicle. Right? I didn't trust them. But through working with Cruise and that AV that they were developing and designing, I started to realize how much of a game changer it would be. You know, we talk about I think it was Mr. John, I forget his name, the first panel, talked about transportation working in regards to hours of life. And that term hit me because most of the stuff that we're talking about don't work within, you know, that immediate. You know, life is quick, right? And so we can try and improve transportation all we want, but if we don't have an opportunity -- (phone ringing) sorry -- if we don't have an opportunity to do something like autonomous vehicle that is quickly on demand that we could use in our everyday life, then we're always going to be behind.

And so, yeah, we got to look at innovation, we got to look at safety and all of those things, but I still believe wholeheartedly that AVs, WAV autonomous vehicles is the answer. Because those are the hours of life that people with disabilities don't have right now. So I always see all of these other things like a Lyft, Uber, that really, you know, can cater to people with physical disabilities but not people with wheelchairs. That is available already. But no one is dealing with people with motorized complex wheelchairs. And I believe autonomous vehicles is the answer, so I'm really behind you.

And I'm also Executive Director of the National Council on Independent Living. And they want to see this happen.

So whenever I can lend a hand, please call on me.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Excellent.

Thank you. So we're going to conclude that panel, yes?

We are pushing time.

But with that, we are actually scheduled for a break. But we are past the time we were actually supposed to take a break. Any of the Council Members need to take a break at this minute or can we continue on?

All right. With that, we'll go to public comment period, then.

Let's take 5 minutes and transition and come back.

[Break]

SHAWN KENNEMER: Let's try to get this going. We have a few more minutes.

I believe our next item and last item for the day is public comments. So Risa, I will turn that over to you.

RISA RIFKIND: Thanks, Shawn.

Today we are soliciting your comments on four topics, all of which are open projects we currently have underway. Those topics include: Improving the outcome of people with disabilities during and after disasters; disability clinical competency training for healthcare provider training programs; ADA accommodations during court proceedings; and youth and younger adults with disabilities in nursing homes.

We will call on everyone in the order we received their preregistration. Anyone who has not preregistered but would like to give comment here in person is welcome to indicate a desire to give comment by raising their hand after we finish with those who preregistered.

We will adhere to a strict 3-minute limit for any comments, and I will prompt you when you have 30 seconds left.

Once called on, please state your name, your organization affiliation, and proceed to provide your comment immediately. Thank you.

If we run out of time today, we strongly encourage anyone who does not give comment but wanted to to please email their comments to us at publiccomment@NCD.gov so we can review your comments as we work on our internal projects.

We will begin with our in-person preregistrants. We will give you a microphone and you will have 3 minutes once you are called on. Let me get my timer up.

Our first person will be Michael Coleman. Michael, are you here? I can't see the left side of the room. Is Michael Coleman here?

Okay. Is John Morris here? John, you were here earlier. There you are.

JOHN MORRIS: Hello. Thank you. John Morris. Wheelchairtravel.org. I would just like to talk very briefly about something that I have both experienced as a former Florida resident and heard from many of my readers about and that in some ways relates to our conversation earlier today and is also focused on emergency evacuations safety.

Obviously there are lots of challenges with the availability of accessible transportation, but in particular, the limited resources that do exist are often completely shut off in the event of an emergency situation.

During a hurricane maybe 6 or 7 years ago, I was in the midst of a travel journey and I was down in Miami, and I was trying to get a ride to a hotel from a train station nearby and there were no wheelchair taxis available. There were no resources. I contacted emergency services. There was nothing that could be done. So I rolled to my hotel in a pouring rainstorm.

And so, you know, I think it's very critical that communities, particularly residential communities, develop plans and strategies to make accessible evacuation possible for disabled people so that they can take advantage of all the resources otherwise offered in the community when there is an emergency situation. Thank you very much.

RISA RIFKIND: Thank you.

Rebekeh (inaudible) --

Sorry, Rebekeh, please spell your last name for us?

>> Yes. It's Tosado. And my comments are on improving the outcome of people with disabilities during and after disasters.

Thank you, Chair, members of the Council. My name is Rebekeh Tosado. Until earlier this year, I worked at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. I'm speaking for myself today, not for the department.

My position and the position of all of my peers was eliminated earlier this year even though the functions of the office are mandated under the Homeland Security Act. It was my office that was responsible for ensuring compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in all of the programs of the department, including in disaster response.

Some of my colleagues and I made a disclosure to Congress of the consequences of eliminating the office. Don't worry, I'm not here to talk about anger about losing my job. I'm talking about the need for oversight in this area.

The team I led in this office for more than 10 years worked to integrate disability requirements into FEMA's programs. Whenever possible, we did this in coordination with leaders and staff at FEMA, and always listening to the voices of people with disabilities and organizations like the Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies and World Institute on Disabilities.

What ended or ceased. Eliminating our positions meant the disability program was completely wiped out. This meant cessation of disability complaint investigations and abandoning our work integrating disabilities in disasters, including our plan to conduct a compliance review of how states and localities are meeting their section 5 obligations in shelters.

Why we need a civil rights oversight office at the Department of Homeland Security. The simple answer, to ensure continuation of systems established by people like Marcie Roth, who once directed FEMA's Office of Integration and Coordination. And also because the taxpayers should know that their expenditure of funds are being used effectively and in compliance with Section 504 and other civil rights laws.

RISA RIFKIND: 30 seconds.

>> So I don't have too much time. I'll submit a full comment. But a few recommendations that I have is to push towards reconstituting the Interagency Coordinating Council on People with Disabilities.

And these are my recommendations for NCD in particular: Ensure that FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination is functioning as required by law; ensure NCD is carrying out its own role vis-a-vis disaster response at FEMA; and support the restoration of a robust civil rights oversight office.

RISA RIFKIND: Thank you, Rebekeh. Thank you.

Is there anyone else in the room who would like to make a comment?

Okay. I have a few more things to say and then I'll turn it back over.

In our remaining time, I want to acknowledge that we received written comments from several individuals in advance of the meeting. And written comments are always very welcome at NCD.

That email address again is publiccomment@NCD.gov.

Thank you to the individuals who presented written comments: Dr. Linda Long-Bellil, Assistant Professor at UMass Chan Medical School; Dr. Suzanne Smeltzer, professor emerita at Villanova University College of Nursing; Peggy Schiffer, a parent of an adult with developmental disabilities and a member of the Massachusetts Citizen Advisory Board to the Department of Developmental Disabilities; Dr. Steven Perlman, President of People Advocating for Optimal Health; former NCD Council member Dr. Rick Rader and Director of Project DIME, Disability Inspired Medical Education; and Dr. Nicholas Lawson.

In addition to those comments, Annie Streit of United Spinal Association, Mitchell Berger, and Jenny Ahler provided comment on improving outcomes for people with disabilities during and after disasters.

Thank you for all of your comments.

Lisa Cooley and Brandon Cassady provided written comments regarding youth and young adults living in nursing homes.

And finally, Shawn Richmond of National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association, who provided comments on the NCD ground transportation report on the panel today, as well as Stephen Walker, who provided written comments on access to artificial intelligence for people with disabilities.

Anyone who has recently reviewed our ground transportation report, you know that the public comments we receive play an integral role in informing the Council's areas of research, giving us great leads to follow in our investigations, and they also often provide powerful stories that help us drive home information and make it more personalized.

With that said, I want to remind everyone in the room or who tuned in today, although we have highlighted areas that we're looking for specific input on as was the case today with our open four projects, NCD's public comment program is always welcoming you to share any insights on any topic at all, which helps us keep aware of the issues that are bubbling up across the country and most important to the community.

We're grateful for those who take the time to provide us with the insights they have and help share their expertise and lived experience with us to make our advisement to policymakers stronger.

Back over to you, Chair, and thank you, staff, for the talking points.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Thank you, Risa.

With that, we now come to the area where I need a motion to recess until tomorrow morning.

RISA RIFKIND: I'll move.

SHAWN KENNEMER: Do I have a second?

All in favor, say aye?

Any opposed to recess?

Hearing none, we are recessed until tomorrow morning.

[Meeting concluded at 3:27 p.m.]