



Testimony on B26-0684, Autonomous Vehicle Deployment Authorization
Amendment Act of 2026

Committee on Transportation and the Environment

Written Testimony of Disability Rights DC at University Legal Services
Lyndsay Niles, Managing Attorney
Elizabeth Myerholtz, Staff Attorney

July 24, 2026

Disability Rights DC at University Legal Services (DRDC) appreciates the opportunity to submit written testimony on the Autonomous Vehicle Deployment Authorization Amendment Act of 2026. DRDC is the designated protection and advocacy agency for the District. We are federally-mandated to advocate on behalf of all District residents with disabilities across the lifespan to promote their rights to community inclusion – including full and equal access to accessible transportation. DRDC appreciates that the intent of this bill, in part, is to “provide more equitable access to rideshare services” for people with disabilities, including expanding transportation access to those who are blind and have low vision.¹ DRDC recognizes the transformative potential of autonomous vehicles (AVs) to enhance independence and community inclusion for District residents with disabilities and we support the Committee’s efforts to advance this legislation. However, DRDC’s testimony focuses on the following concerns with the legislation.

I. Availability of WAVs for All Wheelchair Users

Although we strongly support that this bill would expand on-demand transportation access for the blind and low vision community and other

¹ Letter from Councilmember Charles Allen to Nyasha Howard (May 1, 2026), available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/61803/Introduction/B26-0684-Introduction.pdf?Id=237767>.

District residents with disabilities, we are also concerned that the bill fails to ensure equity for all District residents with disabilities, particularly those with mobility disabilities. By failing to mandate wheelchair accessibility of vehicles, the bill structurally authorizes the exclusion of approximately 37,000 District residents with mobility disabilities² from AV services.

DRDC urges the Council to include language in the bill to mandate baseline wheelchair accessibility vehicle (WAVs) requirements to ensure that people with disabilities have access to equivalent autonomous vehicle service as required by Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the DC Human Rights Act (DCHRA).³ This baseline standard could be tied to a wait time standard that allows for equivalent service where the average wait time for a WAV is equitable to the wait time for standard AVs. In recognition of lessons learned from previous legislation with regard to WAVs and taxi companies, it is not sufficient for providers to simply have a certain number or percentage of WAVs as a part of its fleet. The standard must instead require that those WAVs actually be in use so that they remain available to the disability community.⁴ The legislation must also ensure that WAVs are required to include wheelchair securement technology in driverless vehicles (or alternatively have an autonomous vehicle operator until such time that a fully autonomous vehicle can be developed) to ensure full wheelchair accessibility. Though Waymo claimed during the July 13, 2026 DC Council hearing on this bill that it is simply a technology company and therefore should not be required to provide WAVs, such an argument has been outright rejected by federal courts.⁵ Waymo and other AV companies are not exempt from the ADA and DCHRA and are therefore obligated to provide WAVs in their fleets.

Accordingly, DRDC encourages the Council to amend the bill's language to require that applicants for an AV permit submit plans to specify how it will design and deploy WAVs at the start of implementation of AV services in the District, including specific timelines for which the AV companies will be held accountable. We also urge the Council to require in

² United States Census Bureau, 2024 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, District of Columbia Disability Characteristics, available at <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Disability&q=040XX00US11> (Census data on DC residents with ambulatory disabilities).

³ 42 U.S.C. § 12184; D.C. Code §§ 2-1401.02(24), 2-1402.31(a)(1).

⁴ See National Council on Disability, *Ground Transportation for People with Mobility Disabilities 2025: Challenges and Progress*, at *72-73 (Jul. 23, 2025) ("The law requires taxi companies to have wheelchair accessible taxis within their fleet, it doesn't require them to actually be in use, meaning many sit empty in garages.").

⁵ *Equal Rights Center v. Uber Technologies, Inc.*, 525 F. Supp. 3d 62, 70-71, 84-85 (D.D.C. 2021).

the bill that AV systems designate fully accessible drop-off and pick up zones and mandate accessibility requirements for the machine interface. For baseline criteria of accessibility, DRDC recommends that the Council consider Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund's (DREDF's) "Fully Accessible Autonomous Vehicles Checklist."⁶ DRDC has serious concerns that if this bill allows AV companies to route users to third-party accessible taxi providers, people with disabilities will continue to be relegated to transportation services with unlawfully long wait times and discriminatory service denials.⁷

II. Ableist Bias in AV Algorithms

We also have concerns regarding potential ableist bias with AVs. Though some of the testimony provided at July's hearing focused on the impartial nature of AVs,⁸ there have been studies demonstrating that AV datasets are not inclusive of the disability population because researchers often recognize individuals with disabilities as outliers, rather than as a part of the world. In other words, the disability community is often treated as an exception or an edge case by researchers assessing AV data, which creates a lack of data surrounding how algorithms treat individuals with disabilities inside and outside the vehicle.⁹ As DREDF recently noted in comments to the Department of Transportation, "current research and anecdotes suggest that not all AVs are being taught to detect people seated in their wheelchairs, or people with darker skin tones, among others. This is an enormous problem."¹⁰ DRDC adopts the recommendations provided by DREDF both in those comments and in its 2022 report, which suggest that there be continued research that includes

⁶ Available at [Microsoft Word - DREDF Fully Accessible Vehicle Checklist 110718.docx](#).

⁷ See *Equal Rights Center v. Uber Technologies, Inc.*, 525 F. Supp. 3d at 67-69 & 88 ("Given the language of both section 12184 of the ADA and the DCHRA, this Court easily finds it plausible that Uber's alleged failure to address policies that may contribute to the purported dearth of wheelchair accessible vehicles in its fleet – such that users who need said vehicles face substantially longer wait times and significantly higher costs – qualifies as conduct that discriminates against persons with disabilities.") (opinion authored by then-District Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson).

⁸ For example, some individuals testified regarding the difficulties they've experienced with ride share drivers refusing to take them when they see their service animals. These individuals asserted that AVs do not have the same biases and therefore such discrimination would not happen with AVs.

⁹ Ian Moura, *Addressing Disability and Ableist Bias in Autonomous Vehicles: Ensuring Safety, Equity and Accessibility in Detection, Collision Algorithms and Data Collection*, at *10 (DREDF, Nov. 7, 2022) ("It is critical that both developers and policymakers recognize that these data are not an objective reflection of the world; rather, they result from a series of choices and decisions, and frequently contain the same biases and prejudices that permeate society.").

¹⁰ DREDF, *Comments submitted concerning Research Ideas to Support Nationwide Automated Vehicle (AV) Deployment* (Oct. 17, 2025), available at: <https://dredf.org/dredf-comments-on-research-ideas-to-support-nationwide-automated-vehicle-deployment/>.

individuals with disabilities in the algorithms that will assist AVs and to ensure that datasets are accountable and transparent.¹¹ We therefore strongly urge the Council to require during permitting and renewal for AV companies that they conduct ongoing algorithmic testing and refining that includes persons with disabilities not as an outlier, but as a part of the general population. The bill should be amended to require AV companies to report the findings of this algorithmic testing as a part of its permit renewal processes. Without such safeguards, there can be little confidence that the algorithms used by AVs will improve to be inclusive of people with all disabilities, as research has demonstrated that “incorporation of disabled people into the original training data [has] not [been] a priority for developers.”¹²

Additionally, the algorithms used by AVs impose a concern of additional surveillance of individuals with disabilities. Just this month, a Waymo vehicle in California contacted law enforcement on its teen passengers due to suspected criminal activity.¹³ If the algorithms are not representative of the disability spectrum, then there is an increased likelihood that similar incidents could happen for passengers with disabilities, especially with the understanding that individuals with disabilities are already more likely to be policed than their nondisabled peers.¹⁴ For example, some individuals with disabilities may have tics or other manifestations of their disabilities (such as rocking, etc.) that could be considered “abnormal” passenger behaviors. If AV algorithms are not properly programmed to evaluate these disability-related symptoms, then passengers with disabilities could be subject to discriminatory policing due to algorithmic bias.¹⁵

III. Additional Research Regarding AV’s Effects on DC’s Disability Population Is Necessary

¹¹ See Moura, *Addressing Disability and Ableist Bias in Autonomous Vehicles*, at **12-15; DREDF, *Comments submitted concerning Research Ideas to Support Nationwide Automated Vehicle (AV) Deployment* (Oct. 17, 2025), available at: <https://dredf.org/dredf-comments-on-research-ideas-to-support-nationwide-automated-vehicle-deployment/>.

¹² See Moura, *Addressing Disability and Ableist Bias in Autonomous Vehicles*, at *11.

¹³ Scott Neuman, “Waymo called the cops on teen riders, raising privacy concerns”, NPR (July 10, 2026), available at [Privacy concerns raised after teens detained by police from a Waymo robotaxi : NPR](https://www.npr.com/2026/07/10/waymo-cops-teen-riders-privacy-concerns/).

¹⁴ DC Developmental Disabilities Council, *Position Paper on Policing and the Disability Community* (Dec. 15, 2022), available at: [FINAL Position Paper - Policing and Disability - Approved 12.15.22.pdf](https://ddc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ddc/publication/attachments/FINAL%20Position%20Paper%20-%20Policing%20and%20Disability%20-%20Approved%2012.15.22.pdf).

¹⁵ See Moura, *Addressing Disability and Ableist Bias in Autonomous Vehicles*, at *12 (“Attempts to increase data about disability can also involve labeling people as disabled based on guesswork and assumptions, and even constructing synthetic disability data, similar to efforts to create more racially inclusive datasets that have relied on simulated images of darker-skinned individuals.”).

Though the Council required a study that evaluated the impact AVs would have on the District's disability community in 2018,¹⁶ the resulting report had "nothing describing an examination of the impacts on the disability community and no recommendations about the disability community. This required section is absent."¹⁷ Indeed, all variations of the word "disability" only appear eight times in the 226-page report – two of which are merely as restating the Council's requirements for the study.¹⁸ The other times it appears, it is only as demonstrations of hypothetical scenarios, rather than actual data, including data informed by individuals with disabilities, of the effect AVs would have for DC's disability community.¹⁹ Although the lack of this study should not delay implementation of this legislation, we further recommend that the study regarding the effect of AVs on the District's disability community required by the 2018 law actually manifest so that future legislation or regulations can incorporate any necessary recommendations and updates that this relevant research provides.

IV. AV Booking Accessibility

Finally, although we appreciate that the bill addresses the accessibility of the smartphone application, we urge the Council to amend the bill to require alternative booking options (e.g., web, telephone, etc.) for those individuals with disabilities who cannot navigate complex smartphone applications or District residents who otherwise do not have access to a smartphone.

In moving this legislation forward, we urge the Committee to not repeat the previous or current failures of traditional ride-hailing infrastructure for District residents with disabilities. As such the bill should be amended to ensure that transportation innovation in the District does not continue to leave people with disabilities behind. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important bill.

¹⁶ D.C. Act 22-434, Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Support Emergency Act of 2018, Title VI, Subtitle K (July 30, 2018).

¹⁷ National Council on Disability, *Ground Transportation for People with Mobility Disabilities 2025* at *109.

¹⁸ DC Sustainable Transportation, *DC AV Study: Final Report*, at ** 21 & 174 (Apr. 7, 2020), available at <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/44545/Introduction/RC23-0172-Introduction.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Id.* at **2, 43, 48, 62, 81, & 100.

For further information:

Lyndsay Niles, Managing Attorney
202-547-0198 ext. 128
lniles@uls-dc.org

Elizabeth Myerholtz, Staff Attorney
202-547-0198 ext. 102
emyerholtz@uls-dc.org