

## Testimony on Transportation Accessibility for People with Disabilities in Minnesota

Good morning,

My name is Trevor Turner and I am the Public Policy Director for the Minnesota Council on Disability, and I am here today to provide testimony on the state of transportation accessibility for older adults in Minnesota. Today, I will highlight the successes achieved thus far, pinpoint existing gaps, and propose recommendations for further improvement.

While today's conversation is about Minnesota's accessible transportation for aging Minnesotans, I like to remind everyone that aging for most Minnesotans is simply the acquiring of disabilities over time. Many of the things I talk about today apply not just to aging Minnesotans, but to Minnesotans with disabilities young and old as well. Aging for many, means developing sensory disabilities like vision loss or hearing loss, mobility disabilities, and/or cognitive disabilities. All of these kind of disabilities, which are associated with aging, change and impact how we interact with Minnesota's transportation system.

While I may not be considered an elderly Minnesotan yet, I can deeply empathize with struggle to find convenient and accessible transportation options. I have Usher Syndrome, which causes deafblindness, which prohibits me from driving a vehicle. I utilize public transit, paratransit, transportation network companies such as Uber and Lyft, and the generosity of family and friends to make my way around my community and the state of Minnesota as a whole.

One of the biggest challenges we have in disability advocacy is fighting disability apathy. I have never experienced explicit bigotry or hatred due to my disability, however, the struggle I have most is getting others to care about the issues that impact my community the most. I think aging Minnesotans can relate to this struggle, which is a shame, because if each of us are lucky, we will all live long enough to become elderly and acquire a disability in one form or another. This isn't an abstract issue that impacts a far-flung demographic. This impact every single one of us and the best time to address these issues, is not when they eventually happen to has directly in the future, but now in the present when our influence is greatest. Agism and ableism will come for us all, so let's make the world a better place for aging and disabled Minnesotans now.

Let's talk about the successes in Minnesota's Transportation Accessibility

Minnesota boasts an extensive network of accessible buses and light rail services, providing vital connections within urban areas. The implementation of audio and visual announcements at bus stops and train stations enhances the independence of individuals with visual or auditory impairments. Priority seating and boarding options ensure that individuals with disabilities and aging Minnesotans can navigate public transit comfortably.

The state has implemented robust paratransit programs, ensuring door-to-door services for those unable to use traditional public transit.

Advance reservation systems simplify scheduling, providing individuals with disabilities flexibility and convenience. Paratransit staff undergo specialized training, ensuring courteous and supportive service for passengers with disabilities.

Public spaces and transportation hubs usually adhere to ADA standards, featuring curb cuts, ramps, and tactile paving to facilitate mobility for individuals with various disabilities. Accessible parking spaces near transit stops and public buildings further support the needs of those with mobility challenges.

Mobile apps offer real-time transit information, making it easier for individuals with disabilities to plan their journeys. Assistive technologies are integrated into transportation systems, catering to diverse communication and navigation needs. Digital platforms enable seamless trip planning and provide timely service updates.

Minnesota is also leading the way in transportation innovation with the GoMarti pilot program in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. GoMarti is an autonomous vehicle program that provides free on-demand ride services include approximately 70 pickup and drop off points with a fleet of five autonomous vehicles, including three wheelchair-accessible vehicles. The free, on-demand rides can be requested through an app. This pilot program is working to help expand accessible transportation options, especially in greater Minnesota where public transportation is limited.

Transportation is not just limited to our roads and rails. It also expands into our state parks. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has introduced a fleet of all-terrain track chairs in 13 state parks. These track chairs, which look like something out of a James Bond movie, allow Minnesotans with mobility limitations to enjoy all that Minnesota's beautiful nature has to offer, spring, summer, fall, and even winter.

While Minnesota is a leader in the US for accessible transportation options, everything I have mentioned to this point could be improved. There are also many gaps in our accessible transportation options.

The biggest and most prominent issue of transportation is not limited to Minnesota, but the United State as a whole. However, as a mid-western state, Minnesota is an extremely car-centric state. Car-centric culture and policies not only create barriers to accessible transportation, they also have devastating impacts on our environment, marginalized communities, urban planning, and our quality of life.

I have had the privilege to have lived for several years in Europe and East Asia, both of which have far greater aging population than in the US. However, due to their strong investment in public transit options and prioritizing of busses and trains as their main modes of transportation, accessible transit is less of an issue in those regions. Aging people in European and East Asian countries have better integration into their communities because most people, regardless of age or disability status, utilize public transit as their primary mode of transportation. Car ownership and driving is the exception, not the norm, which is a great equalizer. Aging people and people with disabilities feel less ostracized and isolated from their communities because they are able to utilize the same modes of transportation as

everyone else. This has reverberating effects on the quality of life of aging people, as they play an active and visible part of their communities, rather than being segregated and relegated to nursing homes.

So when cities are getting congested, the solution is not to expand car lanes and incentivize more cars on the road, but to add more trains, busses, and ride-share programs to get more cars off the street. This has a positive impact on our communities, making them more pedestrian-friendly, which many of those pedestrians are aging and disabled Minnesotans.

Minnesota is known for its winters. Often Minnesotans wear our ability to endure such brutal winter conditions as a badge of honor. However, winter can be a very isolating time for aging and disabled Minnesotans. We must improve our snow-removal infrastructure, and not just off our roads, but off our sidewalks and public spaces. I'm always impressed by our fast our snow-plows can clear the interstates, but sadly our sidewalks are mostly an afterthought. This makes it almost impossible for Minnesotans with limited mobility to navigate our communities and often can force them to remain isolated in their homes until the snow and ice melts. We must dedicate as much resources and efforts to clear all of our sidewalks and public areas such as bus stops and storefronts. We also must make sure these sidewalks and public areas are adequately lit during the darker winter months.

Rural areas face a scarcity of accessible transportation options, creating challenges for aging and disabled Minnesotans residing in these regions. And accessible public transit options in rural areas are more important than ever, as our rural residents are aging faster than our urban ones. Door-to-door services are more challenging to implement in remote locations, leading to a lack of connectivity between rural and urban accessible transportation systems. Many Minnesotans in rural areas have limited transportation options to vital medical centers such as the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. I personally have had to use expensive airport shuttle services from MSP to Rochester in order to make it to important medical appointments at the Mayo Clinic. Greyhound and Jefferson Line busses do not drop you off within any walkable distance to the Mayo Clinic. If transportation to communities outside of the Twin Cities is a challenge for someone like me who lives in downtown Minneapolis, it is nearly impossible in Greater Minnesota.

Accessibility issues persist in reaching transit stops, with inadequate infrastructure for safe pedestrian pathways. Gaps exist in connecting paratransit services with mainstream public transit, posing challenges for individuals with disabilities navigating the first and last mile of their journeys.

Communication regarding service disruptions is inconsistent, impacting the ability of individuals with disabilities to plan their journeys effectively. Information availability in alternative formats is limited, hindering those with sensory disabilities from obtaining timely updates.

In conclusion, while Minnesota has made significant strides in creating an accessible transportation system for aging and disabled Minnesotans, there are still notable gaps that require attention. By addressing these areas of concern, Minnesota can continue on its path toward creating a transportation system that truly serves the needs of all residents, regardless of their age and disabilities. I appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony and am hopeful that our collective efforts will result in a more inclusive and accessible transportation landscape in Minnesota. I am happy to answer any questions.