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Date of submission: Thursday, 19 September 2024

Your submission for this review:

Vision Australia is writing to the Review of rank and hail taxi fares to draw the Tribunals attention to the importance of taxis for the blind and low vision community, and to emphasise the role of a stable and appropriate fare structure in maximising access to taxis for our clients. People who are blind or have low vision cannot drive conventional motor vehicles, and many therefore rely on taxis as the equivalent of a private car to enable them to participate in the social and economic life of the community, to attend medical appointments, visit family and friends, participate in employment and education, and engage in cultural and recreational activities. Access to taxis is not a luxury or even a convenience, but a necessity, in the same way that most sighted people regard being able to drive a private car as a necessity. Apart from the amenity and convenience that taxis provide, there are many situations where public transport is simply not available. Governments throughout Australia recognise the vital role that taxis play in the lives of people with a disability. The NSW Government operates the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS), which provides a subsidy of 50% of the metered taxi fare up to a maximum subsidy of \$60 per fare. Unfortunately we have become aware of an increasing number of instances where taxi drivers do not or will not charge passengers the fare displayed on the meter. We can trace the origin of this pattern to the deregulation of the point to point transport industry, but it appears to have accelerated during and after the COVID pandemic. Drivers may refuse to take passengers from key destinations such as Sydney Airport unless they agree to pay many times the metered fare, and, similarly, drivers may also refuse to take passengers a short distance at the metered fare. We have received reports of passengers who are blind being stranded late at night in an unfamiliar, potentially unsafe location because taxi drivers refused to take them unless they paid an exorbitant fare, which they could not afford. While we believe that such practices are not widespread across the taxi industry as a whole, their apparent increase is concerning, in part because the charging of non-standard fares subverts the intent of the TTSS and, if left unchecked, could eventually threaten the viability of the scheme. This, in turn, would put the social and economic participation of people with a disability at significant risk. While in no way condoning fare gouging behaviour from taxi drivers, we do recognise that rank and hail fares have not increased for a decade, yet in that time there have, and continue to be, many increases in the costs that drivers must meet in operating their business. Clients have told us about conversations they have had with taxi drivers who point to increased competition combined with much higher fuel and maintenance costs as key contributors to the creation of an environment that forces some drivers to take drastic action in an attempt to keep their taxis viable. The taxi industry is best placed to comment in more detail and quantify the costs that drivers experience. Suffice it to say that the majority of drivers are not engaging in behaviours that disadvantage vulnerable customers, even though they also incur the same costs. In any case, customers are also dealing with cost-of-living pressures, so rank and hail fare increases must balance the need for industry sustainability against likely changes in passenger demand. It is essential that any increases to rank and hail fares be accompanied by an expanded program of enforcement to ensure that the practice of charging non-metered fares is stamped out. An expectation that overcharging is acceptable must not be allowed to develop among NSW taxi drivers, and there must be a renewed insistence on the meter as the only valid measure of a rank and hail fare