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Testimony of Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) To the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission April 30, 2014

I am pleased to submit this testimony to the New York City Taxi Commission regarding the proposed policy that will increase the accessibility of taxi service for people with disabilities.

Over 24 years ago, when I was working on the language for the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, along with my colleagues in the Senate and the House of Representatives, we identified four great goals for individuals with disabilities: equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency. These goals have been the touchstone for much of our legislative work regarding individuals with disabilities over the past 24 years. They help ensure that individuals with disabilities are meaningful and full participants in their towns, cities, and counties; at their places of work, in schools, and in their communities.

Of course, we realized, however, that these goals would be achieved in different ways in different places. To be a fully participating citizen in Cumming, Iowa, my hometown, means different things than it does in New York City. In Cumming, for instance, I should be able to use the Great Western Bike Trail that connects to Des Moines, or to enter the post office to conduct business, or possibly even to have a beer at the Cumming Tap.

In New York City, the needs are different. Life is different. Accordingly, what should be accessible needs to be different. Certainly, it is essential for a person with a disability to be able to get around in New York—to get to a doctor's office, to get to work, to eat in a restaurant, or to go to a movie or show. In New York City, there are three major forms of transportation: bus, subway and taxi.

The City has worked hard to make buses and subways accessible to people with disabilities. The subways of today are vastly different from those in 1990. Today, they are more accessible for people with physical disabilities, for those who are deaf, and for those who are blind.

What has not changed much is the accessibility of taxis. Taxis are a way of life in New York City. There are over 13,000 taxis in Manhattan. That number alone is testimony to how important taxi service is to New Yorkers. How many are currently accessible? Only 231. Two-hundred and thirty-one!

That means that if I use a wheel chair, I have a 1 in 65 chance of hailing a taxi I can use. But in actuality, my odds are not even that high. Accessible taxis are dispatched and sent to those who call ahead to reserve them—so my chance of randomly hailing an accessible taxi on 7th Avenue or 54th Street is actually next to zero.

What this means is that, if I have a disability, I do not have equal opportunity in New York City. It means that I am not able to fully participate as a resident and citizen. It means that there are material impediments to my being economically self-sufficient in New York City. And it means that I am not allowed to live independently in New York City, a city where citizens rely daily on taxi service.

The current lack of accessible taxi service means that New Yorkers and visitors to New York City who have disabilities cannot participate in the ebb and flow of the city the way those without disabilities do. They are treated as second class citizens. Actually, it is worse: they are barred from one of the key economic and social mechanisms of life in the Big Apple.

But all of this can be changed, and it can be change relatively quickly. To his great credit, Mayor de Blasio has honored an agreement made by his predecessor to make one of the most important forms of transportation for New Yorkers accessible to all.

The proposed plan, to make 50 percent of the taxis on the street accessible to people with disabilities by 2020, means that those with disabilities will be able to roll to the corner, signal for a cab, and be picked up and transported to their destination. No longer will people with disabilities need to call ahead to reserve an accessible taxi. No longer will they need to wait for an hour or more. No longer will they need to plan a visit to the doctor that should take an hour but because of the lack of accessible taxi service might take three or four hours. In New York City, accessible taxis will mean an accessible, equal opportunity life for those with disabilities.

The plan that 50 percent of all new taxis put into service be accessible will mean a significant and rapid increase in the availability of accessible taxis. That plan will ensure that the City reaches the goal of a fleet that is 50 percent accessible by 2020. New York City will join another great international city, London, where virtually all taxis have been wheel chair accessible for almost ten years.

This plan will not only make New York's taxi fleet accessible, it will also provide training for drivers so they will have the skills to interact with and support passengers with disabilities. Accessibility to the vehicles and taxi operators who are trained in accommodating people with disabilities – these great steps forward will mean a higher quality, more pleasant experience for passengers and drivers alike.

The bottom line is this: the rapid transition to an accessible taxi fleet will benefit everyone in the City. Taxi drivers will have an increased number of possible passengers. Businesses will have new customers who will be able to visit their stores. It will be easier for everyone, including seniors, to get in and out of a taxi. Families with young children will be able to take strollers into taxis. And, of course, people using wheelchairs, walkers or other mobility devices will be able to hail a taxi and secure a ride just as anyone else in the City. Accessible taxis will mean a better quality of life for everyone.

Implementing the Mayor's plan is a significant step forward in accessibility for the transportation of people with disabilities. New York City can now serve as a powerful model for other major cities that aspire to make their taxi fleets accessible. As in so many other civic endeavors, New York City will lead the way for the entire nation.

I urge the Commission to approve this plan and to make one of the key modes of transportation for New Yorkers available for ALL New Yorkers, as well as all who visit your great city.