

**Orlando Sentinel**

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*Uber, Lyft drivers told to get on board with service dogs*

By: Kate Santich, Orlando Sentinel  
 April 14, 2017

Judy Mathews, blind since birth, had just finished celebrating national White Cane and Guide Dog Safety Day last October when she summoned Uber for a ride — only to have the driver refuse to transport Mathews’ guide dog, Keats.

“I tried telling the driver, ‘He’s my eyes. It’s like telling me I can’t bring part of me in your car,’” said Mathews, 38, the adult services supervisor at Lighthouse Central Florida, which helps people with vision loss. “I also calmly explained that it was the law.”

After a long standoff — in which the driver objected to having dog hair in her Cadillac — Mathews called police, filed a report, complained to Uber and got another ride home. Six months later, she said, she is still awaiting the results of a U.S. Department of Justice investigation into the incident.



The ordeal underscores what advocates say is a continuing problem with ride-sharing networks that contract with independent drivers ignorant of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act — despite a landmark settlement reached nearly a year ago between Uber and the National Federation of the Blind.

Though Uber acknowledged no wrongdoing, as part of the agreement in the class-action suit the company vowed to educate drivers and ban those who violate the ADA. Uber also agreed to submit to compliance testing over the next 3½ years, pay \$225,000 to the national federation and pay nearly \$3.3 million in attorney fees.

Yet Elly du Pre, executive director of the Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind, said she is still hearing complaints of discrimination by both Uber and Lyft, including drivers who see that a passenger has a service dog and drive off without stopping.

“We are trying to work with Uber and Lyft on how to accommodate people with visual impairment,” du Pre said. “They’ve been very receptive — but this is still a problem. And there has to be strong action taken in these cases.”

DuPre and Mathews hope that a bill currently making its way through the Florida Legislature — expected to be passed next week — could offer additional safeguards. At the least, advocates said, it will underscore that the ADA applies to independent drivers, despite previous arguments by Uber to the contrary.

Florida bill aimed at Uber, Lyft heads to Senate floor »

Senate Bill 340 would provide for statewide regulation of what are generically referred to as independent transportation networks, such as Lyft and Uber. Mostly the bill addresses background screening and insurance requirements for drivers and prohibits their regulation at the municipal level. But it also includes a requirement that the networks “adopt a policy of nondiscrimination” toward passengers with disabilities and those with service animals.

Fines for violations, the bill states, will be worked out by the state’s Department of Financial Services.

(more)

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Javi Correoso, an Uber spokesman based in Miami, said the company is working closely with Lighthouse Central Florida and other agencies serving people with disabilities to help educate its Florida drivers — now 40,000 strong and growing, making the state one of Uber’s top markets.

“They’re educating us on their concerns, and we’re educating them on our drivers, our technology, our product,” he said. “We’ve definitely worked with them, and the sponsors of this legislation have worked with them, to make sure these issues were [included] in the bill.”

Strangers help dogs get heartworm treatment — and homes »

Jodi Kawada Page, an Uber spokeswoman based in Washington, D.C., said the company now requires drivers to acknowledge in an electronic contract with the company that they “agree to transport service animals and operate in compliance with all applicable accessibility laws,” which also require them to accept people using wheelchairs, provided the chair will fit in their vehicle.

The drivers also get quarterly reminders on the law and are warned that “failure to follow the laws may result in permanent loss of access to Uber and the app,” Page said.

The driver who refused to transport Mathews with her guide dog, Page said, no longer works for Uber.

Lyft’s policy, which took effect just this week, is virtually identical. Earlier this month, the company announced a new partnership with the National Federation of the Blind and said Lyft would participate in the federation’s national convention this summer in Orlando.

“Access to affordable and flexible transportation can make a big difference in the lives of passengers with vision disabilities,” the company said in an April 4 statement. “... We’re working to increase awareness of blind passengers’ rights, implement effective public policies, and expand transportation options.”

Mathews said most of her encounters with drivers go smoothly and that she’s hopeful the remainder will get on board, particularly if SB 340 passes. But some fear the very nature of independent drivers — many of whom work part time or for short stints — will make this an uphill battle.

“My question for Florida is: Will the state have the ability to enforce the law?” said Marilyn Golden, a senior policy analyst for the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, based in Berkeley, Ca. “California has moved regulation [of independent transportation networks] to the state, and it has been atrocious. There’s one small state office, and they just don’t have the staff to enforce.”