

The Secretary
Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Submission to the Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program

Dear Committee Members,

National Disability Services (NDS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into the Victorian Multi Purpose Taxi Program.

NDS is Australia's peak body for non-government disability service organisations, representing over 1200 non-government service providers. Collectively, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability.

NDS understands that the Multi Purpose Taxi Program plays an important role in providing access to low-cost transport for Victorians with disabilities. Many people with disabilities rely on the Multi Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP) for transport to work, community activities, to day service programs, and to medical and allied health appointments.

As a result, we value the opportunity to provide feedback on behalf of the disability sector to improve the safety and accessibility of the program for people with disabilities.

Wait times:

Disability support providers raised wait times as a key safety concern for people with disability accessing the MPTP. They noted that Victorians with disabilities often must wait over an hour for an MPTP taxi during peak times, such as the start and end of the day when many people with disabilities are travelling to and from day programs. This creates particular safety concerns where people with disabilities are forced to wait alone and/or in the dark. While some providers indicated that their staff and clients had developed strategies to avoid

these situations, such as booking transport at least an hour in advance of when it is needed, this requires forward planning and significantly restricts flexibility.

NDS strongly believes that Victorians with disability should be able to access timely transport which allows them the flexibility to move around in their community when needed and without significant delays. For this reason, NDS supports the extension of the MPTP to Uber as a result of the role it plays in reducing wait times and providing greater access and choice for Victorians with disabilities.

Expansion to Rideshare Platforms:

NDS has not received any feedback indicating that Uber passengers receive lower quality service when compared to taxi passengers. Further work, however, is required to ensure that MPTP users, their families, carers, and the disability sector are aware of the program's expansion to Uber and have the skills and confidence to access the MPTP subsidised Uber 'rides.' NDS has received mixed feedback about the level of confidence in Uber, with a number of organisations noting a lack of trust in the rideshare platform when compared to traditional taxis. NDS supports efforts to improve safety and build user confidence in all MPTP vehicles, including rideshare vehicles.

Driver Knowledge and Training:

NDS members expressed concern around low levels of disability knowledge and understanding among drivers operating within the MPTP. Support workers who travelled with clients in MPTP vehicles noted that drivers often adopted a pitiful or charitable manner with users which was reminiscent of outdated understandings of disability. Support workers and coordinators also noted that drivers had a lack of knowledge around the needs of people with disabilities, and often ignored clear instructions provided by people with disabilities and their carers. NDS has summarized two case studies which illustrate this lack of understanding:

Jack, who is vision impaired, asked his MPTP driver to drop him off on the street out the front of his house, close to the curb so that his guide dog could get out of the car. The well-meaning driver decided that he would instead drop off his client in the driveway, closer to the front door so that Jack didn't have to walk as far. Jack got out of the car confused and struggled to find his front door. When Jack eventually got to the front door, he found that his driver, who had now left, had dropped him at the wrong house.

Susan was in a MPTP subsidized vehicle with a client, Lisa, who has an intellectual disability and is non-verbal. Lisa was making grunting noises on the journey home. The driver became agitated and asked Susan to 'get her to be quiet.' This was upsetting for Lisa and created unnecessary stress for both Lisa and Susan.

NDS strongly encourages the Committee to consider strengthening the training provided to MPTP drivers to ensure that participants and their companions (including family members, friends, carers and support staff) feel safe using the MPTP system. Drivers should have regular specialized disability training to ensure that they adopt a positive contemporary approach and attitude to people with disability and have a strong understanding of the unique needs of their passengers with disabilities.

Application and Card Replacement Process:

Providers also expressed concern about the wait times associated with attaining a new or replacement taxi card, with one member indicating that their client had to wait upward of 6 months. NDS understands that to access the MPTP, an individual must have their General Practitioner complete a form indicating their diagnoses and their capacity to utilize public transport. While this can be time consuming, the process is widely accepted to be reasonable. However, disability support organisations noted that if MPTP users lose their card, they are not able to get a replacement card without repeating the entire application process, including having their GP complete the online form again. NDS members noted that it is not uncommon for people with disabilities to lose their MPTP card. The wait time and processes involved in attaining a replacement card presents a key barrier to participation in the community for people with disabilities who misplace or lose their card.

Potential for Misuse of the MPTP Card:

NDS is aware of cases where individuals are (knowingly or unknowingly) using the incorrect MPTP card. This can occur when an MPTP user accidentally leaves their card in a vehicle after their trip, and the driver unknowingly uses their previous passenger's card to pay for the next passenger's trip. NDS also received concerning feedback that some workers in group homes and residential facilities have adopted the practice of using another participant's MPTP card if they cannot locate a participant's own card. NDS suggests that photo identification on the MPTP card would minimize the likelihood of this sort of misuse of participants funds.

Conclusion:

NDS acknowledges the important role that the Multi Purpose Taxi Program plays in ensuring access to affordable and accessible transportation for people with disabilities in Victoria.

NDS encourages the Committee to consider:

- Improving training for drivers;
- Expanding the program to a greater variety of vehicles in order to reduce wait times;
- Addressing application processing delays; and
- Implementing actions to reduce the potential misuse of users' cards by third parties.

NDS Victoria

30th July 2021