Honorable Members of the New Mexico Legislature,

My name is Tara Chavez, and I am the President of the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico. Our organization is dedicated to improving the lives of blind individuals throughout the United States, with a key focus on protecting their civil rights.

Today, I am reaching out to advocate for our rights. Level IV highly autonomous vehicle technology is already in use in cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Phoenix, and it will soon be available in Austin, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; and Washington, D.C. As a blind woman who uses a Guide Dog to travel safely and independently, I am thrilled about the potential of this technology. Imagine using my iPhone to summon a fully autonomous vehicle—one that operates without a licensed driver or any human presence in the passenger compartment. This vehicle would safely take me to my desired destination. In fact, I could fly from Albuquerque International Sunport to Phoenix or San Francisco today and experience this groundbreaking technology firsthand.

However, proposed legislation that bans autonomous vehicle use on our highways and requires licensed drivers would impede our progress. It would prevent us from fully realizing the dreams of blind individuals like myself. If this law passes, we will be denied the same freedom of movement that every licensed driver in New Mexico enjoys, and our freedoms would be restricted for at least a decade or more.

We urge you to do the right thing. Let us protect the rights of the 65,200 people in our state who report having a vision disability. As an affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind, we firmly believe in the promise of autonomous vehicle technology. In July 2024, we passed a national resolution emphasizing our commitment to enactment of equitable legislation in this domain.

Ironically, as you’ll see the very issue we’re fighting against is being attempted in New Mexico. I have included an excerpt of that resolution below for your review:

WHEREAS, many bills that would limit the deployment of fully autonomous vehicles, and even specifically require a licensed driver in every fully autonomous vehicle have been introduced in state legislatures across the country, essentially stripping away a dream that is now a reality.

Furthermore, the National Federation of the Blind is diligently working to establish a federal framework that would enable the safe testing of autonomous vehicles. This framework would conflict with the proposed state law, which is both unnecessary and detrimental to the future progress of autonomous vehicle technology in New Mexico.

Why Is a Licensed Driver in a Highly Autonomous Vehicle an Issue?

The presence of a licensed driver in a highly autonomous vehicle presents several significant problems:

Discrimination Risk: Blind individuals often face discrimination from rideshare companies for various reasons, such as using a service dog or a long white cane. Additionally, marginalized and underprivileged communities encounter discriminatory practices. When a licensed driver is involved, the risk of discriminatory behavior remains, leading to the exclusion of our community.

As we stand on the brink of technological innovation, we have a unique opportunity to shape the future of transportation. The advent of highly autonomous vehicles promises increased independence and mobility for blind individuals like myself. However, we must ensure that our legislation upholds the principles of equity, accessibility, and fairness.

By embracing autonomous vehicle technology, we can open doors that were once tightly closed. We can empower blind individuals to move freely within our communities, unencumbered by the limitations of traditional transportation. Let us not allow fear or hesitation to hinder progress. Instead, let us champion legislation that paves the way for a more inclusive and accessible world—one where blind individuals can confidently hail an autonomous vehicle, knowing it will safely transport them to their destination.

To the esteemed members of the New Mexico legislature, I implore you: Consider the dreams of the blind, the aspirations of those who seek independence, and the promise of technology that transcends barriers.

Thank you for your attention. Let us collectively steer toward a future where transportation truly means freedom for all.

Sincerely,

Tara Chavez, President

National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico