



blindness and low vision services

Taxi consultations
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Taxi Fare Review

Draft Report

Submission to: Essential Services Commission
Response Submitted by: Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira

To whom it may concern,

Vision Australia is the nation's leading provider of services for people who are blind or have low vision, and was formed through the merger of several agencies that shared a common purpose.

We are a living partnership that unites people who are blind, sighted or have low vision. Our goal is that people who are blind or have low vision will be able to access and participate fully in every aspect of life in the community.

To help realize this goal, we provide early childhood, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living services, and also work collaboratively with Government, business and community groups.

1. Introduction

Access and full participation in community life for people who are blind, Deafblind or have low vision, is not just 'our' vision, but is an inalienable human right. Explicit in the 'Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006', the 'Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995', the Commonwealth 'Disability Discrimination Act 1992' and international Law under the 'UN convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2007', governments, industry and the community, ought minimize systemic discrimination for people with disabilities, and promote equal access and participation to the greatest possible extent. For people with limited means of transport, reliable and affordable taxi services are an integral part of independent participation in community life. vision Australia therefore welcome this opportunity to speak to the Essential Services Commission (the Commission) as part of the Taxi Fare Review (the Review) in response to the Draft Report (the Report, and do so as per the following comments.

2. The Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

With reference to the proposition of an increase in Taxi metered fare prices, Vision Australia would like to reiterate comments made by other interested parties, such as VCOSS and the DHS, regarding a review of the MPTP subsidy scheme. Essentially, there are three key points to be made here with reference to fare prices: firstly regarding affordability; secondly around eligibility; and thirdly, the composition of the scheme.

Affordability

Vision Australia has identified through an extensive employment survey in 2007, that 63 percent of the labor market of people who are blind or have low vision, are unemployed, and 46 percent of those in the workforce are only part time employed(1). What this data indicates is that people who are blind or have low vision, are 5 times more likely to be out of work and 4 times more likely to be under employed in comparison to their sighted peers, painting a picture of systemic social and economic disadvantage. What is also clear from the anecdotal evidence of our clients, is that even with the MPTP in its existing form, taxi affordability is out of the

reach for some. This means that any increase in taxi fares, even with the MPTP subsidy, will have a significant exclusory effect on many people who are blind or have low vision.

It has been noted that under section 9.1 of the Report, that considerations for shortfalls in the service provision and the MPTP scheme for both taxi patrons and the industry have been comprehensively acknowledged. However, Vision Australia would like to also extent the comments here to those considerations, as a point to the wide reaching implications of the points raised above, being amplified to those living in rural, regional and outer suburban areas.

Eligibility

Vision Australia also endorses the comments made by VCOSS and the DHS throughout section 9.1 of the Report with regards to MPTP eligibility, yet we would like to extend further comment on the magnitude of the restrictive eligibility criteria introduced in 2004. Of the 42,000 vision Australia clients across Australia, the median age is 79 years and 80 percent are aged over 70 years. Although vision loss is often attributed to the aging process, it is not a homogenous notion, with variants ranging from relatively little loss to total blindness. Since the tightening of the eligibility criteria and the introduction of the means test, we know from our work with clients that many people with low vision do not meet the stringent requirements, either due to the disability criteria, the means test or both. Therefore, it is not uncommon for many of our clients who are of senior age, to have limited means of transport, are not eligible for the MPTP subsidy, and also have limited means to travel by taxi under the current fare structure. Of course, it should also be noted that such a situation is not limited to any age demographic, and such occurrences can be found across our entire client base. Again, what is clear, is that with the cost of living increasing across the board and the restrictions of the MPTP membership eligibility, an increase in taxi fares, will mean that people who are blind or have low vision, will often be left out of many aspects of community life.

the Composition of the MPTP

it is unclear from our reading of the report, whether the Commission will recommend an increase in the MPTP subsidy to offset any taxi fare increases. Vision Australia

would like to unequivocally state, that the MPTP subsidy rate should keep in step with any taxi fare increases, as a matter of policy. this being said, we also endorse the following recommendations put forward:

- Examine options to reduce red tape in the application process for MPTP membership

Vision Australia would also recommend that the disability eligibility criteria be examined to incorporate information regarding a persons access to transport. We also recommend that the means test be abolished or re-evaluated.

- Provide for temporary membership for people who are temporarily disabled and required to use a wheelchair;

We also recommend that non permanent vision loss or a temporary reduction in vision loss be incorporated into a temporary MPTP membership.

- Retain the MPTP benefit level at 50% of the fare;

This recommendation to be subject to the below recommendation being established, otherwise we recommend a review of this element.

- Reconsider the Government position on previous proposals to Increase the maximum trip subsidy to \$50;

On the grounds that the current subsidy of up to \$30 per trip, discriminates against those required to travel further distances, Vision Australia endorses this recommendation.

- A several-fold increase in the annual MPTP subsidy cap should be considered;

To ensure that members of the scheme are not forced to pay full fare, vision Australia would recommend either the annual cap be abolished or at least increased to a level reflective of the high end usage equivalent.

3. Conclusion

Vision Australia whilst being mindful of the burden being placed on the taxi industry due to high petroleum prices, also reminds the Commission of the systemic disadvantage across the board for people who are blind or have low vision, and that affordable taxi services play a key role in bridging that gap. We wish to thank the Commission for this opportunity to speak on this matter and welcome any further assistance should it be required.

Yours Sincerely,

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References

(1) Spriggs, R., (2007), 'Results and Observations From Research into Employment Levels in Australia', Vision Australia, available online at <http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/info.aspx?page=1651>