



My name is Mark Riccobono and I serve as President of the National Federation of the Blind, America's civil rights organization of the blind. Thank you for allowing me to share our thoughts with you about the potential of autonomous vehicle technology to enhance the independence of blind Americans.

The promised benefits of autonomous vehicles are well known, ranging from fewer road fatalities, to greater independence, to better fuel economy. Autonomous vehicles are poised to be the next great American innovation. In order to unleash the myriad benefits that autonomous vehicles and their associated technologies represent, it is imperative that Congress be proactive and expeditious in paving the way for the development, deployment, and full and equal enjoyment of autonomous vehicles for all Americans.

Blind Americans are enthusiastic about the prospect of autonomous vehicles. By potentially enhancing our independence by providing reliable transportation that we can access whenever we need it, just as other Americans are currently able to do, autonomous vehicles would also improve our productivity, economic outcomes, and community engagement. It is important to recognize, however, that none of these benefits will be actualized without a clear and forward-thinking approach to the autonomous vehicle issue at the federal level, which includes ensuring full and equal access for everyone.

To ensure equal access, two items must be a part of any final legislation promoting autonomous vehicles, and only one of which has to do with the design of autonomous vehicle technology. The first item is protecting the blind and other people with disabilities from discrimination in the licensure process; in other words, eyesight must not be a requirement for a license to operate an autonomous vehicle. The second item is requirements related to nonvisual accessibility of user interfaces and vehicle design. Without these two requirements working in tandem, we could find ourselves in one of two ironic yet equally untenable scenarios. In the first, the blind could have unfettered access to autonomous vehicles via nondiscriminatory licensing practices, but are then unable to operate the vehicles due to inaccessible user interfaces. In the other scenario, autonomous vehicles could be designed and manufactured ideally in terms of accessibility, yet many blind people are then unable to enjoy the fruits of such innovation due to discriminatory licensing mechanisms.

The National Federation of the Blind supports the responsible production and deployment of autonomous vehicles that are safe, reliable, and fully accessible. We also support nondiscriminatory public policies that make these vehicles equally available to both the blind and others with disabilities or other characteristics that prevent them from operating traditional vehicles. Early and consistent guidance from policymakers as these technologies are developed, tested, and deployed, and as states and territories craft legislation and regulations supporting their operation, is critical to realizing the promise autonomous vehicles hold for all Americans. I therefore ask this committee to take urgent action to ensure that promise comes to fruition. Thank you again for the opportunity to address you today.