

## **RE: Submission to the Review of the Disability Standards for accessible Public Transport 2012.**

February 6, 2014

Sheelagh Daniels-Mayes

On Friday July 4 2014 I was made aware of the review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport through a Government Media Release called Notify. Prior to this, I was not aware of such a process being undertaken, Since this day I have learned that there are a number of vision impaired and blind people who were not aware. We do acknowledge the submissions made by the Royal Society for the Blind and by the Guide Dog SANT service. However, I do not feel that they fully represent the experiences I have had on public transport.

Therefore, despite the lateness of this submission, I have quickly put something together. I have reviewed the report provided but feel key areas are not covered. Yes vision impairment is included but not sufficiently. Accessibility goes beyond ramps. There I am submitting the below to highlight gaps I have found but also support the fact that some improvements have been made.

I am an individual who is vision impaired (and have been for four decades), have a guide dog, travel domestically and internationally on a regular basis and have experienced some joys but some horrors to accessing public transport in its many guises.

I have divided by submission into sections. This has been written much more rapidly than I would care to do but I have a PhD to write and it would seem that each time I set aside time to get on with it another issue of accessibility arises (e.g. I have been battling copyright laws and web accessibility this past two weeks to gain access to one single journal article that I need for my research). So this may not be pretty, it may not be well laid out, I may miss things. But please read it as it will give you insight that I feel is still much needed for

*developing a public, private and community transport system that is accessible to the whole community.*

### **Trains**

In South Australia trains are one of my primary transport means. Where do I begin?

Announcements on trains have massively improved. It is audible and reasonably timely. Recently, I have discovered that each stop is announced twice, fantastic.

The new electric trains in SA are well designed and laid out.

However there is plenty of room for improvement.

Most train stations in SA are unmanned. They are usually difficult to navigate. If arriving at a new station I have little hope of independently finding what platform I

need to go to for the correct train let alone then finding it. Signage is poor if I can find it to begin with.

Tactile Ground Indicators (TGIs) are generally good. However, they rarely line up with the carriage door. Thankfully I have a Guide Dog who is able to find the door.

However, SA train doors do not automatically open at stations (same as Melbourne). So, once the door is located - either internally or externally - you have to find a button to push to get on (that magical, mysterious button).

Additionally, as doors do not open automatically it is guesswork as to what side of the train you need to alight. The train pulls in, I have to figure out if it is to be the left or right side, find the button, push it and wait. I've missed getting off a train due to the time it takes to figure this out.

In Milan Italy, train stops are announced along with the words "exit on left (or right); easy;

Adelaide Railway Station is a nightmare. Yes, we now have an escalator. The lift is hidden away somewhere and the ramp exit is steep. But it goes further than this. I can't see the screens to locate my train time or platform. Unlike Sydney or Melbourne, for example, trains do not consistently leave from the same platform.

*In Sydney's Central Railway Station I can go to Platform 18 and know this is the Western suburbs line to Parramatta, Penrith and the like. Easy.*

In Adelaide Railway Station I need to go to the person at the one entry gate and ask. This often means a line up along with people with bikes, prams, zimmer frames and the like or those simply wanting to ask a question. Waiting times means I have regularly missed a train. Additionally, once I was told my train would leave that day on Platform 5 (for example). Off I went with my guide dog; we got on; we sat down; we waited; it eventually left and then announced it was the train service to an entirely different destination. We got off when we could at a strange station; somehow got on a train back to Adelaide; started again. You see, sometimes two trains leave from the same platform - one at the front (which I should have been on) and one at the back (which I got on). No-one told me. How do I distinguish between these trains as a vision impaired person? I avoid this now by getting staff to be specific but it worries me constantly.

*Whilst in Vancouver recently I used trains all the time. I whizzed all over the place. Either by calling, pushing the security button in the lift, picking up the security phone on the platform or entry point of the station, I could ask for VIP (Vision Impaired Person) Assistance. Tell them where I am and within a couple of minutes a real live human arrived, one that is fully trained in sighted guiding of vision impaired and blind people and all things disability. They helped me get my ticket, got me to the correct platform, radioed ahead to my destination (if I wanted) had someone meet me and guide me out. So easy. I did this to get to the airport one day and was pass the parcel through the hands of four people; it felt good, safe and I didn't panic about getting lost, running into things or missing my flight. This is standard operating procedure in Vancouver.*

*In Milan the human element wasn't so good as Vancouver. However, with low vision I could navigate my way through the three colour coded tunnels, hand railings and the like. I knew, roughly, where I was. Train announcements in Italian and English were fabulous.*

## **Buses**

Where do I begin again?

Buses are my other primary source of transport in Adelaide.

Internal design of buses is restrictive with guide dogs, there are only a couple of seats we easily fit into. Explain this to other passengers and they tend to get rather put out. Get a pram or two, a wheelchair, shopping trolleys, zimmer frames and the like (it's happened) and I'm almost sitting with a dog on my lap whilst having a necessary backpack on my back. I've gotten off the bus several stops early because there is simply no room and little understanding that access is beyond wheelchairs, it is also about guide dogs needing space. Parents tend not to like folding up their prams to provide more room stating it is too difficult for them.

Drivers are generally hopeless at letting you what bus has pulled in to the stop. They rarely remember to tell you when your stop is approaching. They change drivers and the new driver is not informed of your need. Several buses pull up in a line and you may need bus three but you can't see it, can't get to it if you know it's yours, and then it pulls out and leaves.

Buses rarely stop when they see a white cane or guide dog stating that you need to flag it down. How do you know it's coming? How do you know it's your bus when you can't read the bus number?

*In Vancouver (I was there for six weeks) buses are much more accessible. They talk. On arriving at a bus stop they announce what they are e.g. 14 UBC. Once on the bus each stop is announced using GPS technology. At times they give additional information such as "change here for Canada Line". Drivers don't have to do anything really but often they do anyway. Often when I got on the bus with a white cane they would announce that the "Courteous" seat was needed so it could be vacated by a passenger. When alighting from a bus I was offered on occasion assistance to the nearest lights to cross the road or told that Main Street was the one in front not behind. Little things but huge for vision impaired people whether local or visiting.*

## **Trams**

Generally good. Announcements are clear. With the use of my guide dog we find the big disability access sign on the platform and wait and most times the driver lines the door up. However, if I couldn't see, I wouldn't find this sign as it is not tactile in any way.

The lay-out of trams in SA are difficult when also boarding with a guide dog. It would seem that the recent move for automated ticketing systems requires a large onboard machine which seems to have been plonked in access areas. So you sit with your dog

as people clamber past to the machine and hope she doesn't get kicked, trodden on or tripped over. No matter what I do, she does stick out a bit and I find myself hunched over protecting her.

There needs to be a system whereby trams are announced on the platform. Usually you don't know that this is a South Adelaide tram, for example, until you are on board which means changing trams for more distant stops.

TGIs along the edge are good.

Still some gaps between platform and tram which could be difficult to navigate for some.

## **Aviation**

There is a lack of an online system with all airlines to make a booking when you need also to book a service dog such as a guide dog which results in, at times, long wait times via phone, added service fees, inexperienced personnel who don't know how to proceed. Average wait/booking time is approximately 40 minutes in my experience. However, I do understand that QANTAS now has a direct phone number to try and overcome this but do I always want/need to fly with QANTAS?

There is a lack of Dog Relief areas at airports to allow guide dogs and other assistance dogs to toilet prior to, or after a flight. This has improved at Adelaide Airport but the location is out of the way and not known to many. When traveling to Melbourne I book with Virgin Airlines (no matter the cost) because I just need to get across two or three zebra crossings to some grass. At Brisbane I am yet to find an adequate space. In Sydney, after numerous flights, I have finally found some grass at the 10 minute pick up point at Terminal 2; getting there takes sighted assistance as it is a bit of a hike involving zebra crossings, fences, car park entrances and, I'm not sure what. Designated Dog Relief areas are needed that are well known and well signed within easy distances that have garbage bins for disposal of any waste.

Assistance at airports is a pot luck affair. Once dropped off by a taxi driver you are generally on your own. I have found that entering an airport with suitcase and guide dog is not enough of an indicator that you might need help?? I have had to use my partial vision to locate a person who looks like they are wearing a uniform and ask for help. This is not adequate. I would like to see a number i can call on approach or a set pick-up point (similar to Vancouver airport) or a button I can push so that trained individuals can come to assist. Vancouver Airport also has trained information staff wearing bright green vests who are abundantly helpful and they find you.

Security at airports when using a guide dog is interesting. At times it is fine. Recently in Sydney I stood in line for 5 minutes arguing with security on how to proceed. I have had people scared of dogs refusing to assist. There is a recent move to have people with disabilities go through a separate gate but no-one tells you until you are ready to go through the "normal" access. I saw one elderly couple turned away at the last minute because she needed assistance which meant a long walk back along the line to some special door or other.

On returning from overseas recently (without a guide dog and just using a white cane) I received ground assistance at the International Airport but had to wait nearly an hour as there were 5 other people (all elderly) who needed assistance despite the fact I had booked this months in advance. Five lots of suitcases to claim, five lots of customs clearances. I was eventually put on the domestic link bus to go get my connecting flight. When I got to Terminal 2 I had no disability assistance meet me. I navigated myself off the bus, across the road, into the terminal, eventually found a uniformed person who, with hesitation, navigated me to check-in. I had two suitcases, a white cane and been on a flight for 16 hours. I made my flight as it was boarding passengers despite the fact I had left almost three hours between flights. No time to go to the toilet, get cash, get water or any other comfort. Not acceptable. I tried to inform the airport of the problem but got transferred from one person to the next and have not got back to that issue because of other commitments in my life.

Where is the "Whole of Journey Access"?

### **Timetabling**

I use the Adelaide Metro Smart App to access timetables. Usually it is pretty good. However, there are some design floors that I understand are being investigated at the moment e.g. how to find that little pale blue button to tap on to get the actual train timetable in a sea of white. I also note that this App comes at a cost of nearly \$10 which may be prohibitive to some and not everyone has a smart phone or iPad.

I also would note that timetabling of some buses is just plain weird. I live 50kms south of Adelaide so outer metropolitan. On week-ends there are certain locations I best not want to get to because buses aren't provided on week ends at all.

Once the Seaford train station opened (heaven thank you!) the bus was stopped that went from Aldinga Beach to Colonnades Shopping Centre. I used this bus to get to the high school where I am undertaking PhD studies. I now need to get a bus (which has additional stops), get off at Seaford and get a train to Noarlunga and then get a bus to go back again or do a 25 minute walk. A process that can take up to 90 minutes instead of 45. I'm told by Adelaide Metro that is what has been decided (by whom?). I had been thinking of long-term employment here but 3 hours a day transport to cover approximately 30kms seems ridiculous - call me crazy.

Apparently there is a button, somewhere on the train platform, that tells when the next train is due and where it is going. I'm yet to find it. Maybe such a system should be consistent and made obvious. I would also suggest such a system be implemented at some bus stops?

I am also informed that train doors should align with a certain TGI on the platform. Where?

I note too, that lifts are great as noted in your report and several submissions. The more recent ones are highly accessible but older ones don't have good braille on buttons and the like for reading. Thankfully they usually only go one level because it is not announced in any lifts I have used at stations. A final comment on lifts...they need regular cleaning as there are ones I know of that are being used as public toilets and not being cleaned out. Absolutely not acceptable, they stink and I can't see what I

might be stepping in. Furthermore, if lifts are going to be placed in out of the way areas then this needs to be well signed and TGI indicators need to be used to enable vision impaired and blind people to navigate to it.

### **Taxis**

Taxis are a necessary part of a vision impaired persons life as general public transport doesn't go where you need it to or, it is a lengthy trip with several changes of line or transport mode. I receive the M40 Taxi Subsidy here in SA. Essentially it gives me a \$20 discount one way. That gets me nothing in the grand scheme though is useful for those undertaking short trips around their neighbourhood or in the city (rare with me).

If I were to get a taxi to university from home one way it would cost me, minus the discount,  
\$70;s

My husband was recently in hospital. A return trip to the hospital was \$110 subtracting the discount. It would take two buses and 111minutes 9(all going right) to get there otherwise;

If I go to the airport it costs me \$165 return (I had a return flight to Sydney recently that cost me \$149);

If I get a taxi to the school I'm located at 20km down the road because the bus/train combination takes so long, it costs me \$35 one way.

So, whilst taxis seem like a viable option they are not. Whilst living in New South Wales and Victoria the subsidy was greater and therefore made it a useful option on occasion.

Taxis need to be identifiable to vision impaired passengers e.g. braille numbering as discussed in the report. I've had incidents of discrimination with the guide dog and a case of sexual harassment by a driver but didn't get anywhere with the complaint because I could not identify the driver or car.

Meters need to talk. Once I became familiar with a new address in Adelaide and i had a talking GPS system I noticed how much cheaper the taxi ride became. Strange that.

### **Accessible Parking**

I noted this was touched upon in your review. However, I'd like to add that Accessible Parking should be extended to vision impaired people particularly those with guide dogs. Here is why.

Everyday car spaces are usually narrow. I find it almost impossible to get in or out of a car with a guide dog in or out of harness. She has to bend in weird ways to get out or out of the front passenger seat where she sits with me ready to assist.

So, we started dropping me off before parking. This means I'm dropped in oncoming traffic ways trying to get a harness on whilst traffic is coming up behind. Particularly dangerous in multi-storey car parks where cars have limited directions where they can go, so no dropping me off and then going to a space you saw, or standing in a safe space and waiting because cars really don't have anywhere to go.

On days that are 32 degrees and above guide dogs are not able to work because the ground is too hot. Going to the shops is impossible as the everyday car spaces are miles away from the shopping centre doors and the ground is far too hot under paw.

Ever tried navigating a guide dog through a car park even with sighted assistance? There are garden beds, a lack of footpaths, speed humps, there are no consistent road rules of keep to the left, which way is the traffic traveling, cars backing out, side windows, tow bars for knees to hit, tailgates sticking up, kerbs that seem to come out of nowhere and so much more. Have your husband pushing the trolley full of shopping thrown into the mix and it is impossible. Many shopping centres we visit don't have good drop off or pick up points so you get abused by other shoppers for dropping us off or picking us up. Then there is the problem of course of identifying the right car to get into or finding the shopping centre door to go into once dropped off and then finding the person you are supposed to be shopping with.

Accessible Parking is also essential at hospitals. We have seen several spaces empty that we can't use and then had to park almost a kilometre away with no footpaths, flights of steps and no safe crossing zones to return to the entry.

At Seaford Railway Station there are several Accessible parking spots that we walk past as we navigate our way to the car on the days my husband picks me up. The spaces here are usually very narrow and involve my husband backing out into oncoming traffic and me navigating myself and the dog into the car.

This goes on and on. Car parks be they private, public or whatever all have a combination of these issues. I recall going to an art gallery in Adelaide after having a hellish time parking and navigating with a guide dog to find an empty accessible parking spot at the front door that remained empty for the evening.

Airports are similar but need to be noted here.

i had an accessible parking pass whilst living in Sydney and Melbourne but with recent changes this has been denied me here. I know one other guide dog user who has one but I can't get one?

### **Complaints**

To whom do I complain or provide feedback?

The issues outlined above have impacted on me (and many others) for years both as a white cane user and as a guide dog user. I have raised the issues across a number of forums and spaces with little success.

For example, I have complained to the relevant transport authority, blindness peak organisations and advocacy groups, the SA Transport Ministers advisory group and the list goes on. I attempted on several occasions to lodge a Human Rights claim but found the process to time consuming and therefore prohibitive. I often feel that the system is deliberately designed this way to keep us quiet. Or, that bodies believe we have so much time on our hands that we can spend hours, like now, finding the appropriate body/person, writing the complaint and following it through.

There needs to be one body to whom the standards are accountable that the public can access via post, phone or email. A place where we can say this happened today be it good or bad. Then we may make consistent progress.

### **Final comments**

I am so pleased that we have a set of standards. However they do not go far enough, they concentrate mostly on wheelchair users with some inclusion of vision impaired or blind people. The standards are definitely a step forward in the right direction but need to improve with accountability and reporting systems.

To highlight this point, as noted at the outset, I accidentally found out about this review only last Friday, July 4. How I did not know is a mystery to me. I found also that there were a number of vision impaired people who did not know of the review who would, if given time, like to submit. I'm curious as to where and how this review was promoted. Clearly not on radio or television, you know, those auditory forms of promotion as opposed to print material. I know it's impossible to tell everyone about something, I've been there. But to have so many missing out makes me curious but also makes me suggest that promotion be addressed in the next review process for consideration.

Is there going to be a peak body responsible for these standards to be achieved? If so, will it include those who have a lived experience of a diversity of disabilities (i.e. goes beyond ramps)? This I think is essential and could be the driving force of necessary change.

Again I apologise for the lateness. However, I felt it important enough to contribute my experience that I have taken the past six hours of allotted PhD research time out to do this somewhat unprofessional document. I hope it provides you with some lived experience of vision impairment and know that what I am suggesting as solutions would be good for all Australians and not just the blindness community.

Please feel free to contact me if you need further information or clarity.

Yours sincerely,

Sheelagh Daniels