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The TLC Central Dispatch Program is Failing to Provide Adequate Services to Wheelchair Users

Testimony by Assembly Member Micah Z. Kellner
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My name is Micah Z. Kellner and I represent the 65th Assembly District in Manhattan, including parts of the Upper East Side, Yorkville, and Roosevelt Island. Thank you to Chairman John Liu and Council Speaker Christine Quinn for the opportunity to testify today.

Central Dispatch was launched as a two-year pilot program in July 2008 to match scattered wheelchair users looking for a taxi with the limited number of accessible taxis. I was very supportive of this program's creation; I wrote an Op-Ed in the New York Post saying so. I did have a number of concerns about how I heard it was being structured—and many of my gripes have unfortunately proven to be real problems.

After receiving a number of complaints from wheelchair users who told me that the program was not working, I conducted a study between December 2008 and January 2009 to determine how well the two-year pilot program was meeting its own goals and the needs of our city's 60,000 wheelchair users.

For the study, my office monitored twenty calls to Central Dispatch requesting taxi pickups in the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, with varying destinations.

While Central Dispatch is supposed to be available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, I found that, in practice, service is largely unavailable on weekends and outside of normal '9 to 5' business hours. Of the seven calls my office monitored outside of weekday business hours, four didn't even result in reaching Central Dispatch. 311 attempted to transfer these calls, but no one at Central Dispatch picked up. Of the remaining three, only one resulted in the dispatcher successfully obtaining a taxi for the caller.

Even when Central Dispatch could be reached, problems abounded. The TLC has a stated goal of meeting 25% of service requests within 20 minutes, 50% within 40 minutes, and 100% within an hour. An immediate comment to make on this very questionable standard is that the TLC does not include the time a customer spends waiting for Central Dispatch to *confirm* a pick-up appointment in their calculations for this. In my study, the wait time for call-backs was significant—often several hours. All in all, I did not find that Central Dispatch was able to meet its goals, even applying its own standard. Very rarely were taxis available, and more rarely were they scheduled within an hour of the requested pick-up time.

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It is important to note that the biggest problems I saw were with calls for trips originating from or going to the outer boroughs. While every monitored call was placed more than 90 minutes before the requested pick-up time, not one call from an outer borough resulted in a pick-up being scheduled for the requested time or within 30 minutes of that time. Significantly, out of the seven of these outer borough requests, five ended with the caller being told that no taxicab was available.

I question why wheelchair users are required to give their destinations to the dispatcher. Doesn't this allow drivers to screen against destinations they'd rather not drive to? The Taxicab Riders Bill of Rights is supposed to guarantee that passengers are not discriminated against in this way, but Central Dispatch seems designed to be at odds with the rights that other New Yorkers enjoy as taxicab riders.

In all, there are 19 TLC violations in the Rules specific to the Central Dispatch pilot program. All 19 carry fines in the pathetic range of \$50 to \$100 and none require a personal appearance by the offender. Side by side, the comparable rules for passengers engaging a taxi through a street hail are much tougher in their analogous situations.

The relevant example that explains the not-so-mysterious lack of taxicabs available to the outer boroughs is TLC Rule §2-50(b), which prohibits a driver from refusing to take a passenger anywhere in New York City. For street hails, a violation of the rule carries a fine of between \$200 and \$350, depending on the number of offenses. In contrast, a driver participating in Central Dispatch is expressly permitted to refuse two fares per shift, with a third refusal carrying only a \$100 fine. It is unknown how many such citations have occurred or how many refusals drivers make per shift on average. The TLC, bizarrely, doesn't track this.

Since For-Hire-Vehicles (FHV) and livery cars form the bulk of taxi service in the outer boroughs, it would seem logical that they fulfill a similar purpose for Central Dispatch. TLC rules require that these companies have accessible vehicles in their fleets or that they contract with a company that does. I suspect that the reason these companies have been left out of the requirement to participate in Central Dispatch is that the TLC knows that they have done nothing to enforce this rule and that very few FHV and livery car companies are in compliance.

From the point of view of the wheelchair user in need of transportation, Central Dispatch is simply unreliable. You can't reach Central Dispatch on weekends or outside business hours. You can't travel to or from an outer borough. And you can't depend on scheduling a pick-up in a timely fashion even if you call hours in advance. What good is it?

The report I issued following my study, *Stranded*, made a number of recommendations on how to change this holding pattern and improve the services Central Dispatch provides.

An important first step in correcting the problems that exist is to have a full and clear picture of what is working and what is not. This means meaningful data collection.

It is disturbing to me that as of March 2009, the TLC said it has dispatched 1,275 calls, with 10% ending in cancellations for reasons not tracked. However, 311 reports that for roughly

the same time period (as of February 2009), 2,287 calls were transferred from their operators to Central Dispatch. The TLC has yet to provide any explanation for this discrepancy.

Of equal concern is the lack of any clarity on what the TLC counts as a “cancellation.” When I asked the TLC, recently, if customers who are told there is no vehicle available to them are considered to be “cancellations,” I was told that they were. How can we hope to improve services if we don’t know how often vehicles are unavailable or when and where these problems tend to occur? Imagine how much more we would know about how to improve the pilot program if those who did cancel were asked why. Is it that the available pick-up time offered by the dispatcher was too far in the future from the customer’s requested pick-up time? Or is it that in waiting for the dispatcher to call back to confirm a trip the caller gave up and made other arrangements? If data collection does not improve, we cannot know these things.

I have also recommended that the TLC make better use of available technology to improve services and maximize the ability of dispatchers to match consumers with drivers.

Despite training on how to use the Central Dispatch BlackBerry smartphones issued to drivers, TLC data shows that on average, only 31 drivers are logged into the system at any given time – even though there are likely almost 238 accessible vehicles on the road.

Most New York City taxis already have global positioning systems (GPS) attached to their meters as part of the Passenger Information Monitor System (PIMS). The TLC could have adapted this standard technology for the purpose of tracking and dispatching taxis for Central Dispatch. Instead, it chose to provide drivers with GPS-enabled handheld BlackBerry smartphones. This approach has undermined the effectiveness of Central Dispatch because it is unreliable: the devices can be left at home or in the glove compartment, their sound can be switched off or set too low, or drivers can simply forget to turn them on.

BlackBerry smartphones further impair communications because they only allow a driver to answer “yes” or “no” to a fare request. This means that there is no way to communicate that the driver currently has a fare but might be willing to make a pick-up after finishing it.

I am pleased that the TLC has begun a pilot program in half of its accessible taxis, using the PIMS system instead of BlackBerry smartphones, but more needs to be done soon to address this major failing. This is especially urgent because of the TLC’s new proposed rules barring drivers from using handheld devices while driving. How is a driver supposed to fulfill his commitment to responding to trip requests from Central Dispatch while following this new rule?

I would be remiss if I did not close my testimony by once again putting out a call for the TLC to show its commitment to the program by providing a modest advertising budget for it. A bus shelter ad in front of a few agencies that cater to wheelchair users would make a big difference in getting the word out about this program. Since the inception of Central Dispatch, I have heard the TLC claim that demand for this program is low. Until there is a meaningful attempt to get the word out, this will undoubtedly continue to be the case.

Ultimately, until there are more accessible taxicabs it will remain challenging for the TLC to provide the excellent customer service that wheelchair customers deserve to receive. That is why I sponsor a bill with State Senator Tom Duane (A.7842/S.4861) to mandate that after June 30, 2011, taxi owners may put only accessible taxicabs into service when replacing vehicles that have reached their TLC-mandated retirement age.

I am grateful to Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Transportation Committee Chair John Liu for holding this hearing today. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.