Autonomous vehicles (AVs) are being developed and tested across the United States, with the potential to significantly increase mobility options and safety for Americans. However, a key question facing policymakers and industry is how to ensure AVs provide accessible transportation for people with disabilities—approximately 43 million Americans, according to the Institute on Disability.

A 2010 survey by the National Organization on Disability found people with disabilities are three times more likely to depend on public transportation than those without disabilities. The current transportation system, however, often leaves people with disabilities without accessible and reliable options to meet their basic needs, including getting to and from work. A 2017 report from the Ruderman Family Foundation estimates 2 million Americans with disabilities could access new employment options with improved transportation choices.

Purchasing personally owned AVs will probably be out of reach for most people. AVs likely will be deployed in a fleet model, similar to existing transportation network companies (TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft, as part of an expected shift away from individual car ownership to “mobility on demand.”

Furthermore, planning autonomous trips must account for instances where assistance may be needed to enter and exit the vehicle, secure individuals safely in the vehicle and other concerns. This also involves designing vehicles with “universal design” principles to “accommodate the widest...
range of potential users, including people with disabilities,” according to the Intelligent Transportation Society of America.

Some advancements in accessibility are already being made by the AV industry. Waymo has included Braille writing for the “start ride” button and other features in its AV services in Arizona, and some companies are experimenting with vehicle “way-finding” sounds that could help visually impaired passengers find their vehicle.

**State Actions**

While over 30 states have passed legislation regarding AVs, most states have taken a relatively hands-off approach with their legislative and regulatory actions thus far. A few states have started to address AV accessibility for people with disabilities.

Maine, Michigan, Minnesota and the District of Columbia have directed task forces to study issues related to AV accessibility for people with disabilities.

Minnesota’s previous governor established an Advisory Council on Connected and Autonomous Vehicles. The council’s 2018 report contained a number of recommendations concerning people with disabilities, including one to consider allowing people with disabilities and others who may not have driver’s licenses the ability to use AVs. The council also suggested conducting pilot projects in areas with persons with disabilities, as well as soliciting public feedback on how to make the design of AVs more accessible for people with disabilities.

Michigan’s Future of Mobility Council, which was created by the legislature in 2016 (SB 995), makes statewide policy recommendations and encourages innovation relating to AVs. It recommends the disability community be involved in the debate surrounding AVs and that pilot programs be developed with the goal of improving mobility for persons with disabilities.

In Washington, D.C., the city council enacted legislation in 2018 (B22-0901) requiring a study on the effects and impacts of AVs, including on the district’s disability community.

And in Maine, the legislature created a Commission on Autonomous Vehicles in 2018 (HP 1204) to coordinate efforts among state agencies. It directed that a representative of the Office of Aging and Disability Services within the Department of Health and Human Service serve on the commission.

Nevada legislation in 2017 (AB 69) regulated autonomous TNCs and prohibited any additional charge for providing transportation to a person because of a physical disability. A policy prohibiting discrimination due to a disability is also required. The law also mandates services to enable passengers to indicate they require a wheelchair-accessible vehicle. If the TNC cannot provide such services, it must direct the passenger to an alternative provider that can, if available.

New Hampshire SB 216 in 2019 directed the New Hampshire Transportation Council to solicit input from representatives of the disability community regarding, among other things, the testing and deployment of automated vehicles.

Some states, such as Colorado, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina, have begun to explicitly allow those without a driver’s license to operate an AV, which could accelerate adoption of autonomous mobility by people with disabilities.

**Federal Actions**

Congress debated, but did not enact, AV legislation in its last session. The AV START Act would have prevented states from discriminating on the basis of a disability when issuing a license for a mostly (level 4) or fully (level 5) autonomous vehicle. Such a provision is expected to be included if Congress moves a new bill this session.

The U.S. Department of Transportation’s (USDOT’s) Automated Vehicles Guidelines 3.0 (a subsequent 4.0 version has since been issued) encouraged “developers and deployers to work proactively with the disability community to support efforts that focus on the array of accommodations needed for different types of disabilities, and ways to improve mobility as a whole—not just from curb to curb, but also from door to door.” However, neither guideline includes any binding requirements.

USDOT recently unveiled three initiatives regarding autonomous mobility for people with disabilities. The Complete Trip Deployment Program will provide $40 million to communities for partnerships that promote independent mobility and an emphasis on the “complete trip,” i.e., from planning a trip to arrival at the final stop of a destination.

USDOT’s Inclusive Design Challenge is soliciting solutions to mobility access barriers for people with disabilities. Additionally, the Mobility for All Pilot Program is granting $3.5 million to encourage coordination and partnerships to enhance mobility and access to vital community services for older adults, individuals with disabilities and low-income populations.

Another notable federal project is the Accessible Transportation Technologies Research Initiative (ATTRI). USDOT, partnering with the departments of Labor and Health and Human Services, is focusing research “on areas where market incentives may otherwise lead to underinvestment.”

**Additional Resources**

- [NCSL Autonomous Vehicles Resources](#)
- “The Future of the Workforce: State Exchange on Employment & Disability
- [USDOT Automated Vehicles Activities](#)

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