Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern and I'm your host.

Hello everyone and welcome to Central Bark. I am super excited today because I'm joined by two of my very favorite people on the planet. We have Amy Salgar, who is our manager of Alumni Engagement at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and we have Dr. Melba Valez Ortiz, who is one of our illustrious alumni association board members. And today we're going to talk about a really important topic to those of us who are Guide Dog users, and that has to do with ride-share denials. The alumni association just conducted a survey and these lovely ladies are going to tell us a little bit about the findings. So welcome, Amy and Melba. Thanks so much for joining us. Amy, can you just pop in real quick and introduce yourself to everybody?

Amy Salgar: I would absolutely love to thank you there. This is Amy Sager, and as Theresa mentioned, I am the Alumni Engagement Manager here at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and I have been fortunate enough to hold this position since this past August.

Melba Valez Ort...: And my name is Melba Valez Ortiz. Ola. Hello. Hello everyone. I am a professor of communications at Grand Valley State University in West Michigan. But in addition to that, I am a proud member of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Alumni Association, and I have the privilege of serving on our travel committee.

Theresa Stern: Fantastic. Fantastic. Thank you so much for joining us, both of you. So Amy, my first question is for you. Can you tell us a little bit about the role that the Alumni Association at Guide Dogs for the Blind plays in advocacy?

Amy Salgar: Absolutely. So there's actually a couple of major things that the Alumni Association, which for anyone who's not familiar, is that if any graduate from any of our three programs, the Guide Dog Program, OMI or Canine Buddy Program do become part of the alumni association. One of the things that first happens from the Alumni Association is actually they're usually the ones that we get are advocacy related topics from the Alumni Association Board that Melba is a part of. They're able to hear from the alumni as to what are issues that are going on, what are struggles, how can we assist? The other main point of individuals within our Alumni Association is truly they're the main advocates. They are the ones who are dealing with these issues. We've tried to pull together both the board as well as Guide Dogs for the Blind in providing them with tips and resources, but they ultimately are the individuals who are able to educate the public and bring awareness to the different topics and issues.

Theresa Stern: That's fantastic. I love that feedback loop. I think that was so important for Guide Dogs for the Blind, and I know that GDB is really one of the only guide dog schools, if not the only guide dog school that has an alumni association. I think that's so important because I think it really does help us to move everything further in terms of advocacy for those of us who use guide dogs, having that feedback from folks. So thanks for all the great leadership that you're giving to the Alumni Association, Amy. That's awesome. So Melba, tell me, as one of the key researchers for this study, can you tell us a little bit about the methods, the intention of the study and the design of the study?

Melba Valez Ort...: Sure. Well, here's a bit of an origin story. As a guide dog user myself, I have retinitis pigmentosa and I lost most of my vision at this point. I had experience personally at denial. Now I happen to live in West Michigan and because of my training, I know better than to generalize when something is happening to one person. So I never quite knew whether that was an issue that had to do something with me or with other people or more broadly a societal issue, to put it that way. Well, because of my interaction with the Alumni Association, I get to be in touch with lots of other guide of users regularly, I had heard similar stories. And then last year a federal judge, Judge David Patel, was denied a rideshare ride by one of the rideshare services, and that caused a ruckus that made it all the way to the pages of the Washington Post.

It was at that point when the Alumni Association and I, in our conversations, wanted to look into this further, using the momentum, but our approach was a little different. Already the National Federation of the Blind was, I believe, in coordination with Guide Dogs and the Department of Justice had set up a database of denials, what could go and report a denial. Primarily the idea behind that study was to get a sense for the volume of denials, the frequency of the denials. Our study, we wanted to be a little different. We wanted to get at the impact that these denials have on individuals who experienced them.

And our findings were very surprising in some ways and very concerning. But very broadly, the way we approached it was that because we are able to access and have access to so many graduates, thousands of graduates all over the US and Canada, we sent a survey, this is what is called in the business of research, a sample of convenience to our membership. And we asked them to tell us about their experiences with rideshare services and importantly what impact it had on their lives. We got 179 responses. We analyzed those and here we are ready to report on our findings.

Theresa Stern: You cued me right up because that's exactly what I was going to ask. Tell us about these important findings.

Melba Valez Ort...: Well, as I said, surprising and concerning. Surprising why? Because of the volume that we found. 83%, I didn't say 50%, I didn't say six, I said 83% of our participants reported being denied a ride. Not just every once in a while. No, no. Frequently.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Melba Valez Ort...: Regularly. And we found through the data, we collected that there are three main areas of impact. The first one and the most predominant by far are the psychological impacts. Our participants reported severe feelings of anxiety, frustration, degradation. In some cases, we found reports of abuse, either verbally or offering, for instance, to put the dogs in the trunk by some drivers, stress, tension, dehumanization, and of course demoralization. And that's bad enough when it happens once or twice. But when it happens regularly, we found that there's a compounding effect.

And just to conclude with that area of findings, what seems to occur is that once this has happened enough times, then the anticipation of the denial becomes equally as stressful. We have to leave our houses 40 minutes before we could have gone somewhere. Why? Because we expect that we're going to be denied one or two times before we find somebody who's going to take us there. And of course, the stress that comes with being humiliated in that way regularly, but that's just the psychological impacts. There's two other sets of impacts. There are economic impacts here as well. Oftentimes, we're still charged a cancellation fee.

Theresa Stern: Oh, that's terrible.

Melba Valez Ort...: Yes, for a ride that we did not cancel. And it's not just on the consumer side, but even people who had acquired special memberships or programs with these rideshare companies end up canceling their membership. So there's an issue here of revenue that's being lost by these rideshare companies that to my knowledge, no one has measured yet. But it would be interesting to look at. Lastly but importantly, the second most prevalent impact that we found is social, Theresa, because we find that for some of us who rely on rideshare services to attend social events, meet up with friends, attend a wedding, a Baptist, go to church, or even more concerning, going to job interviews, going to work regularly, the barriers to transportation means that people oftentimes choose not to engage. So that means further isolation for people like us who are already dealing with a very stressful life and need, that social interaction in order to cope with everything else that comes with the disability.

Amy Salgar: And Melba, correct me if I'm wrong, but one of the things that we also found within the economic, which is also part of the social, like you said in regards to employment, but we also found where people were losing wages because they weren't able to make it to job interviews or they were missing their hours that they were scheduled to work and that impact as well economically.

Melba Valez Ort...: Absolutely, yes, yes, yes. Thank you so much for reminding me of that because that is crucial. These are people livelihoods here that at play. It's not just maybe not making it at all to a job interview, but maybe when you do have a job being late because you have two or three drivers who are denying you. My goodness, this impacts economically in very significant ways that should be unacceptable in today's society.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. And it's clearly illegal, right?

Melba Valez Ort...: Yes.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Melba Valez Ort...: Clearly illegal what these drivers are doing by not taking a person who has a guide dog with them. That right is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. It's just so concerning to me that, like you said, with such a huge amount of denials happening, I think the rideshare companies are aware of this, but it doesn't seem like they're not making much of an effort to comply with the law. Oh my gosh. Well, a personal story for me, I was so excited when things like Uber and Lyft and all that, rideshare companies started to become popular because I'm like, "Well, here's a great way for me to get around", because cabs can be few and far between.

And living out where I do the public transportation in terms of buses and trains and things like that isn't great either. But honestly, I have so much anxiety about, like you said, calling and not being taken and having to go through that demoralizing event where it's like you are not good enough to come into my car. Really does hit you emotionally. It sounds like it does hit an emotional piece in you and it really is. It's impactful.

Melba Valez Ort...: It is. Especially when it's so needed. For those of us who are of a certain age, we probably remember that back in the day, the way in which cities were organized, you could go downtown and get access to a whole bunch of different things. Your doctor was downtown, the pharmacy was downtown. But the way that cities are designed and organized these days, people move farther and farther and farther away from downtown. And unfortunately, public transportation is not able to adapt to those changes as quickly as they're happening. So for a lot of us medical appointments and job opportunities, all other kinds of things are not in places where you can access through bus or train. So what are we left to do in that case?

Theresa Stern: Exactly. No, you're exactly right. So Amy, I'm so glad that we have study results that really show the impacts of this issue. Can you tell me a little bit about how Guide Dogs for the Blind is trying to shine a light on this in the public to help to maybe mitigate the issue?

Amy Salgar: Yeah, so Guide Dogs for the Blind has taken the results and developed a press release. There's been social media coverage, connecting with different local outlets and generally speaking, getting the information out there. The reality is as we started to look at these results and really getting the information and talking with people, it is the general public does not really have any awareness of this issue. Even as Melba said, when she first experienced it, she was unaware of the fact that this was a consistent thing among individuals who were guide dog users. And so expand that beyond to just a general population, and it's not an issue that is aware. So there are, as I mentioned, multitude of contacting a couple of different news outlets, the social media aspect, going to Guide Dogs for the Blind's webpage. The results are available as well as some tips and things. And then we're really just working on publishing it out to the alumni as well in many ways as we can.

Theresa Stern: Great. And Guide Dogs has a mighty community. We've got all the folks that listen to Central Bark, we've got our puppy raisers, we've got donors and volunteers, and of course our amazing alumni. Is there anything that we can do to sort of help with this?

Amy Salgar: Educate people in any way you're able to. I was actually doing a presentation the other night at a local community organization and brought this up as information for them. And I live in a very small community. We actually don't have rideshares, so they completely were unaware of this issue. And of course we're very appalled by it as well. And so educating anyone, even people that you think might not care or may not be aware, they actually are very interested in hearing this and whether that's because they're focused on the puppies as well, but they are very, very interested.

Guide Dogs For the Blind is doing a couple of different things on broader scales. One of the things that we are doing is we are having communication with the different rideshare companies. There's been videos that were produced that we provided feedback and like with anything, sometimes those feedbacks and suggestions are not always taken as much as what we would like them to be, but there is continued communication and really a strong encouragement from GDB to focus on holding the different drivers accountable for their actions.

In addition to not only communicating with rideshare Companies, Guide Dogs for the Blind is also collaborating with other guide dog schools. It's not just something that is affecting GDB alumni guide dog handlers. It's affecting all guide dog handlers. And so they are working with the other schools to help try to encourage changes well. And honestly, when some of our discussions with things, this goes beyond just guide dog handlers as well. This is affecting other service animal handlers, so it's much broader than what one would maybe even anticipate it to be.

Melba Valez Ort...: Same thing. As a professor of communications, I echo everything Amy just said. Communication is key. Most people don't know that this is happening in broad daylight and regularly, this kind of discrimination. And it's unfortunately, it's not just the right share sector. I am regularly denied Airbnb stays or lodging. There's also entry issues, denials into public establishment. So we become stronger when we come together and we communicate. So let's keep talking about it until something is done.

Theresa Stern: Awesome. Well, I love communicating with you ladies. I have to say.

Amy Salgar: Absolutely.

Theresa Stern: It's important to let, Amy, if you could let folks know who are listening, who maybe have experienced a rideshare denial, what they can do and what resources we have for them.

Amy Salgar: Yes, definitely. One of the biggest things is reporting the issue. And for the longest time we also found, it wasn't part of our survey, but through discussions is people were reporting to the rideshare organization that they had been denied, which is great. That needs to continue, but it also needs to go beyond that. And the Department of Justice has a very easy accessible form that can be filled out, and that's very important. That way it can document that. The NFB is also continuing to collect data, and so that is another place in order to be able to report that issue that happens, and really one of the biggest things is with anything, document. We did put together when we sent out the rideshare results, we did put together a resource and tips, which provide those different websites as well as some tips if you are calling a rideshare in terms of try to get a picture of the car, reminding people that you don't have to let them know that you have a guide dog, you're not susceptible to the pet charges.

All of those things and all of that information can be found at Guide Dogs for the Blind's website and I believe it's guidedogs.com/rideshare and that should pull it up. All of those things. One of the things that I found interesting within those tips as they were being developed, and Melba mentioned this, although people can get charged for cancellation even though they cancel it is do not cancel it. If someone does deny you a ride, don't cancel that ride on your end because then it affects the reporting of it and obviously then you can be charged.

Theresa Stern: Oh, good tip. That's a good tip. Yes. I took a peek at those tips earlier this week and they're really great. So I definitely would encourage people to go to guidedogs.com/rideshare because there's some really good information there.

Amy Salgar: So Theresa, you might be interested to find out that as this is not just a localized issue, the publications, the press release, communications and interviews with some of our alumni, such as Ms. Melba has actually gained traction across nation as well. And so it's not just localized, it's not just regional. These things are being picked up by the media nationally, and that's going to be one of the things that continuing to educate people with, it will hopefully continue to gain that traction. And we all know the squeaky wheel gets the oil, so the more accurate information that we can get out there about this issue is going to be a benefit.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. That's going to definitely make a bigger impact.

Melba Valez Ort...: Just as a way of summary, this is an issue that's affecting a whole lot of people in very, very harmful ways. These denials are pernicious and pervasive, so we need to continue to tell people about them and we need to make sure we create the consciousness that will lead to resolution. So please share this with everyone you know so we can get some justice here. These are our civil rights.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Absolutely. Great. Well, thank you so much. It was great catching up with you, both of you, and thank you for all the great work that you're doing. That's really helping those of us who really rely on our guide dogs to access the community, helping us to be able to get out and about and live the lives we want to live. So thank you so much.

Melba Valez Ort...: Thank you for having us.

Amy Salgar: Thank you, Theresa. Yes.

Melba Valez Ort...: Gracias.

Amy Salgar: Gracias.

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