

**Orlando Sentinel**

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*Uber can go to the dogs if service pets can't share the ride*

By Judy Mathews, Guest columnist  
 July 15, 2016

The recent news story about an Uber driver who unlawfully refused service to a gentleman on International Drive because he was traveling with a guide dog is a humiliating slight to which I can painfully relate.

I am a certified vision rehabilitation therapist at Lighthouse Central Florida, where I have worked for almost 13 years. I am totally blind and am partnered with my second guide dog, Keats, from Guiding Eyes for the Blind in New York. Using a guide dog is an indispensable way to further a sense of empowerment and independence — particularly when it comes to moving freely and independently around my community.



I love the idea of the sharing economy, and I cheered the arrival of Uber and Lyft to Central Florida. These rideshare companies have greatly increased my transportation options, flexibility and convenience while traveling. The screen-reader software on my iPhone allows me to use these apps and contributes to my greater sense of independence.

However, I have been denied service from drivers affiliated with both of these rideshare companies, though I primarily use Uber. At one point last year, it was happening at least once a week.

Typically, a driver would show up, see Keats, and inform me that he or she could not take dogs. I would attempt to educate the drivers, explaining that Keats was not a pet, but a service animal that performs essential tasks. I would inform them that the law required that they transport me with my service dog. Some grudgingly complied; others still flat-out refused and would drive off, leaving me to request another driver. Many times these exchanges happened, as Murphy's Law dictates, when I needed to be at an appointment, and I would inevitably arrive late.

Of course, I reported every incident, and Uber responded to me by email and/or phone almost every time. Agents were polite and assured me the matter would be addressed with the driver, and that this type of behavior would not be tolerated. They also assured me they were working hard to educate drivers on service-animal laws. I was grateful for the response but wondered how this was being accomplished.

A large part of my job is to provide people with sight impairment the skills they need to achieve their full potential to live independently and maintain or increase their quality of life. We also provide sensitivity training to companies that offer a service patronized by individuals living with blindness or vision loss. I have repeatedly offered to conduct such training with local Uber drivers, or, at the very least, help create an educational video, but Uber has not yet taken us up on the offer.

Earlier this year, the settlement of a highly publicized class-action lawsuit in California involving Uber and the National Federation of the Blind offered hope that drivers using the Uber platform would finally get it.

The terms of that settlement essentially stipulate that all drivers, existing and new, must confirm that they understand their legal obligations to transport riders with guide dogs or other service animals. In addition, Uber will take steps to remove any driver using its platform after a single complaint, if it is determined the driver knowingly denied a person with a disability a ride because the person was traveling with a service animal.

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Later this month marks the 26th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This landmark civil-rights law prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public.

Under the ADA, the task(s) performed by the service dog must be directly related to the person's disability. In situations where it is not obvious that the dog is a service animal, drivers (or any other covered entity's employees) may ask only two specific questions: Is the dog a service animal required because of a disability? And what work or task has the dog been trained to perform?

Drivers or employees are not allowed to request any documentation for the dog, require that the dog demonstrate its task, or inquire about the nature of the person's disability.

Beyond the legal obligations that compel them to act, it is my sincere hope that Uber and Lyft, and the drivers who work for them, ultimately get a full appreciation for the importance of service animals to the dignity and independence of people who live with disabilities.

Judy Mathews is the adult services supervisor at Lighthouse Central Florida, a private, nonprofit agency offering a range of vision-specific, rehabilitative services to Central Floridians of all ages who live with blindness and vision loss.