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*Lynx looks to partner with Uber to give rides to disabled folks*

By: Lauren Ritchie, Contact Reporter, Orlando Sentinel  
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**Q.** What dolt would try to bar a Labrador retriever, a trained guide dog for his blind owner, from a public place?

**A.** One who works for the on-demand car service company Uber.

In a grand show of First-World selfishness, one of Uber’s drivers in October declared she didn’t want dog hair in her Cadillac and refused to let a guide dog named Keats hop in with his owner. A polite creature, Keats sat quietly outside the car, watching.



His owner, Judy Mathews, who has been blind from birth, calmly detailed for the driver the federal law that allows her service dog to go anywhere she does, but the shrew of a driver didn’t care. (One can imagine this driver bursting into tears when her iPhone 7 plus didn’t fit in the back pocket of her favorite jeans.)

Mathews complained and is still waiting for the U.S. Department of Justice to finish investigating the incident.

Last year, Uber settled a lawsuit with the National Federation for the Blind by agreeing to educate drivers on the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and ban those who don’t follow the law.

Mathews’ encounter with the clueless driver shows Uber didn’t successfully educate all its drivers. A new law to prevent discrimination against the disabled using ride-sharing networks sailed through the Legislature this year. It requires drivers to accommodate service animals like Keats.

Even while Uber was fighting to keep Keats and his canine colleagues out of its drivers’ cars, plans were afoot behind the scenes to turn the company into a partner and a life-changing force for the disabled.

Advocates are pushing the Lynx bus system and handicapped transportation service to partner with Uber to provide cheaper rides for the disabled in Orange, Seminole, Osceola and parts of Lake and Polk counties.

Edward Johnson, Lynx’s chief executive officer, vowed that it will come to pass. He said planning is expected to start by mid-June, though how it would work is undecided. At least one advocate from Lighthouse Central Florida, which assists people with vision loss, is urging Lynx to adopt the system being used in a trial project in Boston.

That one requires disabled people to sign up and be verified for handicapped service by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. Then, the disabled person creates an account with one of the services and receives instructions on how to use it.

The program features reduced fares, lower wait times, same-day booking, faster trips, no sharing of rides, access to vehicles that can fit wheelchairs and in some cases, the use of a smartphone provided by Uber. The drivers are specially trained.

(more)

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“This is the best time, the best chance for this to work because safeguards are now in place,” enthused Lighthouse communications manager Richard Alleyne. “Drivers would get training on how to deal with passengers traveling with service animals — they would be compelled to take training — and they would cast themselves in a better light.”

Alleyne envisions Lynx’s para-transit system possibly picking up half the cost.

Uber spokesman Javi Correoso agreed that the new law opens the door for ride service to work with Lynx and said Uber will be “exploring many opportunities.”

Lynx’s Johnson hasn’t jumped in the backseat with Keats quite yet. Lynx is negotiating a new contract with its provider of handicapped transportation, which uses big vans for wheelchairs. The agreement will have new provisions defining how the company would work with ride-share enterprises like Uber and Lyft. Once that’s done, Johnson said, he plans to start talking with the Lynx board of directors about how to structure such a partnership.

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Johnson, who also serves on Lighthouse’s board of directors.

First in line for service will be Mathews — with Keats, of course. She still uses ride-sharing services because of the cost and the convenience. If other blind folks could be sure their guide dogs wouldn’t be turned away, having such a service has the potential to change lives, she said.

“With Uber and Lyft, it opens a whole new world for people with disabilities who don’t drive,” Mathews said. “You can be spontaneous, change your schedule. I’m so excited about the possibilities.”

All right, government, let’s get on it. Keats says he wants a Sunday drive in the country.

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