

Disabled snubbed by Sidecar, Uber, Lyft

Tech transit tells city: Wheelchair service doesn't pay

By MARK HEDIN

IN SAN FRANCISCO, “disruptive technology,” the goal of techies everywhere, has thoroughly discommodated the system for transporting disabled people around town, turning back the clock on decades of hard-won human rights gains and, in the bargain, pulling the plug on the greenest taxi fleet in the country.

While “ride-sharing” companies such as San Francisco natives Sidecar, Uber and Lyft — financed by billion-dollar venture capital investors including Google — flood the streets, for people who get around on motorized wheelchairs and depend heavily on taxis to meet other transportation needs, it's back to the laws of the jungle. People who need service animals, too, have found that the hip, luxe ride-service apps don't really apply to them.

“This is an example of unbridled, unregulated business,” Howard Chabner, former chair of the Mayor's Disability Council's Physical Access Committee, told the council at a July hearing on Uber's impact on the disabled. “And yes, there's always some benefits to that, otherwise it wouldn't make any inroads. But the regulation exists for a reason and this is being undermined, and I blame not only Uber and the other companies, but the city of San Francisco for allowing this to happen.”

“This (Uber) is a predatory, capitalist enterprise. They answer to no one.”

Charles Rathbone
LUXOR CAB CO.

“They're decimating the cab industry, and the city of San Francisco enabled that behavior,” Chabner said.

Although the ride services claim to be environmentally friendly, in a car-pooling sort of way, the taxis they are putting out of business in San Francisco represent the greenest cab fleet in the country: 97% are low-emission vehicles, according to the SFMTA, which forces taxis to meet a clean air requirement that ride-share services do not have.

In the face of the withering competition from tech transit, the cab industry is now embracing app technology with Flywheel and Curb, and individual cab companies are rolling out their own apps as well. And the SFMTA, which regulates cabs with a fine-toothed comb, has instituted some new incentives to encourage cabbies to continue serving the disabled.

Under the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act, all “public accommodations,” including taxis, are required to be available to all customers, and since 1994, according to former MTA board member Bruce Oka, taxi companies have

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CENTRAL CITY



S A N F R A N C I S C O

SENIOR VITALITY



PHOTO MARJORIE BEGGS

Linda Rospendowski, 65, listens as Al Leveckis of Healthcare Innovation Transfer Foundation trains her on how to use her new iPad to monitor her personal health information.

Homeless to healthy

Elders at Curry take tech path to quality of life

By MARJORIE BEGGS

LINDA ROSPENDOWSKI and Diane Evans have had rough patches in their lives. In their 60s, a time when most people expect life to be easier, they were homeless and ill. Bouncing from shelter to shelter, Rospendowski says she was so sick she thought she was going to die, and Evans, a Hurricane Katrina survivor, was trying to maintain her dignity while alternating between shelters and sleeping in her car under freeways.

But the women's bad luck turned good two years ago when they moved into their own studio apartments at Curry Senior Center in the Tenderloin. Six months ago, good fortune came knocking again in the unlikely form of iPads and health monitoring devices they use at their leisure in their apartments.

Their tablets are tricked out with easy-to-use screen “cubes” that let them track their weight, heart rate and physical activity and also access the Internet's wealth of communication, information and entertainment possibilities.

The two seniors are already seeing health benefits. Evans has reversed a prediabetic diagnosis, and Rospendowski is taking Zumba classes several times a week.

Potentially hundreds more poor seniors in the Tenderloin could see similar benefits over the next few years as part of Project Senior Vitality.

In April, Curry Senior Center began developing that pilot program to test whether low-income seniors improve physically when they monitor their own health stats and feel less isolated and more socially involved when they use the Internet.

“We'd been experimenting with ways to help clients get connected through our computer lab that opened in October 2012,” says David Knego, executive director of Curry, a 52-year-old nonprofit serving 2,300 seniors annually with a health clinic, meals, social programs and housing. “The lab is filled with seniors learning and exploring technology every day, but it's not the same as having a personal device in your apartment.”

A year ago, Knego got a call from Al Leveckis, chief technology officer of Healthcare Innovation Transfer Foundation. The California nonprofit, with an office in San Francisco, fosters U.S.-Dutch collaboration on controlling spiraling health costs by giving people modern tools to help themselves to better health.

Leveckis, who lives in the Bay Area, says he checked out several agencies for the

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