

KALGOORLIE–BOULDER — TAXI SERVICES — DISABLED PASSENGERS

Grievance

MR K.M. O'DONNELL (Kalgoorlie) [9.14 am]: Greetings, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much. My grievance today is to the Minister for Transport and it relates to the withdrawals of disabled taxi services in my electorate of Kalgoorlie. Firstly, I would like to thank the minister for taking the grievance. Secondly, I apologise to her for not giving her plenty of notice on this matter; things were a bit disjointed so I apologise.

Local taxi operators from Twin City Cabs approached my office on Friday, 27 September 2019. Just to be clear, taxi operators are the people who organise and dispatch taxis to the customers; they are not the drivers. The operators informed us that the taxidivers were withdrawing disabled taxi services in Kalgoorlie–Boulder following a meeting that the drivers had with the Department of Transport on 23 September. The taxi operators were not invited to that meeting. They were prepared to stop the services on the very day that they came into my office. At the meeting in my office at which Hon Robin Scott, MLC, and his staff were also present, the taxi operators told us how the drivers were intimidated after the meeting with DoT. The taxidivers, who are not all native English speakers, felt that they were, in their own words, criminalised. They decided there and then that they did not want to take on the risk of driving multipurpose taxis. Several community members panicked and have also reached out to my office. Twin City Cabs chairman Sam Hussain managed to plead with the drivers to carry on working for another week. Can members imagine what would have happened if the taxidivers had ceased that service straightaway? It would have been a disaster for those in the community with mobility issues. We have 38 wheelchair users who use the service each week to get to the Kalgoorlie Health Campus for dialysis treatment alone, not to mention those who want to go shopping, attend medical or dental appointments, or even go into town to catch up with friends.

The *Kalgoorlie Miner* of Friday, 4 October 2019 states —

Ali Abodian told the *Miner* he had been working as an MPT driver in Kalgoorlie-Boulder for the past decade and it was a heart-wrenching decision to make.

...

“There is a lady, her husband works and she is disabled and she hasn’t got any way to take her daughter to school so I pick up her and her daughter in the morning, we drop her daughter to school and I take her back,” ... “When I told her that we can’t provide a service she cried and said, ‘How am I supposed to take my daughter to school’?”

That is sadly one of the many heartbreaking instances we will see moving forward. What is in this new legislation that has scared the hell out of not just one, but two taxi companies in my electorate and caused them stop providing disabled taxi services? The biggest concern for taxidivers and operators appears to be the heavy penalty rates. These fines average around \$9 000 for an individual and \$30 000 for a body corporate. I understand and respect that these fines are in place to safeguard passengers and ensure that road passenger service providers are held accountable for their actions. However, the taxidivers are terrified. How can one of them afford to pay a \$9 000 penalty? The simple answer would be to not do anything wrong. How is that possible? We are all human and can make mistakes. The body corporate is also asking how is it fair that they have to pay a \$30 000 penalty for someone else’s mistake? They simply cannot afford that amount.

According to the conditions of use of the taxi users’ subsidy scheme—TUSS—docket, it states that 15 minutes waiting time can be claimed on each voucher and that this includes loading and unloading time. Additional time is to be paid by the passenger. To load or unload a passenger with mobility issues within 7.5 minutes is impossible in certain circumstances, and I can tell the minister why. The girls from my office went on an MPT attendance yesterday morning and attended two pick-ups. The first involved a young bloke from Boulder. He was a fairly easy passenger because he could push his wheelchair on and off the taxi. It took him around five minutes to get on and five minutes to get off the taxi. Upon arrival at hospital, the driver unloaded the passenger and pushed him to the dialysis unit. Those members who have been to the Kalgoorlie Health Campus would know that there is a fair bit of passageway from the drop-off area to the dialysis treatment area. It took the driver eight minutes to deliver the passenger.

They then went to a nursing home to pick up two sisters who were both attending dialysis treatment. The pick-up took 11 minutes. When the driver was asked whether he is given double waiting time because he was picking up two passengers, he said he was not because they were on the same fare. This guy is saving the government money. The biggest eye-opener for the girls was watching the driver push both ladies in wheelchairs into the dialysis unit of the hospital. He had no time to push them one at a time because the next passengers were waiting for their appointments. The next time the minister is in Kalgoorlie–Boulder, I would love to take her or her staff on a disabled taxi run for her to see how long this process takes. The time frame given to the drivers to transport passengers makes their job very hard, and some passengers are more disabled than others.

With regard to training, Sam advised me that during a meeting with DoT on 27 June—just five days before the legislation was passed—he was informed by DoT that the taxidivers could not operate without undergoing a proper course. Sam withdrew MPT services that very day. Two and a half hours later, DoT updated him and told him that the drivers could work as long as a training session is organised in Perth. However, it is not viable for them to send three drivers to Perth for a training session. The costs for travel, accommodation and meals would need to be covered by the company. This all gets back to the taxi buyback scheme. With the country taxi plates now worthless, those companies cannot justify spending an enormous amount of money to send these drivers to Perth for training. The Department of Transport has since turned around and said that the training can be grandfathered as long as the drivers can prove their competency. This should have been mentioned to Sam in the first instance. Apparently other taxi companies can assist, according to the Department of Transport, including Go Gold Taxis. Go Gold stopped MTP services a month ago citing that navigating the new legislation was too difficult.

My questions are as follows: Was there any consultation with the regional taxi operators and drivers prior to the legislation; and, if yes, with which operators? Why did the Department of Transport have meetings with individual taxidivers in Kalgoorlie–Boulder and not include the taxi operators? Is there a time frame for taxi operators and drivers to get familiarised and for any new legislation to be implemented after it has been announced? Who determines what wilful behaviour is? The driver and the passenger could have contradicting versions of wilful behaviour. What would happen in that scenario? What are the government's plans to help regional taxi services stay afloat? Will any changes be made to the legislation? Will the government reconsider and continue with the taxi levy to help reimburse the local regional taxidivers who paid over \$200 000 for taxi plates, thinking they owned them, when in fact they were leased?

Some recommendations were for the Department of Transport to include taxi operators in meetings with individual drivers who are attached to a body corporate, to revise the waiting period and to increase vehicle pit inspections to quarterly instead of annually. I apologise to the minister for being disjointed. If I have said anything that the minister was not aware I was going to raise, I can put it on notice, if that is okay.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [9.20 am]: I thank the member for Kalgoorlie for the grievance. I have said on a couple of occasions in this place that change is difficult, especially in many regional communities that have operated in particular ways for a long period. My office has dealt with the member's office directly on this issue and we will continue that dialogue and ensure that if I do not address anything today, we can follow it up, and also if there is continuing concern, we can follow that up directly.

I was alerted to these issues two to three weeks ago. Since then the Department of Transport has made a number of visits to Kalgoorlie to meet with both operators and drivers. There has been a keenness to meet with both groups because they are both essential in the provision of the service. Sometimes they might present different views or raise different issues. We want to ensure that the department has an open dialogue to both parties. That has happened over recent weeks and will continue. I wanted to say that at the outset. A meeting was held as late as Tuesday with the Kalgoorlie operators and drivers.

Those taxidivers provide an incredible service across regional Western Australia and in the metropolitan area, transporting people in wheelchairs. It is a huge service they provide the community. They have a lot of patience and really strike up excellent relationships with their passengers. I have experienced their service when my father was ill and he was transported from one hospital to another. The work they do for hospital patients is incredible. They form an essential part of the community and play an essential role in moving people from point to point—from home to hospital or home to doctors' appointments. They play a big role, and I again thank them for their work.

As I have said, I am aware of the concerns raised by the member. People are perhaps fearing more than they should about a couple of key things—firstly, the fines. The fines are set to be a maximum penalty and are for people who deliberately put people in danger. Although fines are scary for everyone when they see the maximum penalty for something, they exist to deter people. It is not about making mistakes; they apply to people who put vulnerable people in danger. It has been talked through, particularly with the drivers and the operators, that those fines are to highlight that people are dealing with vulnerable persons. So far I think only one fine has been issued, and that was for someone not being authorised, which was a significant breach. We are not about prosecuting people; we are trying to assist people in this transition and change.

I will go through some of the key points. The Department of Transport has been working with Twin City Cabs and local stakeholders. There has always been a requirement—pre and post on-demand transport reforms—for wheelchair-accessible vehicles to comply with certain Australian standards. Some of these requirements are not new, but are probably more explicit and transparent now for everyone involved. Drivers of wheelchair-accessible vehicles delivering a passenger transport service have always been required to operate the vehicle competently to ensure the safe loading, restraint and unloading of a passenger in a wheelchair. The regulations implemented as part of the on-demand transport reforms formalise a standard of competency. It is intended to provide vulnerable

passengers with greater confidence that the people arranging and delivering their transport service have the appropriate practices in place.

Two of the three key issues were the fines and training. It does not mean that everyone is required to undertake a specific training course, but just to demonstrate competency. Obviously that has now been communicated better to the local drivers and they understand that it is about being able to prove that they are competent in their job and may not have to attend a specific training course. Training is an effective means to attain competence, but in many cases people have been doing the job for many years and know what they are doing.

A meeting was held in March and more meetings have been held over recent weeks. I am advised that a number of issues were raised at those meetings. The Department of Transport is working through them and people are a little more confident and satisfied with their role, knowing that the fines are not aimed at them and the training will not be too onerous; in fact, many of them already have the required competency.

Other matters raised were the level of data and also the issue of the 15 minutes waiting time, which I will get further information on. Part of the reform is to provide data of the trips that are undertaken. My understanding is that that requirement is not too onerous. It is not something that has been raised as a major issue, but it was raised at those meetings. The government continues to work with all the operators. Every town has unique challenges and circumstances. Every town has drivers, operators and other stakeholders. The taxi industry is a complex world. We continue to work with it. Many operators have met with my staff and the Department of Transport on the compensation issue—something we are still looking at. More generally, on this issue of wheelchair accessibility, we want to ensure that we do everything to assist the company.