OVERVIEW

There are 342,000 young people in New York City with disabilities. Of the nearly one million New Yorkers of all ages who have self-identified as living with disabilities, about 10 percent are estimated to use wheelchairs.¹ Youth with physical limitations due to disabilities face daily access barriers that hamper their independence and limit their ability to navigate the city. These young people must often rely entirely on their parents or caretakers to travel to school, work, and go about their everyday lives, and are therefore rarely seen outside of academic settings and definitely not heard when policies are being written.

Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams has committed to amplifying the voices of these youth and working with them to secure a Barrier-Free BK. The following challenges and recommendations have been identified and developed over eight months in 2018 in concert with Borough President Adams’ Disability Roundtable stakeholders. The challenges outlined are not insurmountable and, with thoughtful policy development and strategic investment, can improve the lives of all New Yorkers regardless of ability. This work builds off Borough President Adams’ 2015 “Access-Friendly NYC” report, which outlined key steps for the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) to improve accessibility in New York City public buildings.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Access-A-Ride:** Access-A-Ride is an inadequate mode of transportation for the 21st century demands of riders with disabilities. The traditional paratransit program does not reflect everyday needs for on-demand transit service, riders are subjected to hours-long trips, and dedicated bus lanes are not available to Access-A-Ride vehicles.

a. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) e-hail pilot program launched in November 2017 with a limited population of 200 Access-A-Ride users has proven successful according to feedback from stakeholders in the pilot program. The MTA must immediately expand this pilot program to all Access-A-Ride users throughout New York City. This program allows riders to use Access-A-Ride as they would hail a cab for on-demand trip bookings throughout New York City. The MTA’s review of the pilot program found that the e-hail program costs $36 per rider on average compared to $69 on average for the same Access-A-Ride trip.

b. The City Council should pass, and Mayor Bill de Blasio should sign, legislation introduced by Council Member Diana Ayala at the request of Borough President Adams, which would amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to permitting Access-a-Ride vehicles to use bus lanes.

**Mass Transit:** There are 470 stations in the MTA system with only 25 percent of them accessible to some extent, according to the New York City Transit Authority (NYCTA)’s Fast Forward Plan.²

a. Students in high school and college are demanding independence not only for the sake of mobility but to also fulfill the natural evolution of their personhood. The MTA plans to make 130 more stations accessible in five years but this plan is neither ambitious enough nor will it be completed fast enough to make a difference in the lives of our young people today. MTA must fast-track and expand these efforts as well as prioritize repairs to elevators within the system to minimize disruption to the lives of commuters who rely on elevator service.

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**Parks:** There are no destination parks in Brooklyn with accessible parking spaces or drop-off zones along the perimeter that allow residents with disabilities to easily visit. In addition, the welcomed and successful 25 years of community advocacy that led to the prohibition of private vehicles in Prospect Park has inadvertently made it more difficult for young people on crutches, in wheelchairs, and with other physical disabilities to travel deeper into the park and enjoy nature.

- The New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) must coordinate to allow accessible parking near major entrances to ensure parents may take their children with disabilities into the City’s parks to enjoy nature.
- Parks advocates (e.g. “Friends of” groups) should partner with disability rights advocates to develop and incorporate barrier-free day(s) for all parks and youth with disabilities.
- NYC Parks, DOT, and the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) should investigate developing disability shuttle programs and networks in all parks with internal circulation to allow greater access to public spaces for those living with disabilities.
- NYC Parks should also reform its vehicle permitting processes to make it easier for those living with disabilities to access parks with their vehicles during special events.

**Landmark Buildings and Comfort Stations:** There is still confusion about compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in older buildings. The ADA defines readily achievable as “easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense.” Many of our parks and landmark treasures have been allowed exemption from compliance with the ADA. As technological advances are made, there is an opportunity to “revamp and build ramps” – even of a temporary nature to ensure that all New Yorkers and those who visit us can access and marvel at many of our landmarked buildings and open spaces.

- Disability advocates, partnering with the Office of the Brooklyn Borough President, will conduct an accessibility audit of all comfort stations in the city and present results to NYC Parks.
- Over the long term, we urge NYC Parks to develop a strategic capital investment plan to ensure that people with disabilities can fully access all restrooms in City parks.

**Public Venues and Events:** Many public events have reserved seating for persons with disabilities. However, the pathways to those seats within the venue are often too difficult to navigate for those with physical limitations.

- While the 2015 bill signed into law by Mayor de Blasio requiring improved communication of information around accessibility when agencies host public events, is a good first step, but we must do more. We must look beyond reserved seating for people with disabilities and effectively plan their pathways to those seats. The Mayor’s Office of Citywide Event Coordination and Management (OCEM) must develop permitting processes in partnership with MOPD for large-scale and public events that includes a full review and action plan for accessibility. This review should include determining accessibility into the facility, restrooms, steepness of inclines throughout the facility, and whether or not the ground is level at outdoor events – anything that precludes persons with disabilities from accessing reserved seating.
- A strategic capital investment plan should be developed by MOPD and OCEM to support retrofitting public spaces to become fully accessible so individuals and families with disabilities can fully avail themselves of all public events that New York City can offer.