

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users**

Melbourne—Thursday 24 August 2023

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

#### **WITNESSES**

Francois Jacobs, Board member, and

Corey Crawford, National Policy Officer, Blind Citizens Australia.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned silent.

All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside the hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website.

I will remind Committee members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, just to minimise that interference.

Thank you both for being here today and coming along to answer some of our questions in regard to this Inquiry. I thought it might be best first if you would like to make some opening statements or if there is some information you would like to give us as a Committee first, and then we will open it up to Committee members to ask some questions, just to unpick a little bit more of that and have a conversation, really, about your experiences. I am happy to hand it over to either of you to start.

**Corey CRAWFORD:** Thank you. I might jump in first. Hi, everyone. I am Corey Crawford. I am the National Policy Officer from Blind Citizens Australia. BCA is the peak national representative organisation for the more than 500,000 people in Australia who are blind or vision impaired. I will just let you know, for the record, I am based in Western Australia. So I am very happy to have Francois with me, who is a BCA board member as well as our Victorian representative on our National Policy Council, to provide some on-the-ground feedback. I will also let you know that if you hear squeaking or any barking in the background, I am in the house with my dog and she does have a tendency to announce herself in video meetings. As long as she does not start barking at the postie or as long as I do not go viral and end up on *Insiders* on Sunday, I am happy. But thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Corey, that will just make it more interesting. It is fine.

**Corey CRAWFORD:** Thank you. We are very thankful that you have read our submission and that you are interested in hearing from us. I will pass over to Francois. Thank you.

**Francois JACOBS:** Thanks, Corey. I am Francois Jacobs. I am from Melbourne, as you have mentioned. I can just add that, yes, on the national policy council people from all over the country meet regularly and discuss issues such as road vehicle safety. We also consult with our members. From my side, I am blind myself. I am a dog guide user, and I also work at Deakin University, teaching in disability and inclusion. But really I am happy to be here today talking about the issues that we are experiencing.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for that. We will head straight into some questions and try and unpick a little bit about what your experiences are and your submission. I might go to the Deputy Chair, who is Kim O'Keeffe, the Member for Shepparton.

**Kim O'KEEFFE:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you so much for coming in. It is really great to have your submission and have you on our panel today and have some discussions. It is really interesting—the report that you have put in and the submission. It is obviously such an important area, with people with disabilities and how they do navigate through things. It is really interesting to know if there have been any changes that have been noticed since COVID. Have your members noticed any changes in how people use the roads since the COVID-19 pandemic, and if so, what have they noticed?

**Corey CRAWFORD:** I will jump in there, Francois. Thank you for that question. Yes, we have noticed particularly two issues—the surge in electric vehicles, both cars and e-scooters. They have been really significant, and they have been causing significant problems for people who are blind or vision impaired but also people in the community in general. We have noticed that we have had near incidents and near accidents, which is concerning, and we are concerned that there will at some point be a terrible accident involving one of our members. We support electric vehicles and e-scooters. We know that we need to reduce carbon emissions, and that is an important step in reducing emissions both in Victoria and across Australia, so we are supportive

of that. But we recognise that the silent nature of e-scooters and e-vehicles does pose significant problems, not just for people who are blind and vision impaired but the community in general. So that has been the most significant area of concern for us since the pandemic era commenced.

**The CHAIR:** Francois, did you want to talk to that?

**Francois JACOBS:** Yes. Not directly, but I would just like to add that I would like people to bear in mind that, yes, we are talking about what is not working well or what could work better at road safety, but bear in mind that a person's experience of the roads, the trains, the trams, the buses, the everything is a large factor that contributes to your decision whether or not you actually go out and how you go out in the community. So this has a huge knock-on effect on the extent to which people like me and our community participate in everything in life.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely. And thank you for adding that, really. And to be fair, this is probably one of the first hearings where we are really hearing from people with lived experiences such as you, so it is wonderful to hear from you. Thank you. I might go to Anthony Cianflone, who is the Member for Pascoe Vale.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Corey and Francois, for appearing. It is really great to have lived experience as part of this submission, and it builds on the Merri Community Health hearing that we had I believe in Coburg, Chair, in that context too in some ways. Look, we have received quite a few submissions from different stakeholders that relate to, I guess, what you guys may be able to contribute here now. One is the Monash University Accident Research Centre study that found 35% of blind or vision-impaired participants had experienced a collision or near miss with a quiet vehicle, and 74%—going to your point, Francois, just then—reported reduced confidence in using the road since quieter vehicles were introduced. So my question goes to, I guess, acoustic vehicle alerting systems. You know, your submission does recommend a mandatory fitting of acoustic vehicle alerting systems to all vehicles. So my question really is about what other approaches have been adopted in other countries and jurisdictions that are best practice that we could look at here in Victoria, not just for electric vehicles but also in the context of cyclists and bikes and also e-scooters as well? I would be keen to hear your thoughts there.

**Francois JACOBS:** Corey, you might chip in with the European and the US standards, but I would say absolutely include e-scooters. With bikes we are dependent on people using the bell. They generally are pretty good. But honestly, even in the morning at 6:30 when I am the only person in the road, you cannot hear the scooter until it is right on you. And that goes for anybody who has their back turned on the oncoming vehicle, not just somebody who is blind. If you add to that a hearing impairment, which I have, mild to moderate, it is even more important that the vehicle has some sound that comes through without the ability of turning it off when it does not suit that person, because I really think that safety supersedes people's comfort levels for things. It is even when you decide whether or not it is okay to cross a road. I would stand on a narrow sidewalk ready to cross—you cannot hear that e-scooter until it is about a metre away. By that time you might have started walking, and then you are hoping that that person is alert and swerves away. It causes people to have to really concentrate much harder than they would need to.

**Corey CRAWFORD:** Yes.

**Francois JACOBS:** Gold standards.

**Corey CRAWFORD:** Thank you, Francois. If I can just add: you cited the Monash statistics, and they are doing excellent work, but because we do not have all that many e-vehicles in Australia at the moment, although that number is increasing every month, unfortunately the data in Australia is not the best. But it is more significant in the United States, where they have just got a larger market and they have had e-vehicles in their culture for a longer period of time. We know 2011 data published by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration indicated that electric vehicles and hybrid vehicles had a 35% greater likelihood of accidents with pedestrians—that is all pedestrians, not people with disability necessarily, just pedestrians in general—as well as a 50% greater likelihood of accidents with cyclists. And interestingly, the majority of these incidents occurred in car parks and driveways when a driver was reversing or at low speed. So it is really a problem for the community at large, not just people with disability or specifically people who are blind or vision impaired. The reality is that people generally are struggling to hear these vehicles, especially when they are moving or turning at low speed. But the problem as well with these e-vehicles is that the batteries that power them make

them much heavier, and further research from 2011 published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States indicated that with every 454 kilograms you add to a car the likelihood of death increases by 47% when you are struck by one. So really these vehicles are causing major issues and deaths wherever they are in the world. And that is why the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, South Korea and China already mandate some sort of AVAS for these vehicles, because they are just causing problems for everyone in the community, and you do need to have those restrictions in order to keep people safe.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. Jess Wilson is the Member for Kew. I might go to Jess.

**Jess WILSON:** Thanks very much, Chair. And thank you both for being with us today. You have spoken a little bit about, I suppose, the risks from cars and e-scooters, but I am keen to get your thoughts on how we could improve other forms of transport for people with a disability and for the vision impaired. Public transport in particular—are there improvements that could be made to encourage more use of those and to improve the safety of those as well?

**Francois JACOBS:** Maybe I will go to my earlier point where I discussed how the landscape impacts on your decision whether to participate, and if so how you would do it. At night if I attend something in the city I will deliberately choose a cab because it gets me door to door, because on the train you face a situation where if the city loop goes in reverse order very often the announcements do not work so you do not know which station you are at, so that is the recommendation about ensuring that the automated announcements work at all stations or at all stops. Also, indicating which side of the train the door will open, because if there are not a lot of people around there is a moment of panic, and I have passed my station before—and I am not the only person; I am talking about myself, but it is also from other people—so that you are able to prepare and get to the door in time to get out of the train before it leaves, because the consequence is that you will end up at a station which you are not familiar with and you cannot get out. And you hope there is somebody that you can ask for help, which is not necessarily going to be the case in less busy times.

Some stations have deteriorated or non-existent tactile indicators along the platform edge, so you feel really exposed and vulnerable and cautious when you walk along the platform towards the exit but not quite sure how close to the edge you are, where you have to depend on your sight, if you have any, your cane or your dog guide, And even with those things you become more hesitant because as soon as the wind picks up or it is raining it impacts on your hearing, which is really essential for somebody who is blind and vision impaired to navigate because they are some of the cues we use. So we can talk about things that can be put in place later on, but these are some of the things that are considerations.

**The CHAIR:** Jess, do you have a follow-up for that question?

**Jess WILSON:** Yes. Thank you very much. Thank you for that, pointing to that broader landscape and how we see it in that way. One way we could potentially improve things is to have more transport assistance officers, so people on public transport that can provide assistance. That might not be necessarily at all points in time. Maybe it is increased during peak hour or when there are major events or whatever it might be. Do you think that could be something that would assist in providing that greater comfort that there are people to assist on the public transport?

**Francois JACOBS:** I would say it would, but probably an even better way is if we can adapt the environment on a more permanent basis so that it does not require the high level of staffing to make it so. By that I mean ensure that tactiles are crisp and noticeable and that they are tested by people with lived experience, not by somebody who looks at them and thinks, ‘Oh, they look nice.’ It needs to be somebody who is dependent on them that gives the okay, including people with disability, in that work. And the same thing with announcements. If there are safety screens and screen doors as are being used in countries like Singapore, there is no risk of falling onto the tracks, so you are so confident even when you are not knowing that city. I would just go there. I might get lost, but I can get out of it if I can get help. But there is no risk of a fall because of the safety features of the screens and the doors they provide that only open when the train arrives and you step into the train.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Corey, do you have anything to add?

**Corey CRAWFORD:** Thank you, yes. If I could just add: it would be a good idea to have more disability-aware public transport officials. For a separate submission we made a few months ago to the Federal Government's review of the disability transport standards we had consultations with our members across the country—and these issues are not just a Victorian problem, these are nationwide. We heard some really harrowing stories about bus drivers closing doors on people and knocking them down, stories of bus drivers dropping people off in the wrong location. If you are not vision-impaired, that is not an issue, because you would either recognise you had been dropped off at the wrong place or you could call out to the bus driver. But if you are expecting to be dropped at a certain location, especially if it is in unfamiliar surrounds, then that can cause major issues and anxiety. As Francois said, it is difficult to measure in statistics, but it does cause a feeling of apprehension and anxiety and it reduces people's willingness to go out and about in public. I know that it is nice to have statistics and to be able to quantify that, but it is really more how people view the world and their place in it, and sadly public transport is where people with disability, especially people who are blind or vision-impaired, are often made to feel most excluded from the community. And alternatives such as using taxis or rideshares, such as Uber—we have people, especially when they have got dog guides with them, who are often rejected. You can just do a quick Google search, and you will come up with a bunch of news stories just this year about these sorts of things happening. Again it is a nationwide problem, not just a Victorian problem, and it just requires a lot more, I would say, effort on behalf of public transport providers to be aware that there are many people in the community who are disabled and relying on their services.

So to go to Jess's point, having more dedicated officers I think would be a useful thing. Lived experience is also very valuable—having people sitting at the decision-making table when train stations are being built or bus stations are being built or adjusted in some way or plans are being put in place with that lived experience, because sometimes the community will experience something in a negative way that does not need to occur if there is someone in the design phase who is able to recognise, 'Oh, this causes a problem for people who are blind and vision-impaired.' So there are some structural issues that need to be addressed, and we would definitely like more people with lived experience working for public transport providers in Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, both of you, for that. I will go to John to ask the next question. Thank you.

**John MULLAHY:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you both for appearing today. Francois, in your answer just there, you mentioned often having degraded tactile sensors around stations and places like that. I was just wondering if there are any other ways we could improve the infrastructure of roads, footpaths and crossings that the Victorian Government could have a hand in.

**Francois JACOBS:** Yes, with roads, and especially with crossings, there are directional tactile indicators—what is it, TGSIs; what a huge acronym—which people who are blind and vision-impaired really use to navigate and also to orientate themselves, because when you set off from the pavement, you want to get straight across to the other side. One of the things we use for that is the alignment, which is provided by these tactile indicators. If they are not straight and aligned to the opposite end, they can cause you to walk into the middle of the road, and that happens to some people. Again, people's level of mobility varies, and weather conditions can also impact even people with good mobility skills. Some road crossings are not in a square, so you would have to veer left or veer right to cross. Especially when it is multilane crossings with no place for pause in the middle, no island, then you have to run or jog across the road. I have come across roads where I would not possibly be able to cross without assistance, somebody who can jog across with me, which is really not ideal. One thing that we use in conjunction with properly positioned tactile ground indicators is the audible traffic light signal—that sound is at an appropriate volume now. We understand that people do not want to hear loud noises at 11 pm. That can be reduced according to expected low noise levels but should never be switched off, because there is no rule that says people who are blind or vision impaired have to go to bed at 9 pm—and neither should there be, if that makes sense.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely. Corey, do you have anything to add?

**Corey CRAWFORD:** I think Francois covered everything. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. We might head to Wayne. Have you got a question, please?

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Yes, I do. Thank you for your submission, by the way. In and around urban design, how should roads in urban areas be designed to protect the safety of road users with disability? We have talked about tactiles. Do we extend the tactiles across the road to make it easier?

**Francois JACOBS:** No, I have never seen that happen. Corey, I am not sure if you have. I just think even making sure that the tactiles at the corner are properly positioned is going to make a huge difference. Corey, do you have any thoughts on that?

**Corey CRAWFORD:** It is not something we have considered necessarily. I would say in terms of general traffic we have noticed issues with e-scooters riding on footpaths. That is probably the biggest concern. Rather than roads themselves, it is often the footpaths next to roads where we have really significant issues with e-scooters zipping in and out, as well as cyclists riding on footpaths. We know that Victoria and New South Wales are actually quite rare in terms of Australia's jurisdictions, in that both largely preclude adults from riding bicycles on footpaths, and we have had some complaints from Victorian members of BCA just this month about cyclists riding on footpaths. That is really important, we would say, in terms of people's confidence and safety—that footpaths are sacrosanct, in a way. Because even though people who are blind or vision impaired typically do not drive themselves in their own cars, relying on footpaths to get around your local community is very important. People will not know that there are tactile ground surface indicators necessarily if they do not have the confidence to walk out their front door to be able to use them, and unfortunately that is happening. So thank you. I hope that answers your question at least in part, Wayne.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very –

**Francois JACOBS:** Wow!

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Francois, you go.

**Francois JACOBS:** No, I just thought: I really like that idea. I am definitely going to give it some thought—the one about the tactiles going across the street—to see if it has happened anywhere.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Well, I used to be a builder, so I thought I would throw that in.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I am sorry, we have run out of time. We do need to wrap this up now. We could probably ask you a whole lot more questions. It has been a really interesting conversation, so I really appreciate your time today. If there is something further that you need to add or it sparked something today, please, we are more than happy to receive further information from you both for the Committee's consideration. Again, thanks for your time today.

**Francois JACOBS:** Thanks, Alison.

**Witnesses withdrew.**