MEDIA RELEASE

New campaign to end discrimination launched on International Guide Dog Day

Despite federal and state laws allowing them in, Tasmanian residents with Guide Dogs are continuing to be refused access by taxi drivers, causing them embarrassment and humiliation.

According to a recent survey conducted by Guide Dog organisations around Australia, including Guide Dogs Tasmania, 33% of Guide Dog handlers are still being discriminated against when trying to use a taxi.

This continued discrimination has seen Guide Dogs Tasmania launch its Say Yes to Guide Dogs campaign on April 29 as part of International Guide Dog Day 2015.

With support from local taxi companies and the Tasmanian public, Guide Dogs Tasmania is hoping to finally put an end to any discrimination against Guide Dog handlers.

“Even though it is against the law for taxi drivers to refuse a Guide Dog and its handler, there continues to be too many cases of discrimination,” Mary Langdon, Client Services Manager for Guide Dogs Tasmania said.

“As part of our awareness campaign for International Guide Dog Day, we will be working with taxi companies to provide information to drivers, including the relevant laws that allow Guide Dogs access to taxis. The taxi industry representatives with whom we have spoken are supportive and keen to work with us.”

Ms Langdon hopes that through education, the cases of discrimination will decrease, or cease altogether, and Guide Dog handlers can continue with their daily routines without the fear of being questioned or refused.

“Guide Dogs provide safety, confidence and independence for their handlers, and have the same access rights as people, whether it’s in a taxi, on a bus, in a supermarket or in a café,” Ms Langdon said.

“Both the Guide Dog and handler have been trained to safely use public transport, including taxis, and to be refused access is denying the handler equal rights. Being refused can also be dangerous for the handler, as they may seek alternative routes that they are not familiar with.”

According to the survey results, Guide Dog handlers who experienced discrimination when using a taxi were more likely to be completely refused access than simply questioned about their access.

Ms Langdon said that while some taxi drivers may simply not know the law, it is unacceptable that those who do, continue to refuse Guide Dogs.

“We understand that some taxi drivers may simply not be aware of the law, while others may be fearful or unsure of letting a dog into their cab. We hope that by working with the taxi industry, rather than simply complaining, we can overcome these concerns and provide enough information to ensure not a single Guide Dog handler is refused access or questioned in the future.”

Prospect resident Merran Thurley has experienced numerous cases of discrimination when it comes to taxi drivers, where they have questioned her access, or simply refused to take her and her Guide Dog Ida.

“There have been quite a few times when I’ve been questioned by the taxi driver, and even if they allow me in they make it fairly clear that they would prefer not to have Ida there,” Merran said.
“Often they won’t talk to you, or they will ask that Ida doesn’t get too close. It makes you feel pretty uncomfortable, as they treat you differently than they would someone without a Guide Dog.”

Merran has also experienced times when taxi drivers have downright refused to take her and Ida.

“I’ve had times when I’ve waited in line for a taxi, and when it comes to me they tell me they’re not taking me, and simply drive off. There’s no opportunity for me to even discuss the situation with them.”

Guide Dogs Tasmania is also calling on the Tasmanian public to say no to discrimination by informing taxi drivers of the law and the penalties that can apply for refusing to take the person.

“Fines of up to 20 penalty units can be issued to taxi drivers refusing to take a person with a Guide Dog,” Ms Langdon said.

“Rather than see this happen more often, we want to work with the whole community.”

As part of its Say Yes to Guide Dogs campaign, Guide Dogs Tasmania will also be rewarding industries and businesses that do the right thing, with its “Say Yes to Guide Dogs” social media awards.

“We understand that it is a minority who get it wrong, therefore we want to celebrate and acknowledge those who get it right too,” Ms Langdon said.

People can nominate a business or staff member by going to Guide Dog Tasmania’s Facebook page, ‘Guide Dogs Tasmania – Puppy Love’.

ENDS

Filming and photo opportunity:

What: Puppy Walk to hand out information on Say Yes to Guide Dogs campaign
When: Tuesday 28 April, from 1:15 – 1:45pm
Where: Brisbane St Mall, Launceston
Who: Guide Dogs Tasmania representatives, Puppy Raisers and puppies

For more information, photo opportunities or interview please contact:

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Note to Editors:

Guide Dogs and Hearing Dogs Act 1967 – Section 3 (2)

A person who is in charge of a public place or public passenger vehicle, or the servant or agent of a person in charge of a public place or public passenger vehicle, must not –

- (a) refuse to allow a person accompanied by a guide dog into that place or onto that vehicle; or
- (b) direct a person accompanied by a guide dog to leave that place or vehicle; or
- (c) deny accommodation or service to a person accompanied by a guide dog.

Penalties of up to 20 units can apply. Additional civil action could also be taken against you.