

# UNITED SPINAL<sub>NOW</sub>

## Beginnings of a NYC Rights Resurgence

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**B**oth the Old Testament and the disability rights movement begin with the phrase “In the beginning”.

In the beginning there was darkness, i.e., people were institutionalized against their will, or homebound unnecessarily, trapped on their blocks because there were no curb ramps or accessible buses to get them to inaccessible facilities where they would not have been hired anyway or which they could not have enjoyed because they were inaccessible.

While the pace of the disability rights movement, at times, seems glacial and it is still not uncommon to encounter people with disabilities institutionalized unnecessarily, that is no longer the norm. Able-bodied people expect new construction to be accessible and notice when it is not. Politicians have, at least, paid lip service to disability issues since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 but lip service is not a job, or a ride, or even an opportunity.

Now, however, we may be on the brink of a disability rights renaissance in New York City. Elected officials are beginning to follow our lead and so are the government agencies who provide us with service.

Alex Elegudin, United Spinal member, lawyer and former accessible dispatch planner with the Taxi and Limousine Commission has been hired by Andy Byford (who believes all stations should be accessible), President of New York City Transit (NYCT), reporting directly to him, regarding how all transit decisions affect people with disabilities. This move could have been made 35 or 40 years ago and should have been made every year since, but it’s finally happened. Had this been done ten years ago, when NYCT was planning to eliminate the B51 bus, for example, which ran across the Manhattan Bridge to Brooklyn, someone would have realized that wheelchair users will now rely on expensive Access- A- Ride for interborough trips.

Various mayors have appointed commissioners to run the Office for People with Disabilities, but its current leader, United Spinal member Victor Calise, enjoys a relationship with commissioners of other agencies as a colleague and is clearly respected by Mayor de Blasio. Former United Spinal attorney Kleo King serves as a Deputy Commissioner at MOPD, as well.

Every mayor except Bill de Blasio fought making taxis accessible. Now the TLC Commissioner includes people with disabilities in all plans and has worked tirelessly to get accessible taxi, livery, Uber-type services off the ground. As predicted, the accessible and inaccessible yellows, Ubers and greens are providing, or are in talks to provide, Access-A-Ride services, in real time, for NYCT.

While the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) needed lawsuits to ensure timely and proper curb ramp installation, settlement discussions include provisions for dedicated staffing at the Assistant Commissioner level to accomplish this purpose. United Spinal member Quemel Arroyo is the ADA coordinator at NYCDOT, on the staff of the Commissioner. The Parks Department is advised by United Spinal member Chris Noel.

New York City, has seen the resurgence of the disability rights movement, the acceptance of disability rights as civil rights and an active effort by agencies to include people with disabilities in their planning and on their staffs. New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson and the Mayor enacted legislation to cap Uber-type vehicle numbers at current levels unless the companies add accessible vehicles.

The Speaker also hired disability rights activist Anastasia Somoza as an advisor regarding how City policies affect people with disabilities.

I am sure I will hear from some with complaints about non-compliance issues, discriminatory practices and other unsolved problems. You will all be right- there’s lots to do. I will also hear that I left people out, that there are many other people with disabilities in City government. Thank goodness there are. Inclusion, especially in the decision making process, raises visibility, heightens awareness and forces government to plan for everyone, not just those without disabilities.