

Uber Touts New Driver Screening Protocols

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By Porter Wells

Uber's addition of a former Homeland Security secretary to its safety board, more frequent background checks, and partnering with a 911 startup are meant to help the ride-sharing company get "serious about safety."

Background check disputes have been a sharp thorn in Uber's side. The ride-sharing giant has run into disputes in Texas, Colorado, and Maryland over the accuracy of its screening process. A class of Jane Does have sued in California, saying Uber's cursory background checks were the reason they were subjected to assaults by their drivers.

The company continues to strengthen its driver screening process via guidance from its Safety Advisory Board, Uber said in a written statement provided to Bloomberg Law. Former DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson will be joining that board.

Uber will also rerun all driver background checks annually and is investing in new partnerships intended to flag pending DUI and criminal offenses and alert Uber as soon they crop up, the statement said.

The safety update, however, doesn't mention the addition of fingerprinting to its background checks.

"Despite this announcement, Uber still is not allowing law enforcement to review a driver's full criminal history before pairing them with passengers," Jeanne Christensen, a partner at Wigdor LLP, said. Christensen is the lead attorney for the group of Jane Does suing Uber in a case working its way through the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California. Adopting fingerprint scanning before finalizing driver onboarding is one of the Jane Does' demands for relief.

Uber opposes the use of fingerprints in background checks. It says fingerprinting relies on arrest records rather than convictions and therefore disadvantages communities of color because they are arrested at a disproportionately high rate. The company instead relies on legal names, Social Security numbers, and driver's license numbers to check for past criminal and traffic violations.

The new safety features include a "safety center" within the app, the ability of riders to name "trusted contacts" with whom ride information can be shared, and the eventual introduction of an "emergency button" that will connect riders and drivers with the closest 911 call center.

