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Pass Sami's Law—H.R. 4686

Protect ride share passengers from assault

*Excerpts of testimony by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)
before the Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
October 16, 2019*

Chairwoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and Ranking Member Rodney Davis, thank you for the invitation to speak on Sami's Law, a comprehensive bipartisan legislative initiative designed to more seriously protect passengers—especially women—who utilize rideshare services including Uber and Lyft from sexual assault and other forms of violence.

The idea for the legislation came directly from the grieving parents of a young woman brutally murdered by a fake Uber driver.

Now we know there are significant personal safety concerns associated with actual Uber and Lyft drivers as well—not just the fakes—that are not well appreciated or publicized. More on that in a minute.

Last March, University of South Carolina senior Sami Josephson left a late-night outing with her friends alone because she had to work in the morning.

The extraordinarily talented student who had recently earned a full scholarship to Drexel University Law ordered an Uber.

In a congested part of town, a predator pretending to be her Uber driver brutally murdered her. Less than 24 hours later her dead body was found in a field. The murderer was caught, jailed and awaits trial.

Almost immediately and notwithstanding their excruciating agony over the loss of their precious daughter, Sami's parents—Seymour and Marci Josephson—began pushing for federal and state legislation to better ensure that no one else loses their life or gets assaulted by a rideshare driver or a predator who pretends to be.

Working with the Josephson's, we've crafted a bipartisan bill that would push states to require front license plates and scannable codes—such as QR codes—on both back-passenger side

windows that riders could scan on a smart device to verify their ride before—I say again before—entering a vehicle.

The bill provides a rider with the ability to opt-out of using a QR code by using instead a four-digit personal authentication number to be verified before entering the vehicle. The personal number was an excellent idea suggested by the National Federation of the Blind—who have endorsed the bill.

These measures would not only ensure vehicle and driver identification for riders, assist law enforcement in tracking harmful offenders but protects drivers as well by confirming the passenger.

The legislation also makes it unlawful for anyone other than a transportation network company like Uber or Lyft to sell a ride-hailing sign.

Today, anybody can buy an Uber or Lyft sign on Amazon or elsewhere for as little as ten bucks—enabling the fakes and predators with the appearance of signage legitimacy.

Additionally, Sami’s Law requires the GAO to study the incidence of assault and abuse of riders and drivers and the nature and specifics of any background checks of drivers and state laws that may require such background checks.

In April of 2018, an investigation by CNN pointed out that after searching “police reports, federal court records and county court databases for 20 major U.S. cities found 103 Uber drivers had been accused of sexual assault or abuse.”

However, the story notes that the numbers suggest that there may be many more overall incidents of sexual assault than the 103 cases found in the CNN investigation.

The CNN investigative story began with this: “After an evening of cocktails in San Diego, a woman got into the back of an Uber for a ride home. She was so intoxicated she had to ask the driver to stop so she could vomit. She says she then passed out in the backseat. When she regained consciousness, the Uber driver was on top of her, raping her, a block from her home, according to the police report and two sources familiar with the investigation...

“Police later arrested the Uber driver, John David Sanchez, 54. When they searched his computer, they found videos of Sanchez raping women and abusing young teenagers, dating back at least five years.

“In November, Sanchez was sentenced to 80 years in prison for the rape of the Uber passenger and 33 other counts against him, including sexual assaults of at least nine other women and children. Sanchez drugged many of his victims.”

What kind of background check and vetting did Uber driver Sanchez get?

The report notes that “Uber was made aware of CNN's reporting for this story months ago, but the company failed to make any executives available to speak on the record. It canceled an on-camera interview with an Uber executive earlier this month.”

Last month, fourteen women sued Lyft for mishandling their sexual assault complaints against drivers, failing to cooperate with law enforcement officials, and refusing to inform victims about the status of the predators who committed these egregious crimes.

Sami's law requires the GAO to study the incidence of assault and abuse inflicted on both riders and drivers and report back to Congress on the nature and specifics of any background checks by the companies including state laws requiring such checks.

Finally, due to the incomparable courage, compassion and advocacy of Sami's parents Seymour and Marci, the state version of Sami's Law—nearly identical to our federal bill—was signed into law by Governor Murphy of New Jersey on June 20th. Out of an abundance of concern for the safety, welfare and well-being of all rideshare customers, every state needs to do the same.