

State: Thousands fail background checks for Uber, Lyft

April 5 2017, by Steve Leblanc

Massachusetts officials say more than 10 percent of drivers for ride-hailing companies Uber and Lyft have failed a required background check.

More than 62,000 drivers passed, including some who drive for both companies. About 8,200 failed the checks, which are required under a 2016 state law officials have called the most stringent in the country.

Of those who were denied, the figures released Wednesday show the largest number were turned away because their license had been suspended, they had been licensed to drive for less than three years, or they had multiple serious driving offenses.

More than 300 applicants had felony convictions and 51 were registered sex offenders.

Uber issued a statement faulting the background process as too strict.

"Thousands of people in Massachusetts have lost access to economic opportunities as a result of a screening that includes an unfair and unjust indefinite lookback period," the statement read. "We have an opportunity to repair the current system in the rules process so that people who deserve to work are not denied the opportunity."

Republican Gov. Charlie Baker, who signed the law, said Massachusetts has set a national standard with an agreement with Uber and Lyft that

sped up the background check process.

"Public safety is a top priority for this administration and we are pleased to have completed this first round of in-depth background checks a year ahead of schedule," Baker said.

The background checks were conducted in two steps.

First the companies were required to perform multi-state criminal and driving background checks and a check of a national sex offender website.

Drivers who passed were referred to the state, which ran its own background checks including a lifetime look-back for violent felonies, serious driving offenses, and sex abuse convictions.

Lyft spokesman Adrian Durbin said the company's background check provider is legally prevented from looking back more than seven years.

"The state does not face the same limitation, which likely explains why a small percentage of our drivers failed the state's background check while passing ours," Durbin said.

A group representing the taxi industry said the state should also require Uber and Lyft drivers to undergo fingerprint-based criminal background checks.

Abdelai Chaffai is one of those drivers who failed the background checks.

The 62-year-old Cambridge resident said he'd driven a car for Uber for years before being blocked about five months ago. Chaffai said he had a drunken driving arrest about four decades ago, another incident in which

he was accused of scratching a car 30 years ago but he was found not responsible, and three speeding tickets.

"I just don't understand. I'm not a criminal. I'm not a threat to anyone," Chaffai said. "For some reason they're just denying so many people."

Chaffai said he's still trying to appeal. He said he bought a car last year to continue driving for Uber, but has already missed one payment.

"They're just making my life harder and harder, I'm almost giving up. You don't have a right to take someone's food and shelter," he said.

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