

Uber to up its background checks for drivers

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This June 21, 2017, file photo shows the building that houses the headquarters of Uber, in San Francisco. Uber will start doing annual criminal background checks on U.S. drivers and hire a company that constantly monitors criminal arrests as it tries to do a better job of keeping riders safe, the company announced Thursday, April 12, 2018. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg, File)

Uber will start doing annual criminal background checks on U.S. drivers and hire a company that constantly monitors criminal arrests as it tries to do a better job of keeping riders safe.

The move announced Thursday is one of several actions taken by the ride-hailing company under new CEO Dara Khosrowshahi, who said that the changes aren't just being done to polish the company's image, which has been tarnished by driver misbehavior and a long string of other embarrassing failings.

"The first thing that we want to do is really change Uber's substance, and the image may follow," he said in an interview with The Associated Press. "The announcements that we're making are just a step along the way of making Uber fundamentally safer for drivers and riders."

Other safety features include buttons in the Uber app that allow riders to call 911 in an emergency, as well as app refinements that make it easier for riders to share their whereabouts with friends or loved ones.

Since it began operating in 2009, Uber has been dogged by reports of drivers accosting passengers, including lawsuits alleging sexual assaults. Last year the company was fined \$8.9 million by the state of Colorado for allowing people with serious criminal or motor vehicle offenses to work as drivers. The Public Utilities Commission said it found nearly 60 people were allowed to drive in the state despite having previous felony convictions or major traffic violations including drunken driving.

Khosrowshahi, formerly CEO of the Expedia travel booking site, replaced hard-charging co-founder Travis Kalanick in August and faced problems almost from the start. Most recently, he has had to grapple with his company's autonomous vehicle program after one of its SUVs struck and killed a pedestrian last month in Tempe, Arizona.

Khosrowshahi said the company's exponentially fast growth prevented steps like the annual background checks from being done sooner. "I can't change the past, but I can change the things that we do going forward," he said.

Uber does 15 million trips per day worldwide, and its drivers "reflect the good and the bad and the random events of the world," Khosrowshahi said.

It was bad policy for Uber to do just one background check for drivers and never follow up, said Thomas Mauriello, a senior lecturer of forensic science at the University of Maryland and former defense department agent who was involved in background checks. But he sees the changes as positive, potentially catching bad behavior after a driver is hired on.

"Any check is better than no check," he said. "Nobody should think that any check they do is going to be 100 percent foolproof and get all information."

Some governments now require background checks after drivers are hired, but the company's policy makes it uniform nationwide, Uber said.

Uber will conduct its annual background checks through a company called Checkr starting in the next few weeks. It still does not intend to do FBI fingerprint background checks, saying its check of court records and other databases is robust, fair and "stacks up well against the alternatives."

A company, which Uber would not identify, has been hired to continually check arrest data, and that also will begin in a few weeks, Uber said.

Most governments do not require annual background checks on taxi drivers, but they continually monitor arrest records and check them against drivers' names, said John Boit, spokesman for the Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit Association.

Mauriello says that may be true because the FBI database includes only felonies. Many sex crimes and traffic violations that could disqualify driver candidates are misdemeanors and not in the database, he said.

The app changes, which will take several weeks to become active, will roll out first in the U.S., then move to other countries. Riders will see a shield that they can touch, sending the app to another screen with safety tips, instructions on how to easily share ride information with others, and a button to call 911. When the 911 button is pressed, riders will immediately get their location to relay to dispatchers, helping riders traveling in unfamiliar areas.

Uber has been testing its new features with Denver's 911 system, which automatically sends the rider's location, as well as driver and car information, to the dispatch center. Uber says location information from smartphones is better than what's used by 911 centers, which rely on triangulation off multiple cellular telephone towers.

Evelyn Bailey, executive director of the National Association of State 911 Administrators, said there's no proof yet that smartphones provide closer location information than wireless carriers, but it's under study by the Federal Communications Commission. She said Uber's two-step calling through the app may not be intuitive for people, and she would prefer they call 911 with the keypad.

She also said Uber's system has great potential, although she would like to see test results before passing judgment. "If in fact it does deliver what it promises, then that could be very beneficial to the calling public," she said. "But if it doesn't, then I think that's a problem."

Uber says people can always call 911 from the keypad.

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