

NYC drivers for Uber, other apps to get vision care coverage

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In this March 15, 2017, file photo, an Uber car drives through LaGuardia Airport in New York. Starting Sunday, July 1, 2018, drivers for car services and ride-hailing apps like Uber and Lyft in New York will be able to get coverage for vision care as well as phone or video appointments with doctors, industry representatives announced. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File)

Drivers for car services and ride-hailing apps like Uber and Lyft are

usually on their own when it comes to buying health insurance, but starting Sunday in New York they will now be able to get coverage for vision care as well as phone or video appointments with doctors, industry representatives announced.

The coverage for an estimated 43,000 drivers statewide will be paid for by the Black Car Fund, a workers' compensation fund for car-service drivers that is funded by a 2.5 percent surcharge on each ride.

Black Car Fund executive director Ira Goldstein said the initiative is groundbreaking in an industry where drivers are considered independent contractors and don't get employee-sponsored health benefits.

"We think it's a model that could be expanded to a lot of different industries," Goldstein said, citing app-based delivery services and cleaning services.

Meera Joshi, commissioner of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, called the new benefits for livery cab and app-based drivers "a positive first step" for drivers who lack access to health care.

The Black Car Fund was created by the New York state legislature in 1999 to provide workers' compensation insurance for livery and black car drivers. The fund also pays \$50,000 to family members of drivers killed on the job.

New York City yellow cab drivers have workers' compensation insurance through a different program.

The Independent Drivers Guild, which advocates for app-based drivers in New York City, says 90 percent of the drivers who responded to a survey reported they did not have vision-care insurance.

Jim Conigliaro Jr., the founder of the guild, which is affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and is partly funded by Uber, called the new benefits "a huge step toward a more fair industry."

"While we continue our fight for livable pay, we are pleased that drivers who need glasses will finally be able to get them along with 24/7 access to a doctor, all at no cost," he said.

Sarfraz Maredia, general manager for Uber in New York, said the company will work to make sure the company's drivers in New York know about the new benefits.

Uber driver Sohail Rana said the idea of a medical appointment by phone or video is appealing for drivers who can't afford to miss work waiting in a doctor's office.

"It's a huge benefit for the drivers to be able to call a doctor on the phone and get a prescription," said Rana, 50.

The move to provide new benefits for some drivers comes as New York City grapples with regulating an industry that has changed radically over the last decade.

Critics say the rise of Uber, Lyft and other ride-sharing apps has exacerbated traffic congestion, lowered pay for all drivers and driven the value of the medallions that allow a person to operate a yellow cab from a peak of \$1 million to about \$200,000, forcing medallion owners into bankruptcy.

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