

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Gov. Cuomo Ignores Pleas for Help with Uber

BY JAMES WEISMAN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



Wheelchair-using New Yorkers throughout the state have been overlooked by Gov. Andrew Cuomo as he pushes the legislature to provide for Uber and other Transportation Network Companies (TNCs, sometimes called rideshares) in a bill that would grant them statewide operating authority.

Last year, independent living organizations, United Spinal Association, Taxis for All Campaign, the Taxi Workers Alliance and yellow cab medallion owners, along with the New York State Trial Lawyers Association opposed similar legislation successfully. The bill creates an insurance product for TNCs and their drivers – when they’re on the app they’re insured like a commercial enterprise, when they’re off the app, like a private car. In a time-honored legislative manner, the bill pays only lip service to wheelchair users. It calls for a “study” to assess the need for wheelchair access. Uber can be up and operating state-wide long before it is completed and then, of course, new legislation would be required just for wheelchair users to make Uber accessible should the study indicate that access is desirable.

There are 31 independent living centers in the state, 29 of them oppose the legislation. Two (one in Utica and one in Cortland) support the legislation because taxi service in their communities is so poor that at least Uber would help frail, but ambulatory people with disabilities. The state association of independent living centers opposes the legislation.

I wrote the governor opposing the legislation on behalf of United Spinal Association. I told him that should disability advocates prevail, as we always do a year or two down the road, and the legislature and the governor decide Uber and other TNCs should provide at least some access, the TNCs will look to government to subsidize their operations because wheelchair access would be a change to their business model mandated by the state. The governor should require Uber to be accessible now and not create a new mode of transportation off-limits to those who cannot walk or transfer safely from their wheelchair.

IMPORTANT - Tom Harkin, retired U.S. Senator from Iowa, the prime sponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, met with Mayor Bloomberg and the Taxi and Limousine Commissioner on our behalf when we successfully fought to make taxis accessible in NYC. He appeared the summer before last at our ADA anniversary parade in NYC and called for not just taxi access, but Uber access, as well. He said they use our internet and they use our streets and they’re going to be accessible.

On Jan. 9, 2017, Sen. Harkin wrote Gov. Cuomo opposing legislation granting Uber state-wide operating authority without any access requirements. He credited Cuomo, correctly, for initiating accessible taxi service in New York City. Harkin stated, “as Uber and Lyft seek approval to operate in Albany, Buffalo and other cities in NY state, I urge you to include accessibility requirements, similar or greater than those you negotiated for taxis in 2011. These standards should apply to all rideshare companies operating across the state, including NYC, where there are currently no accessibility requirements for rideshare providers.”

As far as we know, the governor has not responded to Sen. Harkin yet, and he has not responded to United Spinal Association’s letter either. For copies of either letter, email me at jweisman@unitedspinal.org.