Written Testimony

Committee ___Transportation___

Bill No ___HB 2614___

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Person Testifying ___Rep. Cindy Holscher___

Agency _____

Proponent __✓__   Neutral_____   Opponent _____

Written _____   Oral __✓__

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Oral Testimony in Support of  HB 2614                    February 19, 2020

Just get an UBER.  It's a phrase heard daily in urban areas as well as college campuses.  With a notable decrease in car ownership for those in the teen years through early 30's, transportation needs have changed.  More younger drivers are putting off car ownership because, for many, the expense is too great.  As an indicator of how driving trends have changed, the used car market for teens has shrunk from 7.5 million to 4.2 million in just five years.   This is a significant, dramatic shift in our culture.

With this shift we have seen the emergence of more ride sharing companies, such as LYFT and UBER.  Powered by apps, arranging a ride has become pretty easy.  With this transition in our culture, essentially "any" vehicle can potentially be your ride.  While companies like UBER and LYFT require background checks for all drivers, there are concerns if enough has been required to ensure safety of the passengers.

Around 2am the evening of March 29, 2019, Samantha Josephson,  a 21 year old college student at the University of South Carolina summoned an UBER.  After being out with her friends, she decided to go home.  Surveillance footage shows her waiting outside holding her phone.  A black Chevrolet Impala pulled up beside her and she got into the vehicle.  Unfortunately, though, this was not her UBER.   The man never took her home and the next day she was found dead.

For many years, taxi cabs were the mode of short-term transportation.  Typically, these  vehicles were easily recognizable with specific paint design for the various companies and trade logos displayed.  As a passenger, you had a certain level of confidence that you were entering a "certified" vehicle, not an imposter.  However, with changes in the industry, essentially  "any" vehicle can be your transportation.  That also opens up the possibility for predators.  Keep in mind, there are a lot of black sedans that have become part of the ride hailing service,  similar to the vehicle Samantha Josephson entered.

Background requirements are required for UBER drivers and there are specific guidelines regarding what type of vehicle can be utilized for their ride sharing service (such as it must be a four door vehicle that is 10 years old or newer in most cities).  In terms of of helping customers identify their vehicle, the UBER app lists out these particular steps:
-ask the name of the driver
-check the car type and license plate
-once in the car, check the driver phone – your name and number should be showing at the bottom of the screen

While these seem like practical steps, there are some issues here.  Specifically, if in the evening hours, it may be difficult to determine the car type as well as the license plate.  The advice of "once in the car, check the driver phone" is faulty in that if this is a predator, once you're in the car, it's too late.

There is one more potential complication – if the passenger has been drinking. We tell people not to drink and drive – that they should find someone to give them a ride home or get an UBER. At a point when cognitive abilities are likely at a considerably lower level, we need to ensure identifying information is clear and consistent as well as visible to the passenger.

Think about the situation with Samantha. She had summoned an UBER and shortly thereafter a black sedan – which is the most popular type of vehicle used for a ride service – pulled up. It's quite likely she asked "are you my UBER?" An innocuous question, designed to help in verification, was an easy way for this imposter to secure a victim.

So what can we do to help prevent this type of situation from occurring? Within a week of Samantha's murder, the South Carolina Legislature passed a bill to make ride sharing vehicles easier to identify. Their bill requires illuminated signs with trade dress logos displayed.

This bill brought forward to you today is quite similar. While illuminated signs are a good idea, they can be fairly easily obtained online. This bill seeks to require UBER/LYFT drivers to display the following information on the rear passenger window of their vehicle:
-driver name
-license plate info
-make/model of car

With this bill, there is a requirement of 72 point or larger font so the information is clear and visible. Additionally, the onus is put on the driver to display the info instead of the company. The requirement placing the info on the passenger side rear window is logical in that this is where the passenger will typically be entering the vehicle. Having a designated spot for this information is important in that customers will become trained to look at a certain area for this verification.

With concern regarding safety of consumers, UBER is working on ways to improve their app. Furthermore, there is the possibility a statute may be enacted on the federal level. There is language in this particular bill that states it would be superseded by safety policies enacted on the national level. But, as we all know, there are no guarantees in regard to how fast – or slow – a governing body will move on a particular issue. In the mean time, this bill is designed to provide a workable solution that is simple and low cost while providing the verifying information our customers need.


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