



Should Gig Workers Get COVID-19 Vaccine Priority?

Insights

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Delivery and rideshare drivers who work in the gig economy should get priority access to the COVID-19 vaccine, according to Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi. In a December 10 letter sent to governors in all 50 states, Khosrowshahi notes just how reliant Americans have become on gig workers during the pandemic, earning them a spot near the front of the line. What do you need to know about this development?

Letter Lays Out Rationale For Priority Access

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommended last week that healthcare providers and nursing home residents should be first in line to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, which could be administered to people in those classifications in a matter of days. The second phase, according to the recommendations, should include essential workers – including those in the transportation industry. And given that it will be a state-by-state determination to categorize such workers, it makes sense for Uber to begin stumping directly to the states in an effort to ensure gig workers are included in that second group.

“Over the last nine months, these workers have been a lifeline to their communities,” Khosrowshahi wrote in the letter. “They have transported healthcare workers to hospitals, delivered food to people socially distancing at home, and helped local restaurants stay in business.” This, in Khosrowshahi’s eyes, has led to this class of gig workers to become “essential” workers deserving of priority treatment. “After nine months on the frontlines keeping their communities running,” he says, “we are asking governors in all 50 states to prioritize drivers and delivery people for early vaccine access.”

But he’s not asking for his workers and other gig workers to receive this treatment without a tradeoff. He also offers up Uber’s platform -- its technology, logistical expertise, and other resources — to help ensure that the vaccine is brought to the general public as quickly and efficiently as possible. He specifically notes that Uber’s app could be used to deliver vaccination information to Americans.

His letter echoes another letter sent last week by Uber to the CDC requesting that rideshare and delivery drivers be considered non-health essential workers for the purposes of ensuring early access to the COVID-19 vaccine. The December 3 letter, signed by Uber’s head of federal affairs, Danielle Burr, notes that gig workers have provided critical transportation for other essential

workers and allowed others to stay home and order food. “Early access to a vaccine would help drivers and delivery people continue to play their essential role while also reducing the risk that they may inadvertently contract, or possibly transmit, the virus,” she said.

What’s Next?

Media reports indicate that Uber will send a similar request to President-elect Joe Biden. At first blush, many might assume that the incoming administration would rebuff Uber and the other gig economy companies given Biden’s noted efforts to reject the gig economy business model and instead seek employee classification for drivers and other workers. However, there may be a few reasons why the Biden administration may be receptive to these overtures.

First and foremost, the request by Khosrowshahi doesn’t aim to benefit him or his company, per se. Instead, it is an effort to ensure inoculation and safety for tens of millions of workers, many of whom have already been negatively impacted by the current economic crisis. Second, the incoming administration has signaled that it will be unleashing a full court press in an effort to encourage Americans to receive the vaccine. That an entire industry may be willing to receive priority access could be a positive development in the information battle that has already begun, especially given how popular such workers are with the average American who has now grown accustomed to their services.

As the COVID-19 vaccine moves from speculation to reality, states will soon begin the process of announcing their own priority access lists and recipient order. We should soon begin to see whether Uber’s efforts have an impact in delivering priority access for gig workers.

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