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Mental Health Program Launches for NY Drivers in Wake of Suicides

NYC Public Advocate Jumaane Williams and others join with Independent Drivers Guild and The Black Car Fund to launch one-of-a-kind wellness program

New York, NY -- In response to high rates of depression, stress and anxiety and an epidemic of for-hire vehicle driver suicides across the city, the Independent Drivers Guild is launching an innovative new mental health and wellness program for NYC's for-hire vehicle drivers with support from the Black Car Fund. The one-of-a-kind Driver Wellness program seeks to destigmatize mental health care and will take a holistic approach to wellness by providing a suite of free counseling and case management services and classes to address and prevent crisis situations. The Guild's counseling services are available in English, Spanish, Urdu, Bengali, and Mandarin.

“Too many drivers across our city are in crisis—with nine suicides that we know of in a little over a year. We are launching this program to provide drivers with much needed support and to save lives,” **said Brendan Sexton, Executive Director of the Independent Drivers Guild.** “At its core, this crisis is largely driven by the economic insecurity of the for-hire vehicle industry. At the same time as we stand up for fair pay for drivers and remedy the exploitation in this industry, we also must give drivers and their families much-needed resources and support. We aim to erase the stigma of mental health care, create a community of support and stop the suicides.”

“This new wellness program comes at a critical moment for for-hire drivers, who desperately need a stronger safety net as they struggle with the stress of an extremely competitive profession, and a more and more demanding daily life,” **said Ira Goldstein, Executive Director of the Black Car Fund.** “We hope that this program will not just improve lives—but also save them. Something must be done, and the Black Car Fund is proud to work with the Independent Drivers Guild and leaders like Public Advocate Williams to reach out and offer meaningful help before it's too late.”

The Guild and BCF were joined by New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who is a champion of ending the stigma surrounding mental health care, particularly for men and communities of color, and New York City Council Member and Transportation Committee Chair Ydanis Rodriguez. Also attending the launch event were community partners as well as drivers and family members who have been affected by the crisis in the FHV industry.

“As a mental health crisis continues to grow in the community of drivers that has been New York City's backbone, it is clear that we in city government have failed this community of hardworking people just trying to keep up,” **said New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams.** “I'm glad that this new program will help provide some vital resources and support through a holistic approach that continues to destigmatize mental health care.”

“We cannot sit still as drivers suffering from mental health issues and financial stresses take their lives,” **said City Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez, Chairman of the Transportation Committee.** “I thank the Independent Drivers Guild and the Black Car Fund for all the work and support they bring to the drivers that need

it the most. I will continue working with the Council to ensure our out-risk drivers receive the help they need. This new program from the Independent Drivers Guild and the Black Car Fund will go a long way to improving the quality of life for drivers in New York City.”

"Many for-hire vehicle drivers in New York City have faced a myriad of financial challenges that have resulted in new mental health challenges," **said City Council Member Rory Lancman.** "We have seen the impact of this crisis all over the City as rates of anxiety and depression have increased among drivers, and nine drivers have tragically taken their own lives in just the past year. The health and well-being of our drivers is a top priority, and I commend the Independent Drivers Guild and the Black Car Fund for launching this new wellness program that will provide counseling and support to drivers in need."

"Our motto has always been, the drivers come first. We always keep this in our minds as we work to expand the benefits we provide to our covered drivers" **said Berj Haroutunian, Chairman of The Black Car Fund Board and President of Vital Transportation Inc.** "Being a for-hire driver in this city takes a toll physically and mentally, and both these issues must be addressed. The program we proudly announce today can save lives and will have a positive effect on the well-being of thousands of drivers."

In recent weeks, the Guild has provided grief counseling for families of drivers affected by violence on the job and fellow drivers who took their own lives. The driver wellness program has also provided trauma counseling for a driver whose passenger was murdered, and crisis support for a driver facing eviction, among others. The program is now launching signups for free individual, couple, and family counseling as well as case management support in obtaining resources at <https://drivingguild.org/wellness/>

The Guild's Driver Wellness program focuses on both prevention and crisis intervention. The multi-pronged program is tailored to meet drivers where they are—physically, mentally and in their language. The program includes:

Weekly Driver Discussion Circles: Our discussion circles function as an accessible and destigmatized entry point into the program. Driver circles provide an in-person way to connect, raise concerns, share advice, and gain coping skills. Led by a clinical social worker, drivers share experiences and discuss practical steps they can take to address stressors of the for-hire vehicle industry. Drivers can opt to participate in group and individual counseling after the circle discussion ends.

Immediate Counseling Services for High-Risk Individuals: Private therapy sessions and group and family sessions with a licensed counselor.

Case Management Support: Social workers assess the needs of drivers and their families and provide linkage to services like SNAP benefits, housing assistance, disability support services and more.

Creating a Community Network: participants in the community network will be trained on identifying warning signs of mental health crisis and carrying out mental health first aid. The Community Leader Network will send referrals to the Mental Health and Wellness Team for ongoing counseling, creating a link between frontline communities most impacted by the crisis and the resources they need for prevention long-term.

Wellness Curriculum: expansion of wellness curriculum and classes (financial, mental health, mindfulness, overall wellness, career skills and language proficiency).

"Professional drivers are quite isolated from one another, spending long days behind the wheel. Driver discussion circles provide an in-person way to connect, raise concerns, and gain coping skills. We have been blown away by how ready drivers are to open up about what they are going through," **said Deborah Ho, a counselor with IDG's driver wellness program.**

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