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Cabbies: We deserve safety on the job

Sunday afternoon the New York Taxi Workers Alliance held a press conference in New York City, calling for legislation to make assaults on taxi drivers a felony. During the press conference, Ndiaye Serigne, a taxi driver, spoke for the first time about the attack he suffered on Halloween night when a group of men, dressed as Mario Brothers' characters, robbed and assaulted him in Staten Island. Alongside Serigne, about 25 taxi drivers stood outside Penn Station with signs asking for more safety in their jobs.

The attack was caught on a security camera at a Mobile Gas Station, where Serigne stopped for help. "I'm just thankful that I am alive," he said at the press conference. Even after releasing the surveillance video, the New York Police Department has not found any information that would lead them to the arrest of the assailants. One of the problems the police face when trying to arrest attackers is that "by the time the police shows up, the robber has fled," said David Sengar, a taxi driver who has been on the job for 31 years. Bhairavi Desai, Executive Director of NYTWA, said that according to the Department of Labor, "taxi drivers are 60 times more likely to be killed on the job, and 80 times more likely to be robbed."

A big supporter of this initiative is Assemblyman Rory Lancman (D-Queens), chair of the Assembly Subcommittee on Workplace Safety. Lacman wants taxi drivers to have the same protection against abuse from violent passengers as bus drivers and subways conductors. According to Lacman, current laws say that an assault is prosecuted as a misdemeanor. However

“certain occupations are prone to violence” and the law raises these assaults to felonies. Attacks on bus drivers and subways conductors are classified as felonies.

“There is absolutely no reason why a person should choose between a job and safety,” said Desai. The “Safety Campaign” initiative also asks for signs to be put up in taxis that say “assaulting a taxi driver is a felony.” The drivers hope that these signs will help reduce the physical and verbal abuse that they receive from some passengers. “If they see that sign they will think twice,” said Desai.

At the end of the press conference chants of “I will help in driver safety” came from the drivers, who all had something in common. “All of these drivers here have all been abused,” said Desai.

The initiative, which is already a law in cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, will be introduced by the end of the year, and is expected to pass, said Lancman.