



States identify licensing procedures as area that needs improving

by Jeff Greco

As legislators search for new safeguards against further terrorist activity, one target for improvements is an area of state government that had been much scrutinized even before Sept. 11 — state departments and divisions of motor vehicles. Accounts of the suspected hijackers suggest that they moved about the country with alarming ease, in part because most had easy access to Social Security numbers and driver's licenses. While it appears that no laws were broken, and analysts surmise that hijackers may well have been able to escape detection even with stronger safeguards, the failure of some state agencies and facilities to adequately screen candidates for driver's licenses has sparked a broader debate on whether (and how) public officials can develop a stronger line of defense against criminal behavior.

Documentation has emerged as an important issue in several states. In many places, authorities simply do not verify information that citizens supply when trying to get a driver's license. In Iowa, for example, workers still do not attempt to verify addresses given by applicants — a policy that officials say will be reviewed in light of the state's growing reputation as an easy place to skirt residency requirements imposed elsewhere. Under pressure from state and national leaders, Florida legislators recently amended a law that allowed foreigners to apply for licenses using customs documents completed by the applicants themselves; several of the Sept. 11 hijackers apparently obtained licenses this way. And in Virginia, the Legislature abolished an antiquated law requiring applicants to supply nothing more than a sworn statement before receiving an ID card.

A more complicated issue — and one that several Midwestern states are now facing — is the question of whether illegal immigrants should be able to obtain driver's licenses. In recent years, several states have implemented legislation that allows people in this country illegally to have driver's licenses. Critics have raised questions about whether such laws encourage illegal immigration by reassuring individuals that jobs (and the driving privileges they often require) will be available. Others, though, believe the granting of driving privileges ensures that illegal immigrants will be sufficiently instructed, examined and licensed and, therefore, less of a hazard.

A bill introduced in Illinois would allow potential drivers to present alternate forms of identification that do not contain Social Security numbers. Supporters of the legislation say the measure could be derailed unfairly due to new safety concerns related to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. They point out that the suspected hijackers were legal visitors or residents of this country.

Still, the push for tougher driving restrictions

has picked up momentum over the last few months. In Tennessee, where lawmakers had rescinded a Social Security number requirement for licenses, an inquiry into the new policy's effects has been launched. The bill's opponents charged that the loose requirements attracted people from other states, causing eight- to 10-hour waits at some facilities.

Legislation has been introduced in Michigan that would prohibit people who are in the country illegally from obtaining a driver's license or state identification card. Foreign applicants who submit documentation verifying legal presence in the United States would be eligible for a license, but only for the period of time covered by their official

stay. Republican Secretary of State Candace Miller says the proposal is "just one of many steps being taken to shore up the safety and security of our state and nation."

"In the aftermath of Sept. 11, I am convinced that government agencies should not be issuing official documentation to people who do not have a legal presence," she adds. A survey conducted by the secretary of state's office found that 26 of the 50 U.S. states require proof of legal presence before a license is issued.

Recent activity in Kansas underscores the difficult state policy decisions that must be made regarding illegal immigrants and driving privileges. In 2000, after stories appeared describing how illegal immigrants routinely went to Kansas to take advantage of lax residency requirements and weak verification procedures, legislation was passed requiring Social Security numbers for driver's licenses. By summer 2001, public pressure against the new measure had grown sufficiently strong for House and Senate leaders to convene a special joint committee hearing, during which lawmakers agreed to further study the issue and make a recommendation to the full Legislature.

Forgery problems

Forgery is yet another issue that states are re-examining. The existence of an estimated 2

million to 3 million illegal driver's licenses in the United States is a testament to the ease with which official documents can be forged, as well as an indication of how futile tougher checks will be if driver's licenses can be reliably reproduced outside the country. U.S. investigators have already found dozens of forged documents — ranging from passport stamps to foreign identification cards — in terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, leaving little doubt that both the will and the means to evade document checks exist. Moreover, illegal driver's licenses cost state and federal governments millions of dollars in welfare services and insurance fraud, not to mention the higher accident and injury rates that stem from underage drinkers using falsified licenses to obtain



Some lawmakers are hoping to strengthen requirements for people seeking state driver's licenses.

liquor and drive illicitly.

Several states are redesigning their driver's licenses in an effort to cut down on forgery. In Michigan, new information and a redesigned format introduced by the secretary of state's office will make falsified licenses easier for law enforcement personnel to identify. The Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles will issue digital licenses by 2003, all but eliminating the possibility that they can be altered or duplicated. And in at least 10 other states, new formatting guidelines will go into effect over the next several years. Meanwhile, talk continues about the possibility of introducing a national identification card, although some critics contend that the national ID would offer few crime-fighting advantages over state-issued licenses with similar anti-counterfeit features.

Regardless of what occurs at the federal level, it appears more will be expected of departments and divisions of motor vehicles in the future. State lawmakers already are seeking changes to licensing procedures in order to impact a wide array of issues — from curbing illegal immigration to stopping underage drinking. As a result, in the Midwest and across the country, improving oversight will be an important issue on the 2002 agendas of many legislatures. ✨