

# **State Certificate Hits the Big Time; Tenn. Document Proves a Magnet To Immigrants and Black Market**

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## **Body**

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**Tennessee**'s driving **certificate** for illegal **immigrants** is not supposed to be valid as a form of ID, but the **document** is so popular that people are paying hundreds of dollars and traveling hundreds of miles to get one.

**Tennessee** has issued more than 51,000 **certificates** since 2004 when it became the first **state** -- since joined by Utah -- to offer them. But not every **certificate** has gone to someone living in **Tennessee**.

Two major federal arrests in recent months exposed **black-market** shuttles carrying South and Central American **immigrants** from New Jersey and Georgia to **state** licensing centers in Knoxville, where **immigrants** using phony residency papers got **certificates**.

A third sweep near Nashville last month uncovered a conspiracy in which prosecutors say **state** license examiners in Murfreesboro accepted bribes from a driving school to provide illegal **immigrants** with driver's licenses and **certificates** without testing.

This comes as **Tennessee**'s **certificate** system is being studied as a possible model for handling "non-conforming drivers" under Congress's recently adopted Real ID Act that will set a national standard for driver's licenses by 2008.

"We have seen individuals coming to **Tennessee** to take advantage of the driver's **certificate** program because they are easy to obtain," Acting U.S. Attorney Russ Dedrick said.

Although "Not Valid for Identification" appears in bold red letters on the face of the wallet-size **certificates**, Dedrick said banks accept them as legal ID and they "can easily be passed off for other types of identification **documents**."

Lawyer Mike Whalen, whose client Zeneida Concepcion Rivera faces as much as four years in prison if convicted of bringing as many as 100 **immigrants** from New Jersey to Knoxville for **certificates**, said the government is making too much of the problem.

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"Somebody went through the roof and said, 'Remember 9/11, everyone had driver's licenses,' " he said. "Well, none of these Mexican immigrants are in flight school anywhere. There is a difference."

That argument carries little weight in law enforcement circles.

The certificate law "just kind of opened up a floodgate of everyone wanting to come here to get some sort of identification," said Knox County Sheriff Tim Hutchison, whose officers discovered 58 illegal immigrants used the same Knoxville address to get a certificate.

Applicants must provide two documents, such as utility bills or a lease, to show they reside in Tennessee, and a Social Security number -- or a sworn affidavit if there is none. They also must pass an eye exam, a driving rules test and a road test.

"What we tried to do in Tennessee was to recognize that there are people who may be legally here but they are not completely documented," Gov. Phil Bredesen (D) said.

Tennessee began licensing illegal immigrants, without a Social Security number requirement, in early 2001. More than 180,000 obtained licenses before post-9/11 fears set in.

The driving certificates were created in 2004 to satisfy homeland security concerns while giving illegal immigrants the right to drive with certified proficiency.

Bredesen recalled being shocked three years ago to see an ad in a Spanish-language newspaper in Georgia promoting package deals for "a certain amount of money to get on a bus and go to Tennessee to get a driver's license."

Since then, he said, "there is no question we have tightened it up a long way."

Yet the arrests of the New Jersey-based group in July and a Georgia-based group in December suggest the underground express is still rolling -- with illegal immigrants willing to pay \$950 to \$1,500 apiece to come to Knoxville to get a certificate.

Some say the problem is not the law, but the law's enforcement.

Hutchison's officers searched the Internet to determine that immigrants were using fake residences, and they spent months monitoring the suspects' movements before they were arrested.

"I would hope that the state would pick up on it sooner," the sheriff said. "But I am not sure that they are actually geared to do that."

Tracy McGill, a supervisor at a Knoxville testing center where dozens of the fake residences were used to get certificates, refused to comment.

The allure of payoffs to underpaid license examiners may only increase as requirements tighten and certificates become more precious, said Melissa Savage, a policy analyst with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

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