

Without Papers, No Full License; Md. Immigrants' Appointments Cut

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Body

The **Maryland** Motor Vehicle Administration will cancel scheduled **appointments** for 8,000 **immigrants** applying for driver's **licenses** and has stopped booking them in advance of a new law that will curtail driving privileges for illegal **immigrants** starting June 1.

Every driver in the state will be affected by the change by having to present a Social Security card or other proof that they are in the country legally to get a **license**.

As news of the measure -- passed in the final hour of the General Assembly session Monday -- coursed through the **immigrant** community, officials mobilized to change computer programs and launch a public information campaign. The current system has allowed hundreds of thousands of undocumented **immigrants** to drive but has made **Maryland** vulnerable to fraud by out-of-state motorists.

Illegal **immigrants** who have **licenses** can renew them once for a driving permit before they are **cut** off July 1, 2015, a date set in a compromise bill muscled through the House of Delegates and the more conservative Senate. The permit will not provide access to federal buildings or commercial airplanes.

Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) is expected to sign the bill next month. By joining 46 states that require lawful presence of drivers, **Maryland** will comply with the federal security law known as Real ID.

"Everyone applying for a **license** is affected," Motor Vehicle Administrator John Kuo said.

Through the Internet and a toll-free phone line, the agency has been booking 2,000 **appointments** a week for drivers who provide foreign documents that lack a U.S. visa stamp. The slots are so coveted that the system has a 60-day backlog. The 8,000 **appointments** for June filled last week. The MVA will send cancellation letters to those applicants, Kuo said.

Learner's permits issued before June 1 will be honored when their term expires, as long as the driver passes the written and road tests, Kuo said. The driving permit for renewing motorists **without** lawful status will read "not for

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federal purposes" on the front or back and might be issued in a different color than the current blue with a touch of yellow.

Under the measure, legal residents will have to show a Social Security card, W-2 form, pay stub or other document proving their identity "or they can't obtain a product," Kuo said. He said, however, that the MVA will ask the attorney general whether renewing motorists whose Social Security numbers are in the system can be exempted from providing the documentation.

Immigrants flooded radio stations and advocacy groups yesterday with anxious calls about the change. "It's only confusion," said Mario Quiroz-Servell³ⁿ, spokesman for CASA of **Maryland**, the state's largest **immigrant** advocacy group.

The phones at Wheaton's Radio Am^{3rica} 1540 AM were clogged all morning, said news director Samuel G. G^{3lvez}. Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery) and Prince George's County Council member William A. Campos (D-Hyattsville) went on the airwaves to explain the change and answer questions. Although many callers were dismayed by the measure and saw it as evidence of growing anti-Hispanic sentiment, others recognize that the system was being abused by out-of-state residents looking to obtain a **license** fraudulently, G^{3lvez} said.

His message to those who are undocumented and want **licenses** was simple: "Hurry up. I told them to put a rocket under their butts."

Armando Rodriguez, a 21-year-old from Honduras who rides the bus from Wheaton to his job as a mechanic at a gas station on Piney Branch Road, said he planned to do everything possible to try get a **license** before the window closed.

"The MVA requires a lot of paperwork, so I don't know if I'll have enough time," he said. "I need to find someone who can help me."

Would he drive **without** a **license** if he couldn't get one legally?

"I don't want to do that," he said. "It's scary driving **without** a **license**."

But **immigrants** trying to get a **license** fast will probably be out of luck. **No** further **appointment** slots will open before the law takes effect. "We don't have the resources or overtime to bring extra people in before June," Kuo said.

For some other **immigrant** drivers, the 2015 expiration date seemed sufficiently remote, given that advocates are hoping that the Obama administration will overhaul immigration policy in a way that creates a path to legal status.

"We bought some time," said Del. Kathleen M. Dumais (D-Montgomery), who worked on the compromise plan but wanted a longer grace period for **immigrant** drivers.

The bill also includes steep penalties for the fraud that has beset the system as other states have shut their doors to undocumented drivers: up to three years in jail and a \$2,500 fine. But many lawmakers who opposed allowing those with **licenses** to keep them are concerned that even the limited **license** will continue to make **Maryland** a magnet for fraud.

Advocates for **immigrants** predict that undocumented **immigrants** will continue to drive **without** insurance or training, making them a safety risk. In Annapolis, Williams Castillo said he will continue offering classes to the high school students and adults who attend his mostly Latino driving school on Chinquapin Round Road.

"Everybody's worried. It's very bad news," Castillo, an **immigrant** from Peru, said yesterday. "But I will still offer them classes, because I want safety for everybody."

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Others worry that the rush to obtain a license before June will lead to an increase in scams as dubious "consultants" offer to book MVA appointments in exchange for hundreds of dollars in fees, even if they're unable to secure the slots through the MVA's online system.

"There's a whole business dedicated to that," said Clinton resident Antonio Alem n, who volunteers at his church to provide information to other Spanish-speaking immigrants. He spent yesterday watching the local Univision station on TV, preparing for a barrage of questions after Sunday Mass.

What did he plan to say Sunday? "That there aren't going to be any more driver's licenses for those who don't have papers."

Staff research director Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

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