

# **An Entry Card for Immigrants; Illegal Residents Gain Access to U.S. Services With Mexico-Issued ID**

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## **Body**

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It wasn't hard for Hector and Uriel to sneak over the **U.S.** border recently. It wasn't hard for the two Mexicans to find work in Virginia's construction industry. But one thing has become harder for **illegal immigrants** since Sept. 11: getting an **ID**.

That's why the two friends joined scores of other **immigrants** last weekend at a fluorescent-lighted church hall in Charlottesville. There, Mexican diplomats were issuing a new, high-tech **ID** for Mexicans living in the **United States** -- a **card** that has quietly emerged as a key **U.S.** document for a huge group of **illegal immigrants**.

So far this year, the Mexican government has distributed about a half-million of the **cards**, known as matriculas consulares. In recent months, the **cards** have been recognized as official identification by nearly 200 **U.S.** police departments in such cities as Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston, according to the Mexican Embassy. Dozens of banks and city governments accept them. Now the **cards** are starting to appear in the Washington area.

Supporters say the **cards** help hardworking **immigrants** who must present an official photo **ID** for basic necessities, from cashing a check to registering a child for school. Obtaining such an **ID** has become much more difficult since Virginia and other states, reacting to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, stiffened requirements for issuing driver's licenses and other identification.

Critics, however, say the Mexican government is trying to issue credentials for its citizens here, undermining the **U.S.** identification system and aiding lawbreakers.

"It's part of a creeping amnesty," said Mark Krikorian, of the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington. "What we're seeing with **illegal immigrants** is a growing institutionalization of their status."

The consular **IDs** do not allow **immigrants** to live or work legally in the **United States**. But for the estimated 4.5 million undocumented Mexican **immigrants**, the **cards** are useful in other ways. Bank of America and Citibank recently decided to accept the **cards** to open accounts. Mexicans also have used the photo **IDs** -- which, unlike passports, include a local address and are wallet-size -- to do everything from buying beer to filing a police report.

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"We can cash our paychecks or do the paperwork to rent an apartment. That's what's so difficult," said Uriel, 22, who immigrated three months ago hoping to earn enough money to buy a house back in Mexico. He and other immigrants who were interviewed did not give their last names because of their illegal status.

The Mexican government has issued consular IDs for more than a century. But it was not until last summer, as state and local governments were grappling with the consequences of a swelling population of undocumented immigrants, that the cards' popularity began to grow.

One of the first agencies to support use of the matriculas was the police department in Austin, which was alarmed to find that half of its burglary victims were Latinos.

"We knew that one of the biggest reasons this community was getting robbed was because they carried huge amounts of money," said Assistant Police Chief Rudy Landeros. Many immigrants lacked the IDs to open bank accounts, he said. So Austin police helped persuade the Wells Fargo bank chain to accept the cards.

Use of the cards soon began to spread, especially after Sept. 11. The Mexican government, through its 45 U.S. consulates, increasingly has urged local officials and banks to accept the cards. "We want our compatriots to have an ID document . . . to distinguish those people who contribute to and live in this society from those who have other interests" such as terrorism, said Carlos Felix, who is in charge of immigrant issues at the Mexican Embassy.

In recent months, consulates have been overwhelmed by immigrants seeking the cards. About 488,000 were issued in the first half of this year -- a 76 percent increase from the same period in 2001, Felix said. Mexico has also stepped up a program of "mobile consulates" in which its diplomats travel to far-flung areas to provide the cards.

It was a mobile consulate that issued matriculas to Hector and Uriel in Charlottesville last weekend. They were among 200 immigrants who trooped to the parish center of a Catholic church, where Mexican diplomats had set up a makeshift office.

They included construction workers and restaurant cooks from Charlottesville, apple harvesters from Lovington and grape pickers from Virginia wineries. They form part of an ethnic Mexican population in Virginia that is relatively small but has doubled in a decade, to nearly 74,000, according to the Census Bureau.

Filomena, 35, a migrant farm worker, was so eager to get a matricula that she arrived at the church hall at 4:30 a.m. She hoped the document would help her cash the checks she received from her winter job picking oranges in Florida.

"They say that you can put money in a bank and save it" with the ID, said Filomena, who makes \$ 6 an hour and supports two children in Mexico. She hoped the card would eventually lead to bigger things, such as a driver's s license. However, Virginia does not accept the matricula to grant a driver's s license.

To get the ID cards, which incorporate anti-fraud features, each immigrant had to pay \$ 29 and present a birth certificate and an official Mexican photo ID.

The matriculas have perhaps had the greatest impact in allowing illegal immigrants into the U.S. banking system. Wells Fargo had opened 35,000 accounts based on the consular IDs through the end of March, the latest data available, said bank spokeswoman Miriam Galicia Duarte.

Some local governments have also decided the cards are useful and are permitting those who hold them to attend government meetings, check out library books and take advantage of other services.

For police, the cards make it easier to confirm the identities of victims and witnesses. "It's very critical in law enforcement to be able to verify who the person says he is," said Landeros, the assistant chief in Austin. He acknowledged that some citizens have criticized the authorities' acceptance of the card. However, he noted, enforcing immigration law is a federal responsibility.

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"Our response is, 'Hey, our job is to protect and serve regardless of a person's immigration status,' " he said, adding that police did not want **immigrants** to be afraid to report crimes. "It all boils down to public safety."

In the Washington area, the Mexican government has just begun to promote the **cards** and has approached Riggs Bank about accepting them, embassy officials said. About 30 Mexicans a day are requesting matriculas from the consulate here, the officials said.

Local authorities in the District, suburban Maryland and Northern Virginia said they had no policies yet on the matriculas. About 65,000 people of Mexican heritage live in the Washington area, a small but fast-growing community, according to the Census Bureau.

Sgt. Joe Gentile, a spokesman for D.C. police, noted that D.C. **residents** are not required to carry identification in public.

Many **immigrants** applying for the **cards** seemed eager to have a credential with a **U.S.** address, in case they are stopped as part of heightened security measures.

"You have to be more careful these days," said Hector, 34. "September 11 has hurt all of us."

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