

Maryland's ID Policy Won't Make Us Safer

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Body

On most matters related to illegal immigration, where you stand depends on whether you think we're being overrun by criminals or undermined by anti-foreigner hysteria.

The battle over driver's licenses in Maryland is different. There are people who deeply believe illegal immigrants are a threat to our way of life and who nonetheless support the notion that every driver on the road ought to be licensed.

After all, those of us who shell out big bucks for car insurance know that every unlicensed, uninsured driver is taking money out of our paychecks.

But **Maryland's** highways will soon gain tens of thousands of unlicensed motorists, thanks to an abrupt reversal by Gov. Martin O'Malley.

In the 2006 campaign, the governor won the Hispanic vote with appearances such as one at Casa de Maryland, the immigrant advocacy group in Takoma Park, where he told reporters that "I don't believe that at the state and local level that we should exacerbate the problem by enacting **policies** that put up . . . barriers to getting a driver's license or getting to and from work or home." Unlike the previous governor, who famously called multiculturalism "bunk," O'Malley seemed intent on embracing Hispanic immigrants, even if they arrived illegally.

So advocates such as Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery) and Kim Propeack, Casa's director of political action, accused O'Malley of a "betrayal" -- both women used the word -- when he announced last week that Maryland would no longer issue licenses to people who cannot prove they are here legally. As of 2010, when the federal Real **ID** law kicks into effect, even people who have long held Maryland licenses will be denied renewals.

"The governor did not keep his promise," Gutierrez says. "This is what he promised me when he was begging for my vote for the slots referendum, which I gave him. And that is the last time I do that."

It's not as if Maryland has had the welcome mat out for drivers who are here illegally. "I can walk in, apply for a license and get it that day," Propeack notes, "but what immigrants have to go through is extraordinary." The process is so cumbersome that an industry of facilitators has emerged, charging \$200 just to arrange an appointment with the motor vehicles office. "People are desperately trying to comply with the law," she says.

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You can just hear the anti-illegal-immigrant crowd answering that one with a crack about how, if they were so desperate to be legal, they wouldn't have crossed the border without documents.

But you won't hear O'Malley's minions say anything like that. Secretary of Transportation John Porcari tells me his staff indeed recommended a two-tiered license system by which illegal immigrants could continue to get a basic license while the rest of us got a Real-ID-compliant license -- the revved-up version that will become the coin of the realm, thanks to a congressional mandate that uses licenses as a national identity card.

Porcari says Maryland was forced to reject the two-tier system not because the governor is suffering from low popularity and wants to glom onto the anti-immigrant movement but because "the national landscape is shifting" and Maryland could have found itself nearly alone in resisting Real ID.

But seven states are refusing to comply with Real ID, and 17 have condemned the law, which was passed after the 9/11 attacks and requires states to conduct time-consuming identity checks. The D.C. Council passed a resolution last fall calling for repeal of the Real ID regulations; Virginia has set aside money to enforce the federal rules. Neither Virginia nor the District allows illegal immigrants to obtain driver's licenses.

Porcari says all Marylanders will face "a customer-service nightmare" when they try to renew licenses starting in 2010. The new licenses will be used as identification for boarding airplanes and entering federal buildings.

Gutierrez says O'Malley should have waited to see if the next president scraps Real ID. "The governor is responding to the anti-immigrant voices in the state," she says.

O'Malley recognizes that denying licenses to a chunk of the state's workforce creates considerable dangers, Porcari says. "Some people will drive with or without a license because their livelihood depends on it," he says. "That's an inevitable side result of turning our state driver's licenses, which are meant to be a safety tool, into a de facto national ID card. That's terrible public policy."

But Porcari says federal regulations leave no choice: "We're making the best of a bad situation." His advice: Renew your license in the next year or two, even if it's not expiring, well before Real ID takes effect.

Or hope the next president sees Real ID for what it is: a hysterical overreaction to 9/11 that sounds tough but offers little added security. Yes, many 9/11 hijackers had Virginia driver's licenses, but there's no reason to believe they wouldn't be able to get licenses even under Real ID's stringent rules: The terrorists were here legally.

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