

Attorney general: Electronic ID OK to apply for benefits

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Highlight: Official says law is vague, though. Worry is that illegal immigrants will abuse system.

Body

Prosecuting government officials for allowing public benefits applicants to submit copies of their identification electronically, under Georgia's new immigration law, wouldn't be proper, **Attorney General** Sam Olens said Tuesday in a letter.

At the same time, the Republican said the law is ambiguous. Olens indicated he would hold this position unless the Legislature changes the law or a court construes it differently. The overall intent is to block illegal immigrants from obtaining taxpayer-funded benefits for which they are not entitled.

In his letter, Olens said he did not "believe it would be appropriate to prosecute an enforcement action against any person for accepting, relying upon, or using electronically transmitted copies of secure and verifiable documents when such person acts in good faith and complies" with the law.

Olens' letter, however, did not address the potential for fraud in this process. Critics say people can easily submit phony documents over websites and by email.

The **attorney general** issued his letter in response to questions the author of the law, Republican state Rep. Matt Ramsey of Peachtree City, raised last week. At issue is a part of House Bill 87 that requires people **applying for benefits** --- such as grants, loans and business licenses --- to show "secure and verifiable" identification, such as a driver's license.

That requirement doesn't take effect until Jan. 1, but city and county government officials raised numerous questions in recent weeks. The Association County Commissioners of Georgia and Georgia Municipal Association met with Olens and his staff last week and asked for guidance.

Among the concerns is this: Must people show their identification in person each time they **apply for benefits**? Or can they submit copies of their identification online or send copies by email to government officials?

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If not, officials worried the new law could overwhelm their offices and create additional expense and hassle for the public. They issue tens of thousands of business licenses electronically and by mail, and said they could envision long lines of people, identification in hand, routinely streaming into city and county offices statewide.

Ramsey pointed to a provision included in the law to make it possible for governments to accept identification electronically.

"I am pleased that our intention is going to get carried out, and that documents can be filed electronically and that governments do have that latitude to make it as taxpayer- and citizen-friendly as possible," Ramsey said.

Clint Mueller, the ACCG's legislative director, said his organization will push during the next legislative session to make the law more clear.

"It is something that needs to be fixed in the law before somebody challenges it and it goes to court," Mueller said, "because once we get a court ruling, then we will be forced to abide by whatever ruling comes out."

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