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ID law creates rush for licenses

Long lines form to beat April 1 deadline

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Twenty minutes before the Division of Motor Vehicles Center at 2701 S. Chase Ave. opened at 7:30 one recent morning, a line was forming. By the time the doors opened, the 25 or so in line rushed to form a new queue at the windows.

In Milwaukee, as in other parts of the state, a stream of illegal immigrants is dashing to get Wisconsin identification cards and driver's licenses before April 1, when a new state law will require proof of legal residency in the United States to get them. Wisconsin has been one of only about 10 states that does not require such proof to get a state ID or driver's license.

The new state law is to prepare Wisconsin to comply with the federal Real ID legislation that requires states to meet national identification standards by May 2008 to help combat terrorism. The Wisconsin provision was introduced by state Sen. Joe Leibham (R-Sheboygan), who called it "an issue of national security." Opponents argued it would lead to more unlicensed drivers.

Holding a steaming cup of coffee at the DMV, Griselda Martin, 28, and her husband, Antonio, 32, a construction worker, said they were hoping to get in under the wire and get licenses before April 1.

"We're all getting in line," she said, smiling. "But you need an appointment (for the driving test), and there's too many people waiting. I don't know if we will get an appointment. But what are you going to do? People won't stop driving, but getting stopped will be a big worry."

Gary Guenther, director of the Bureau of Field Services for the DMV, said part of the recent backup in getting road tests could be attributed to more immigrants trying to get in under the April 1 deadline. But it's also compounded by vacancies, training of new testers and more adults needing multiple exams to pass the driving test, often because they didn't take driver's education, he said.

The road test appointment system is computerized, so a person can go online and find where appointments at

97 sites around the state are available up to 11 weeks in advance, he said. But he noted it might be harder for someone to pass a road test in an area where they're not familiar with the streets or traffic patterns.

"A lot of our appointments right now are getting full and . . . it will be tough to get an appointment," he said. But, he added, it's a dynamic system, and if someone cancels, an opening will pop up.

About 3 million people in the state hold driver's licenses and about a million have state identification cards, Guenther said.

When Real ID goes into effect, an identification card or driver's license will be required for boarding an airplane or entering a federal building. U.S. Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Menomonee Falls), who sponsored the Real ID legislation, said it did not try to set state policy for who may or may not drive a car but addressed the use of a driver's licenses as a form of identification to a federal official.

"American citizens have the right to know who is in their country, that the people are who they say they are, and that the name on a driver's license is the holder's real name, not an alias," he said during debate on the measure.

Christine Neumann- Ortiz, director of Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant workers group, said her office has been flooded with calls in the last three months from people trying to beat the April 1 deadline.

"We know of people who have gone up north five to six hours away to find a driver's license appointment," she said. She said most illegal immigrants don't have access to the online appointment system.

"The tragedy is that many have to pick up their kids or go to work, and they will be driving without a license, which will put them at risk for further prosecution for having to do this," she said.

"This will further criminalize working people, hurt the local economy and create a divisive atmosphere and lead to more racial profiling," she said.

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