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Renewing license may require vast patience

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Ever since she was born 70 years ago in New York, Alice Edelman never had any trouble proving that she is who she says she is.

Until she received a notice from Florida's Department of Motor Vehicles to renew her driver's license in person. To comply with the state's strict identity requirements, she recently had to rummage deep into her remote past to find a pile of documents -- her original birth certificate, Social Security card, marriage certificate, and so forth.

When she arrived at the DMV office in Plantation, she was also asked to present proof of her physical residence address. "My driver's license proves it," she told them. No, they wanted either a utility bill bearing her name and address, a mortgage statement, tax forms or a deed. She didn't have them. In fact, those bills come in her husband's name. She left the DMV empty-handed.

"They made me feel as if I were guilty of something and had to prove my innocence," said Edelman, who moved to Florida in 1970 and is considered by the state a safe driver. "The government always looks for creative ways to make our lives even more complicated."

Since early this year, based on national-security concerns, Florida has implemented a cumbersome process to obtain and renew a driver's license or state ID card. This is driving law-abiding U.S.-born and naturalized citizens nuts, as well as legal immigrants.

The DMV states on its website that "the changes strengthen our ability to verify an applicant's identity and legal presence as we continue to protect our citizens and visitors while improving domestic security."

SAFE UNTIL 2012

Last week I visited the DMV office at 7900 NW 27th Ave. in Miami-Dade, and I thanked God -- repeatedly -- because my license does not expire until 2012.

The atmosphere was totally chaotic. People were outraged and frustrated. Employees had an arrogant attitude. You had to muster a lot of patience or, if it was your second or third visit, you had to summon an overdose of patience and tolerance.

Nina Brown, 29, did not have a birth certificate or a passport to prove her full identity.

"I've never had a passport because I've always lived in Florida and have never traveled farther than Georgia," said Brown, who is eight months pregnant and still had to stand in line for hours. "I've never needed a birth certificate because I was born here. They want to drive you crazy."

Legislators rolled out the tough requirements because Congress passed the Real ID Act in 2005 to create more-secure licenses in an effort to deter terrorist attacks and illegal immigration.

I have no doubt that protecting national security should be the government's No. 1 priority. But in addition of keeping away terrorists and undocumented people, these rules are scaring away Florida motorists. That is why many drivers are being forced to drive without licenses, or with expired licenses and no insurance, compromising our roads' safety.

The law should have been called *Real Bureaucracy*, because it means longer lines, slower service, repeat trips and more paperwork.

Not only are we turning the DMV into a law-enforcement agency of sorts, but the new system takes a bigger bite out of taxpayers' wallets. The renewal fee for a Florida Class E (noncommercial) driver's licenses rose from \$20 to \$48 last September.

And let's not forget the Big Brother aspect that propels us toward a surveillance society or the threat of identity theft that these centralized databases foster.

One of the more frequent problems experienced by low-income people who live in rented rooms or with their families is that they have no way to prove their residential address.

"This complicates our existence," said Mauricio Mujica, 40, last week during his third visit to the DMV.

DRIVERS' RESPONSIBILITY

Drivers need to take responsibility, too, and do their homework. They should find out exactly what paperwork to bring, and make an appointment several weeks in advance.

Kenneth Burch, a 65-year-old retired Army sergeant who served in Vietnam, had brought his military ID, which shows his Social Security number and date of birth. He waited in line 4 ½ hours and was sent home because the DMV wanted to see his original Social Security card.

"We have to fight the system," Burch said.

"They could do a better job to make our lives easier, especially if you have fought to defend this country."

To find out exactly what you need to bring to the DMV, visit <http://gathergoget.com>.