

Commentary

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Leticia Van de Putte: If Homeland Security listens to the experts, Real ID will work

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Do as we say, not as we do. That's the message from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

When Congress enacted the Real ID Act in 2005 to create national standards for strengthening the security of drivers' licenses, it asked Homeland Security to come up with rules to implement the law. For nearly two years, Homeland Security dragged its feet.

The law requires the reissuance of more than 245 million licenses, and legislators are only now learning what they'll be implementing.

State legislators are committed to strengthening the security of the license-issuance process. The problem is the vehicle with which the federal government has chosen to do so.

Shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, state lawmakers went to work strengthening the security of licenses.

But that all came to a screeching halt when Congress enacted and the president signed the Real ID Act. Since then, license security has been in limbo as states have awaited the implementing regulations.

The Real ID Act is the federal government's attempt to create national standards for state drivers' licenses and identification cards. The law requires consumers to visit their local motor vehicle agency and prove they are who they say they are. The authenticity of each identifying document must be verified through a national database.

Real ID was enacted without so much as a public hearing and without any consideration as to the costs, technology and manpower required. An analysis last year suggested states will be forced to spend at least \$11 billion collectively over five years to comply.

Now, despite Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff's recent assertion that the cost estimates were overstated, Homeland Security's economists estimate the cost to be \$23 billion.

The regulations represented an opportunity for Homeland Security to make a well-

intentioned but ill-conceived law much stronger. The drivers' license policy experts — state officials — couldn't have made this easier. State officials offered realistic recommendations that would save consumers money and provide for a secure process.

Of course, chief among the recommendations was a request to fully fund the law. Apparently, the federal government's plan is for states to pass the costs to consumers. This means that, by several estimates, some folks will pay more than \$100 to renew their licenses. Coupled with the additional time in line, that makes for a big headache.

The department suggested states use precious resources from their federal homeland security grants. Of course, the problem is that if states redirect this money, then their first responders will wind up losing the few, precious resources they have. And perhaps they were hoping state legislators wouldn't notice these grants have been reduced over the past five years.

States also asked for the ability to provide exemptions for individuals who've already been vetted by the federal government. People who have a security clearance, passport or military ID or in some other way have had their identity verified shouldn't need to go through the process again. Exempting these 70 million-plus individuals would save states a great deal of time and money and in no way would compromise the process.

Other recommendations would have eased the impact on state resources. Extending the re-enrollment period from five years to 10 provides a more realistic time frame for the issuance of a quarter-billion drivers' licenses. Creating universal terms for records would greatly ease the process of allowing data to reconcile from one database to another. And allowing states to employ proven, and often less expensive, security technologies eliminates the risks of using unproven technologies.

But the Department of Homeland Security wasted a golden opportunity to strengthen the security of drivers' licenses.

State officials can and will make the Real ID Act work. We have many friends in Congress who are willing to listen and realize that perhaps they acted in haste. State legislators look forward to working with their Washington counterparts to strengthen the security of state-issued drivers' licenses while not breaking our budgets.

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