

Roots of Real ID Act Reach to Post-September 11 New York

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The Real ID Act, which cleared the House yesterday as part of a spending bill, may have been sponsored by a Wisconsin representative, but creating a national standard for secure driver's licenses has its roots right here in New York.

The Coalition for a Secure Driver's License, established in 2002 to remedy the security lapses in identification that facilitated the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, is based in SoHo. All 19 of the September 11 hijackers had driver's licenses or other state-issued identification, which they used to board the planes they eventually crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an empty field in Pennsylvania. Many of the hijackers had multiple fraudulent licenses. The most notorious of the group, Mohammed Atta, had eight.

As a result, the 9/11 commission and others pushed for stricter nationwide guidelines for driver's licenses. The Real ID Act would impose national standards for driver's-license applications, requiring multiple identification documents before states could issue ID cards. The measure would also prohibit issuance of licenses to illegal immigrants.

The provisions of Real ID passed the House last week by a margin of 261 to 161. The emergency appropriations bill for military spending in Iraq and Afghanistan, into which the Real ID provisions were folded, passed the House yesterday by a vote of 368 to 58. The bill is expected to pass the Senate next week.

The legislative developments are the fruit, in part, of the community activism of Henry Buhl, chairman and founder of the coalition. Mr. Buhl is a philanthropist and photographer whose expansive studio on Greene Street serves as the coalition's headquarters. As he was working on September 11, about a mile from ground zero, Mr. Buhl said, the smoke from the World Trade Center's collapse reached his offices and he witnessed first hand the devastation a porous system for issuing driver's licenses in a state 1,000 miles away could wreak so close to home.

The president of the coalition, Amanda Bowman, who is also the New York director of the Center for Security Policy, said the former was a response at the citizen level, by Mr. Buhl and the organization's 300 active members, to urging from leaders such as President Bush and Mayor Giuliani that citizens get involved in the "home-front effort" in the war on terror. Instead of just spending more money and going to Broadway shows, she said -

as New Yorkers were told to do to help rehabilitate the city's economy - members of the coalition aspired to reduce the likelihood of attacks happening again.

So the activists began by attending and testifying at state legislative hearings across the country to push for stricter licensing guidelines. Group members met with individual legislators and pledged to hold them personally responsible if a license issued in their state was used to carry out another terrorist attack in New York or anywhere else in the country - a persuasion technique Mr. Buhl said he found effective, especially with states where terrorism seems a more distant threat.

"But we're only as secure as our weakest state," Mr. Buhl said in his studio Wednesday, pointing out that licenses obtained in relatively permissive states such as Virginia, Florida, and New Jersey allowed the hijackers to board planes in Massachusetts - and kill thousands of people in New York.

Some of those states tightened their requirements for receiving driver's licenses in the aftermath of September 11, partly in response to the education and lobbying efforts of the coalition. Simultaneously, however, other states decided to make their license-issuing requirements even more lax after the terrorist attacks, Mr. Buhl said. One coalition member compared the effort to achieve state-by-state reforms to "herding cats."

The difficulties were compounded by the "surprising ferocity" of the opposition in many states to more secure licenses, Ms. Bowman said. That was true in New York, which the coalition ranks as one of the states most cautious in issuing driver's licenses.

The New York Department of Motor Vehicles verifies Social Security numbers when it issues licenses, is reviewing and verifying licenses and Social Security numbers already on file, and requires agency supervisors to conduct random spot-checks of the documents presented by license applicants, providing a disincentive for bribery and corruption among rank-and-file employees. As a result of these efforts, the motor-vehicles commissioner, Ray Martinez, said, the department has found roughly 100,000 New Yorkers whose Social Security numbers were used without their knowledge to obtain driver's licenses.

Those measures, implemented following September 11, earned Mr. Martinez fierce opposition, from groups ranging from the immigrant lobby to organized labor to the American Civil Liberties Union to the Communist Party of America, Ms. Bowman said.

She said, however, that part of the coalition's effectiveness was steering clear of the immigration issue. Herself an immigrant from Great Britain, Ms. Bowman said the group's only concern was security. Even though opponents of Real ID had often tried to bait the organization into debating immigration law, she said, the coalition had remained committed to framing the driver's-license issue as part of the war on terror - not a war on immigrants.

When opponents demonstrated outside the governor's offices in Manhattan last December, however, the coalition for a Secure Driver's License waged a counter protest in support of the DMV commissioner and Governor Pataki. That kind of backing, Mr. Martinez told The New York Sun this week, was "certainly helpful to me, because I was in the hot seat" over the increased security measures.

When members of the coalition showed up at hearings, their support was useful - especially the support of coalition members who had lost loved ones in the terrorist attacks.

"To have people directly involved there, who were really the victims of weaknesses in the system, so I could speak the truth," was "absolutely helpful," Mr. Martinez said of the September 11 families involved in the coalition.

Still, for every New York, the coalition encountered a Tennessee, New Mexico, or Maine, which "really showed contempt for those who died on 9/11" by making their licensing standards "criminally lax" despite the attacks, one of the coalition's board members, Peter Gadiel, said.

Mr. Gadiel is also president of 9/11 Families for a Secure America. His son, James, was an assistant trader at Cantor Fitzgerald and died in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, at age 23.

When it became evident that leaving driver's-license security to the states would not result in uniform, acceptable application standards, Mr. Gadiel spearheaded the coalition's effort to bring about federal legislation, an effort bolstered by the 9/11 commission's support of the measure.

Mr. Gadiel and other coalition members, including the group's Washington-based executive director, Colleen Gilbert, lobbied several congressmen, and the sponsor of the Real ID Act in the House, Republican James Sensenbrenner, in whom the group found an important ally. A spokesman for Mr. Sensenbrenner, Jeff Lungren, said the coalition has been "extremely helpful" and has done "a very valuable service as far as providing information on what the states are doing."

Attempts to meet with the Senate, however, were less fruitful. Mr. Gadiel expressed particular displeasure with New York's Senators Schumer and Clinton. He said both senators refused on several occasions to meet with him and his cohort of September 11 families.

One of the coalition's most effective strategies was a targeted advertising campaign. In March, the coalition retained the firm of Stevens Reed Curcio and Potholm, responsible for the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ad campaign during last year's presidential campaign, to produce a 60-second television ad, which has been running in the Washington area since March.

The coalition has also conducted outreach programs in the states with the laxest licensing procedures.

Although the success of these efforts on the federal front now seems all but certain, the coalition's leaders recognize that much work remains.

One worry, Ms. Bowman said, is about compromises Republicans may have made on other national-security issues to push Real ID through.

Furthermore, the ultimate effectiveness of Real ID depends on the willingness of states to tighten standards, Ms. Bowman said. "We regard this not as a ceiling, but as a floor," she said. "We'll keep the states' feet to the fire."

That pressure, Ms. Bowman said, will mostly come in the form it already has: educating citizens about the perils of weak license requirements, especially in states resistant to the changes.

"Montana has already said they don't care what Congress does," Ms. Bowman said. So the group, she explained, will probably erect billboards aimed at convincing Montana drivers of the dangers of not supporting Real ID.

What will be on those billboards?

An image the group has found particularly effective in drumming up support for Real ID, Ms. Bowman said.

"We'll probably use an picture of Mohammed Atta's driver's license," Ms. Bowman said. "A picture is worth a thousand words."

May 6, 2005 Edition > Section: [National](#) > Printer-Friendly Version