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Deadline in Depth

States Must Tighten Driver's-License Loopholes to Help Prevent Terrorist Attacks, Group Says

By Chimene Williams

NEW YORK, Mar. 29—Holding up pictures of their loved ones, family members of those who died in the World Trade Center attack today demanded nationwide changes to the way states create and administer driver's licenses.

"Simply put, the driver's license has become the de facto identification card in the United States," said Michelle Bouchard, president of the Coalition for a Secure Driver's License, a nonprofit organization that seeks to make it tougher for driver's licenses to be stolen or faked. She spoke at a press conference at the Millennium Hotel, overlooking Ground Zero.

"I can look out of this window and I can see the spot where my son's body was found," said Joan Molinaro, a Staten Island woman who demanded that states toughen their rules granting driver's licenses. "I look at that hole out there, as big as it is, it's not as big as the hole in my heart."

Most of the hijackers in the 2001 attack carried legal driver's licenses from Virginia, Florida and New Jersey, even though they were in the country unlawfully and shouldn't have been able to obtain the licenses.

The coalition today released a color-coded map of the United States, which borrowed from the Department of Homeland Security's threat-assessment code to rank the security of each state's licensing process: green to represent low-risk states; blue for guarded-risk states; yellow for elevated risk; orange for high-risk; and red for severe-risk.

The organization wants every state to adopt four standards for issuing driver's licenses: an applicant must show proof that he or she lives in the United States, the expiration of the driver's license should be tied to the expiration of a visa; licenses must be tamper-proof; and the documents collected as proof of identity and address can be cross-checked with other agencies. Bouchard said a state-issued birth certificate should be required for identification instead of one issued by a hospital.

Those states that meet the above criterion qualify as low-risk and include: Arizona, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, South Carolina, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming. Florida, Virginia and New Jersey, which have changed their licensing requirements since the attacks, also qualified as low risk.

According to the organization those states at the severe-risk level include: Hawaii, Illinois, Michigan, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin.

The problem is these states do not require a person to prove legal residence in the United States nor does the license expire when the visa expires.

"Once they [terrorists] get into this country there should be no way for them to get a driver's license," said Peter Gadiel, a Connecticut resident whose son died in the World Trade Center attacks. "Passports mark you as different. The first thing the terrorists did when they got into this country was to get a driver's license." He said states should stop helping terrorists by closing the loopholes.

Bouchard said each state needs to make the changes to make driver's licenses tougher to copy and hopes that every state will rise to the green level. She praised New Jersey, Florida and Virginia's efforts for tightening their licensing requirements. New Jersey now requires a photo on its license as well as requiring three forms of identification instead of just one, while non-citizens must provide a passport and an alien registration card.

"Another 9-11 cannot happen again. If the changes aren't made, it will," Molinaro said. "You won't want to walk in my shoes."

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