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Driver's License a Vehicle for Terrorism

By Erin Walsh, Daily News, New York Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News

Mar. 30 - For would-be terrorists, a driver's license can be a license to kill.

And getting one is far too easy in 11 states, according to a survey released yesterday by a group urging states to close licensing loopholes.

"My son is dead because of driver's licenses," said Peter Gadiel of the Coalition for a Secure Driver's License, whose 23-year-old son, James, died in the World Trade Center Sept. 11, 2001.

According to the coalition, 15 of the 19 terrorists on Sept. 11 were able to legally obtain a total of 63 driver's licenses.

Among the group's top recommendations:

The 11 "code red" states that have the loopholes should begin accepting only secure forms of identification -- Social Security cards, visas or immigration papers -- to issue a license.

Licenses should be valid only until a visa expires.

Licenses should not be easily replicated.

New York is not among the states cited as having lax standards and is commended for its "low risk" in the report.

But the security advocates stressed that state lines are invisible to terrorists and the country is "only as strong as its weakest link."

"The driver's license has become the de facto identification card in the United States," said Michelle Bouchard, a spokeswoman. "It is a powerful tool that opens the door to places we must not allow terrorists to enter."

States with the least secure licensing laws are Hawaii, Illinois, Michigan, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin, according to the survey.

After Sept. 11, New York began requiring Social Security numbers with all license requests, or proof the applicant is not eligible for a card. The Department of Motor Vehicles verifies the numbers with the Social Security Administration, according to spokesman Joe Picchi.

Licenses for non-U.S. residents indicate they are temporary visitors, Picchi said.

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