

Real ID Deadline Delayed Until Late 2021 Because of Coronavirus

The original enforcement date was set for Oct. 1, 2020, but the federal, state and local response to the pandemic warranted a delay, according to the Department of Homeland Security.



A Department of Motor Vehicles office in Glendale, Calif., last week. Americans have been unable to apply for the new Real ID because of office closures in several states. Credit...Sarah Reingewirtz / The Orange County Register, via Associated Press

By Derrick Bryson Taylor

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The Department of Homeland Security has extended the deadline for Real ID enforcement by 12 months because of the Covid-19 pandemic, postponing an already delayed government requirement for enhanced identification to board domestic flights.

The new deadline is Oct. 1, 2021, one year from the previous date, Chad Wolf, acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, said in a statement on Thursday.

“The federal, state and local response to the spread of the coronavirus here in the United States necessitates a delay in this deadline,” Mr. Wolf said. “Our state and local partners are working tirelessly with the administration to flatten the curve and, therefore, we want to remove any impediments to response and recovery efforts.”

The extended deadline will also allow the department to work with Congress to carry out needed changes to expedite the issue of Real IDs, he said.

The virus's spread in the United States, where there are more than 1,000 deaths and at least 85,000 cases reported, has prompted states across the country to temporarily close or restrict access to motor vehicle offices, Mr. Wolf said.

On Thursday, California's Department of Motor Vehicles announced that it would close all of its more than 170 field offices starting Friday.

Offices in New York, whose more than 38,000 coronavirus cases are by far the most reported in any state, closed on March 21 at the direction of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo. Offices in Virginia, Texas and Florida also closed their doors to the public last week, delaying for millions any chance to apply for a Real ID.

However, this week, driver-licensing offices in Washington State began allowing appointment-only visits for transactions that cannot be done online, over the phone or by mail.

The coronavirus outbreak is only the latest hurdle facing the Real ID nationwide rollout. In addition to long lines at D.M.V. offices, a July 2019 survey conducted for a travel industry group said most Americans did not have or were confused about Real ID.

The Real ID Act was passed by Congress in 2005 to increase security measures for state-issued personal identification cards, mainly driver's licenses, that can be used to access airports, military bases and nuclear installations. The law was one of several steps taken by the federal government to strengthen identification procedures after Sept. 11, 2001, in part because some of the 9/11 hijackers had obtained driver's licenses based on bogus documentation.

In order to receive a Real ID-compliant license, the Department of Homeland Security requires people to provide documentation showing their full legal name, date of birth, Social Security number, two proofs of address of principal residence and lawful status. Some states may require additional information.

Since the act was announced, some groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union of New York, have expressed concerns. The organization said the act could force hundreds of thousands of immigrants to lose their driver's licenses because of errors made by D.M.V. agents who are required to sort through complex immigration laws.

The rollout has been delayed many times over the years after some states complained that the original deadline of 2008 was unreasonable.

Tori Emerson Barnes, an executive vice president at the U.S. Travel Association, a nonprofit representing the travel industry, said that according to the organization's research, as many as 79 million Americans are not Real ID-compliant.

"Right now, we are obviously suffering major, catastrophic damage within the travel and tourism industry as a result of the public health crisis, Covid-19," Ms. Barnes said on Friday.

The travel association praised the decision to extend the deadline, but said another extension may be required.

"We need to recover from the public health crisis and so we should consider where we are economically next year — that Real ID may have to be further delayed because we don't need to do anything that would prevent folks from traveling once you get the all-clear," Ms. Barnes said.