

Massachusetts Immigrant Driver's License Law Credited With Surge In New Applications

By Alison Kuznitz
State House News Service

More than 128,000 newly licensed drivers were on Massachusetts roads in the past year, and officials linked the surge to the one-year anniversary of a law allowing undocumented immigrants to apply for licenses.

The Registry of Motor Vehicles said Monday it has issued 183,825 new learner's permits and 128,079 new driver's licenses since the so-called Work and Family Mobility Act (WFMA) took effect last July 1.

It's not clear exactly how many of those permits and licenses went to undocumented immigrants who until last year were not eligible, but the volume shows a significant uptick that officials attributed to the law.

RMV officials said they issued 161 percent more learner's permits and 132 percent more driver's licenses over the past year compared to the same time period from 2022 to 2023. The volume of new licenses includes roughly 54,238 out-of-state license conversions, the RMV said.

"As we mark the anniversary, we celebrate positive results and hope to reach even more individuals that are eligible for a driver's license in Massachusetts, (and) to make sure sure that they know how to start the journey and complete the journey," Registrar of Motor Vehicles Colleen Ogilvie said during a press conference outside the State House Monday

afternoon, which featured translation of all English remarks into Spanish and Portuguese.

“Work and Family Mobility has been life-changing for so many residents to take children to the doctor’s, to visit family members, to do their grocery shopping and visit friends,” Ogilvie continued. “It’s been such an important part of their communities, and we are so thankful for the successful implementation.”

Massachusetts residents who do not have lawful presence in the United States can apply for and obtain driver’s licenses, which RMV officials say look exactly like licenses for all other Bay Staters. The law enables the RMV to accept more documents that prove people’s identity and date of birth, including a foreign passport, consular identification document, a foreign national ID card and a foreign driver’s license.

Nayeli Gonzalez, a 23-year-old Boston resident born in El Salvador, said she’d been dreaming of getting her driver’s license since age 16. While her dream seemed out of reach for years, Gonzalez said that all changed with the WFMA.

Gonzalez said finally getting her driver’s license gave her a sense of freedom and security that she had “never experienced before.”

“Most importantly, this law has also created a more connected and supportive society,” she said. “I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to the lawmakers, advocates and community members who worked tirelessly to make this act a reality.”

Sens. Brendan Crighton and Jamie Eldridge, and Reps. Christine Barber and Vanna Howard attended Monday’s event, alongside activists who reflected on the yearslong effort to get the WFMA signed into law, as well as the administrative obstacles to broadening access to driver’s licenses and language

interpretation services. Crighton praised the Driving Families Forward Coalition for advocating for the bill and elevating the voices of Bay Staters who are now benefiting from its passage.

"We got it done, and that's because of all of you, and all the families who had the courage to step up," Crighton told supporters. "Happy anniversary."

Proponents of the WFMA say the road safety bill allows immigrants to drive to their jobs and doctor's appointments, and carry out other day-to-day necessities, without fearing the consequences of being pulled over by law enforcement.

Former Republican Gov. Charlie Baker vetoed the legislation, which lawmakers later overrode, and warned at the time that the RMV "does not have the expertise or ability to verify the validity of many types of documents from other countries." Opponents of the WFMA also raised concerns about possible voter fraud.

Republican organizers, including former GOP gubernatorial hopeful Geoff Diehl, pursued a ballot question to repeal the law, but voters in November 2022 allowed the law to take effect.

Permit tests are now offered in 35 languages, and the RMV said phone and in-person help is available in more than 100 languages. To keep up with demand spurred by the WFMA, the RMV said it hired 250 new employees, extended weekday service hours and offered appointments on Saturdays, and opened additional road test locations in Holyoke, Revere, Cambridge, Franklin, Worcester and Brockton.

"The Work and Family Mobility Act has made our roads safer, our economy stronger, and improved the quality of life for thousands of our residents," Gov. Maura Healey said in a statement. "I'm grateful for the hard work of our RMV employees to make the first year of implementation such [a]

success, as well as for the advocates, elected officials and public safety leaders who made it possible for us to get here.”

Roldys Leal, who is from Cuba and lives in Northampton, said he got his driver’s license two months ago, a day that he described as happy and emotional.

“My primary motivation in getting a driver’s license was to have an official document that would give me security and minimize the risks of being undocumented in this country. Beyond that, having a license gives me an immense feeling of freedom,” he said.

Ogilvie said the RMV is not sure how many new driver’s licenses to expect in the next year, though she said officials have seen a “second wave of interest.”

“There were certain community-based groups that hadn’t come forward because I know it was a fear of being sure that we weren’t reporting people to federal immigration,” Ogilvie said. “But we’re here to say it is a safe and reliable process.”