



NM LICENSE DATA SUGGESTS FRAUD AS DUPLICATE ADDRESSES USED BY IMMIGRANTS

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SANTA FE, N.M. – An Associated Press investigation has found that addresses of dozens of the same businesses and homes across New Mexico were used over and over again by people to get driver's licenses in a pattern that suggests potential fraud by immigrants trying to game the system.

In one instance, 48 foreign nationals claimed to live at a smoke shop in Albuquerque to get a license. In another case, more than a dozen claimed to live at an automotive repair shop over a one-year period. The scenario has been repeated at other addresses since New Mexico changed its law in 2003 to allow illegal immigrants to get the same driver's license as a U.S. citizen – one of just two states allowing that.

Republican Gov. Susana Martinez is pressing the Legislature to scrap the law because of public safety concerns about widespread fraud. She contends New Mexico has become a magnet for out-of-state immigrants seeking a license, which can be used to board airplanes, conduct financial transactions or get another license in some other state. The governor's proposal will be considered by a legislative committee on Thursday.

Having an address in New Mexico is a critical part of getting a license. Applicants without a Social Security number must prove their identity with multiple documents such as a passport or notarized English translation of a foreign birth certificate. They also must show New Mexico residency with other documents, including property lease agreements, utility bills and bank statements. Of the more than 90,000 licenses issued so far to foreign nationals, it's impossible to know how many are illegal immigrants because the state doesn't ask a person's immigration status.

The AP analyzed license data since 2003 and found a striking pattern at addresses across the state that suggests the license system is being abused.

Seventeen people with different last names used a car repair shop's address in Albuquerque for licenses during nine months in 2007; only four additional licenses were issued to people using that same address in 2008 and 2009.

Thirty-one people listed a mobile home address in Albuquerque to obtain licenses over 29 months and sometimes the licenses came in quick succession. One a week was issued on average at that address during a two-month stretch at the end of 2008. But no additional licenses have been issued since then.

Those claiming the smoke shop address as their legal residence in New Mexico obtained licenses from May 2005 through 2010. Only two of the four dozen individuals had the same last name – making it highly unlikely that they were part of the same family. Critics say it's obvious what is happening.

"This is yet another sign of how New Mexico's driver's license has been compromised and is not secure," said Scott Darnell, a spokesman for Martinez. "When business addresses are being used as residential addresses by a large number of foreign nationals for the purpose of obtaining a driver's license, it's highly concerning and it points to the presence of fraud that has persisted in this program for some time."

Supporters of the current policy say the government can crack down on fraud without repealing the law and hurting immigrants who are working and raising families in New Mexico. They argue licenses bring a vital benefit to the state and make New Mexico a safer place.

"Many of these folks have U.S. citizen children who depend on their parents' ability to drive them around legally, be insured, register their vehicle, have an identification for purposes of picking up medication for their kids," said Marcela Diaz, executive director of Somos un Pueblo Unido, an immigrant rights group in Santa Fe. "These driver's licenses are a good thing not just for our community but a good thing for the state."

The licensing patterns found by the AP don't conclusively prove fraud – tenant turnover in rental property, for example, could account for some licenses. And there can be legitimate reasons for multiple licenses to be issued at the same address. Fifty-six licenses went to an address in Alamogordo that state officials say is housing at Holloman Air Force Base used by foreign military personnel stationed there.

But the broader pattern raised enough questions for the Martinez administration to send investigators to knock on doors and check on dozens of addresses that were used repeatedly for licenses.

Investigators found at least one person at an address with "first-hand knowledge" that the location had been used purposely to help immigrants get driver's licenses, according to Darnell. That case is still open.

In another instance, investigators couldn't find an Albuquerque area address used by 17 people for licenses. The closest location to the fictitious address was a scrap yard, which had no home on the property.

New Mexico and Washington are the only states that allow illegal immigrants to obtain a driver's license. Utah grants immigrants a special driving permit that cannot be used as identification.

In New Mexico, repeal of the immigrant license issue became a hot-button political topic when Martinez – a former prosecutor – made it a centerpiece of her 2010 campaign for governor and it remains an emotional issue in this year's legislative session.

The AP requested the license data to try to determine whether there was evidence to back up Martinez administration claims of fraud in the immigrant license system.

There are 170 addresses in New Mexico at which 10 or more licenses have been issued to different foreign nationals from 2003 through August 2011, according to the AP analysis. The addresses account for 2,662 licenses – representing nearly 3 percent of the total issued to foreign nationals during that period. Those are licenses issued to individuals for the first time and do not include renewals.

Albuquerque, the state's largest city, accounts for most of those addresses but others are scattered across the state in communities from Santa Fe and Portales to Farmington and Gallup.

Topping the list was a case familiar to investigators and prosecutors. The state granted 66 licenses to foreign nationals who used the residential address of an Albuquerque woman from 2004 to 2009. She's in prison after pleading guilty in 2010 to felonies for providing fraudulent residency documents to illegal immigrants to obtain driver licenses. All of those licenses have been canceled.

An aging computer system does not permit the Motor Vehicle Division to detect automatically when multiple licenses are issued at the same address, agency officials say. However, the state has beefed up its scrutiny of applications from foreign nationals.

Since May 2008, agency investigators review all applications for possible fraud and criminal charges have been brought in what state officials describe as organized fraud rings that obtained driver's licenses for foreign nationals from China, Poland, Mexico and other countries.

Martinez points to those abuses as a reason why New Mexico should no longer issue licenses to illegal immigrants. But her proposal failed last year in the Senate after passing the House. Democrats hold majorities in both chambers.

Despite rejecting a Martinez-backed measure, the Senate approved what Democratic leaders called a compromise. It would have toughened penalties for license fraud, required fingerprinting of immigrants applying for licenses and canceled all previously issued licenses to foreign nationals who didn't renew them within two years. The governor opposed the alternative proposal, however.