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GEORGIA LAW REQUIRING PROOF OF LEGAL RESIDENCY CREATES LICENSING BACKLOG

By Kim Severson
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ATLANTA – For nurses, hair stylists, kickboxing instructors and even geologists, Georgia's desire to clamp down on illegal immigration is having an unintended side effect.

Things are so jammed at the secretary of state's office that renewing a state license for some of the 200 professions that require one is taking weeks instead of days. For some brand-new nurses, the wait for a license can stretch into three months.

The reason is a new law that went into effect at the beginning of the year. It requires people seeking professional licenses to prove they are in the United States legally.

That means people who used to renew online must now find and send in what the state deems a secure and verifiable document: a copy of a driver's license, a passport, a green card or other government-issued ID.

"The fact of the matter is that in our agency we've taken a streamlined process we've had in place and made it more bureaucratic," said Brian Kemp, the secretary of state.

Even a call to ask about how to get a license or why things are taking so long has become a problem. State licensing workers can answer only about three-quarters of the nearly 459,000 calls that come into the call center in a year because the new requirements are bringing more questions and arrived during a period of recession-driven staff cuts, Mr. Kemp said.

The licensing division has shrunk to 87 employees, down 30 percent since 2008. Mr. Kemp, who has to cut his budget by 3 percent this year, will not reduce staffing at the division any further. The workload is too heavy, plus the division brings in \$24 million a year. Instead, he is laying off staff at the state archives and eliminating public hours there.

One would think that simply checking a piece of identification would not gum up the works, but the state licenses 475,000 people over all. Although not all of them renew at the same time, the new step requires hand-checking each application for the correct documents. Before, much of the process was automated.

And despite efforts by the state's professional boards to educate people about the new requirements, more than 8,300 applications have arrived without proof of citizenship or legal residency so far this year. Each of those applicants had to be contacted and asked to provide the correct documents.

Certainly, many professionals seeking a state license have simply absorbed the extra step with the resignation of a traveler in an airport security line.

"It was just a little more paperwork," said Jeff Hopp, the president of the Georgia Athletic Trainers' Association.

But the backlogs can be frustrating, especially since a process that used to take a few keyboard strokes and 2 days can now take more than 10.

"Unfortunately, government makes these laws and regulations at the legislative levels, but they don't make the adjustments at the do-it level," said Henry Williams Jr., a licensed hearing aid dispenser in Gainesville, Ga., who recently retired from the state board that oversees the hearing aid business.

In neighboring Alabama, where many parts of a similar immigration bill were delayed until a federal court heard challenges to it in August, untangling the mess over state licenses is just beginning.

While legal challenges remain, the court allowed Alabama to implement a portion of the bill designed to keep illegal immigrants from getting state licenses. But how the state commissions in charge of regulating architects, therapists and other licensed professionals will comply is still a work in progress.

In Alabama, the secretary of state does not oversee professional boards and commissions, which are independent but operate with legislative approval. The state's Department of Examiners of Public Accounts, an independent legislative audit agency, is trying to offer guidance, said John Norris, a director of the agency. "It will create extra work," he said. "We're just not sure how much yet because these agencies have not had a chance to fully comply."

One option is to get the federal government to allow Alabama to use a federal database called SAVE, or Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements. The state has asked, but the federal government has yet to answer.

Meanwhile in Georgia, Mr. Kemp said he will ask the legislature next year to change the bill so that only first-time applicants will need to prove their status.

And even though veteran nurses have been grumbling about the added paperwork, new nurses and other professionals are used to waiting.

"My perception is we have never been the quickest state," said Linda Streit, dean of the Georgia Baptist College of Nursing at Mercer University. "And with all this from immigration, we continue to not be the quickest state."