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## 3,300 Denied Va. Licenses Under New Regulations

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Almost 3,300 people were turned away by DMV agents in Virginia on the first three business days of the year after a new law took effect requiring license applicants to prove that they are in this country legally, a spokeswoman from the agency said yesterday.

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That was about one in 20 customers who showed up last Saturday, and Monday and Tuesday of this week, said Department of Motor Vehicles spokeswoman Pam Goheen. About 1,000 were turned away Saturday, even though DMV offices are open only four hours, she said.

But the new law did not lengthen lines as much as agency officials had feared, she said. Wait times at DMV

offices in Arlington and Alexandria, two of the busiest in the state, were about half an hour yesterday, which is normal, Goheen said.



"This confirms for us . . . that the additional process of determining legal presence is not having a negative impact on wait times," Goheen said.

But Mary Bauer, legal director of the Virginia Justice Center and an opponent of the new requirement, said that the law -- aimed at preventing undocumented immigrants from getting licenses -- is hurting legal immigrants, too.

"One can assume that the vast majority of people who were turned away are lawfully in the United States because most undocumented people know to stay

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away from a DMV," she said. "And . . . if you have 1,000 people turned away who believe they are entitled to a license on a single day, that's pretty troubling."

The law, which took effect Jan. 1, requires people applying for a driver's license or renewing an expired one to prove that they are not illegal immigrants. For U.S. citizens, that means little more than presenting a birth certificate or passport. Foreign-born residents, on the other hand, have a harder time demonstrating their status because they must present immigration papers that can sometimes take more than a year to get from the federal government.

Immigrants -- especially those who have sought asylum in the United States -- told the news media that they had difficulty obtaining a license this week. Goheen said such newcomers have little choice but to wait until they have the proper documents.

The General Assembly passed the bill last year after reports surfaced that several of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists illegally obtained Virginia licenses and then used them as proof of identification at airports and flight schools.

Immigrant advocates criticized the measure, saying it would devastate tens of thousands of illegal immigrants in the state, making it hard for them to get work or even cash a check. Many would not be able to buy auto insurance but would drive to jobs anyway, critics have said, making the roads less safe for everyone.

But proponents of the bill said preventing Virginia's state-issued documents from falling into the wrong hands was more important than the plight of undocumented immigrants. A chief sponsor of the bill, state Sen. James K. "Jay" O'Brien Jr. (R-Fairfax), likened the inconveniences at DMV branches to what happened at airports shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks. And he predicted that wait times would slowly improve.

"The first time we had [Standards of Learning tests], or the first time we did anything new, there was a bit of a transition period while people got accustomed to it," he said yesterday. "The issue here for Virginia is to protect our own documents and the integrity of those documents."

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