

## Trends and Issues in State Motor Vehicle Agencies: More than Just a License

By Linda R. Lewis-Pickett

*Recent events in our society have been the catalyst for rapid change in the way motor vehicle agencies do business. The need to balance highway safety, customer service and security of the homeland has created a challenge that very few industries will ever have to face.*

The public servant who issued the first driver's license in the state of New York in 1903 probably had no inkling of the importance that small credential would some day come to hold. Initially intended simply to certify that an individual had earned the right to drive a motor vehicle, today drivers prefer to use it as a primary form of identification—giving its holder the ability to open bank accounts, purchase alcohol and cigarettes, access secure buildings and locations, purchase firearms, register to vote and even obtain a job. As use and dependence on the driver's license has increased, so has that of the automobile: it has gone from being a luxury item intended for the wealthy to a must-have for nearly every American over the age of 16, a status symbol and the key to job security and freedom. Both the driver's license and the automobile are now viewed as necessities for anyone who wants to live the American dream. As a result, some people will do just about anything to get a driver's license or a vehicle, including resorting to theft and fraud.

The agencies that administer driver's license and vehicle information and related highway safety laws increasingly must adjust their processes, networks and staffing to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing environment. Additionally, federal mandates ranging from homeland security to voter registration are stretching resources even further and changing the motor vehicle administration environment to the point that it barely resembles the framework that was initially set up to ensure driver safety.

Like it or not, the business of motor vehicle administration has changed. Commissioners of these state agencies have a greater responsibility than ever before. How well they anticipate issues and meet the challenges that have been thrust upon them will impact not only service to citizens, but also possibly their security.

### Ensuring Identity

In the early to mid-1990s, motor vehicle administrators and law enforcement officials began to no-

tice an increase in the number of cases of identity theft and identity fraud. Some of those cases were related to individuals who wished to enter or stay in the country illegally; others were individuals who were seeking to fabricate clean driving records or who wanted to use someone else's credit to make purchases. Nearly all cases involved an attempt to obtain a driver's license fraudulently.

Motor vehicle and law enforcement agencies began to work more closely together to combat the issues of identity theft and fraud. New processes were implemented, new networks were put into place and additional identity credentials were required in many states to help ensure that people applying for driver's licenses were who they said they were. Agencies also formed partnerships with retailers, credit institutions and others in the private sector to work on the problem together.

The motor vehicle landscape changed even more significantly after the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001. Investigations indicate that the terrorists had obtained driver's licenses and used them as valid identification to move about society and ultimately to board the planes used as weapons.

The problem wasn't with the licenses themselves—most were issued according to existing guidelines. The problem was in both operational practices and the validity of the breeder documents, the documents applicants are required to produce to verify their identity when obtaining a driver's license. Breeder documents include birth certificates, Social Security cards, passports and immigration documents, among others.

Breeder documents have become the subject of intense scrutiny over the past four years, and rightly so. The challenge for motor vehicle agencies is that they are now being compelled to consider not only the validity of their own documents, but of those that are used to issue them. The challenge can be daunting, especially when you consider the sheer number of agencies that issue these documents. For example, there are some 14,000 different birth certificate for-

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mats that are issued in the United States. Determining whether the one the applicant is presenting is authentic can be nearly impossible.

Most states are now using or exploring the use of technology to assist in the verification process of some breeder documents and the information these documents display. The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) provides a network to the Social Security Administration so agencies can access an online system to verify Social Security Numbers presented at the counter. The Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services has a similar system for authenticating immigration documents. To help ensure that applicants don't shop for the state that has the most lax identification practices, AAMVA has identified a list of verifiable identification resources that should be acceptable for proving identity, and has recommended that jurisdictions adopt the list to ensure uniformity across the country. These and other efforts to improve the security of the driver's license are likely to continue and to increase in scope over the next several years.

### Crossing State Borders

The need for interoperability among states is one of the most critical issues facing motor vehicle administrators today. In the absence of states' ability to share information quickly and reliably, a small but dangerous percentage of the population will continue to shop around to find the easiest way to get the driver's license or even the vehicle title they seek.

Although standardization and interoperability are national issues, they are managed by the states, and therein lies the dilemma. Even if a state resolves its own issues, it has solved little if it means scofflaws are simply going to the next state over to obtain their documents fraudulently. A motor vehicle agency without technology that crosses state lines is ineffective in today's world. States must—and do—work together on these critical issues. On behalf of its member agencies, AAMVA is pushing for the establishment of more consistent ways to verify information and conduct business.

The business of motor vehicle administration is a multi-state process. The creation of interstate highways and public mobility has created this environment. For more than 40 years, a majority of states have voluntarily participated in two interstate compact agreements, the Driver's License Compact (DLC) and the Non-Resident Violator Compact (NRVC). Both compacts were established to provide guidelines to states on the licensing process and reciprocity in the treatment of traffic violations or convictions for out-of-state drivers.

Because of the increased need to verify identity in the driver's license application process, coupled with the increase in identity theft and fraud, the motor vehicle community has a renewed interest in multi-state reciprocity agreements and guidelines. The outcome of that interest was a new compact, the Driver's License Agreement (DLA), which provides a venue for states to verify and transmit driver and conviction information. The DLA combines the DLC/NRVC, adds identification verification practices and requirements, and has a goal of establishing one driver, one record and one identity.

Another multi-state led initiative is the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System (NMVTIS). Annually, criminals continue to produce multi-million dollars in profit due to vehicle theft, odometer rollback, and the misrepresentation of flooded or wrecked vehicles as being damaged. For this reason, we all suffer through increased insurance rates and threats to highway safety. Through NMVTIS, agencies can more easily determine if a vehicle is reported stolen or salvaged before issuing new titles. Law enforcement can be notified and vehicles recovered more quickly and frequently.

These are only a few examples of how states are working to improve the safety and security of documents. The progress in this area certainly will continue in the upcoming months and years. Efforts are underway to push for minimum standards for driver's licenses and issuance practices across states. While this concept is of concern to some states that see it as another federal mandate, it is a tool that will provide some of the greatest gains in the areas of law enforcement and document security. The federal government's encouragement in requiring states to meet at least minimum standards for issuing driver and vehicle documents would go a long way in helping to ensure the safety of citizens and their property.

### Meeting Federal Mandates

Another issue that will continue to challenge motor vehicle administrators in the years to come is determining how to best handle federal mandates, especially those that come without funding. State budgets, like those in the private sector, have been severely impacted by the recent downturn in the economy. Motor vehicle agencies, already strapped for cash, must implement government mandates that often require expensive system changes and extensive training for employees. Agencies are reducing staff to offset expenses. The employees who remain are under greater pressure than ever due to their implied role in implementing social change.

Increasingly, federal mandates require motor vehicle administrators to stray farther away from the core mission of their agencies. Voter registration, payment of child support and even high school attendance are in some states being tied to obtaining or holding a driver's license. The challenge here is that to enact mandates such as these, agencies must find a way to communicate electronically with other state agencies.

The federal government can help ease these burdens by simply listening to and working closely with state officials on anticipated mandates. Funding must be addressed before mandates are imposed. The government also can look for ways to speed the promulgation of rules and support states' efforts to pass enacting legislation.

### Addressing a Changing Society

Our society's transience is presenting yet another challenge for motor vehicle administrators. Increasingly, a larger number of customers speak little or no English, and may not understand our country's rules and systems that relate to driving. Administrators must find ways to educate and train their employees to provide these customers with the service they need. Some states have explored the use of incentives for hiring employees who speak other languages, while others have offered to train their employees to speak Spanish or other languages common to their customers. According to population projections, this challenge will continue to escalate and will not only impact the border states, but almost every other area of the country.

Baby Boomers are another group requiring motor vehicle administrators to think outside the box. This segment makes up a large part of our population and, as these drivers age, agencies are beginning to address the needs of the older driver, such as balancing independence with safe driving skills. The issue is one that will continue to impact motor vehicle agencies for at least the next few decades.

### Meeting Societal Expectations

Motor vehicle agencies' challenges are not always the result of federal or state mandates, but often are due to the changing expectations of society. We live in a microwave, MTV, reality show society where people want and expect instant gratification. Motor vehicle agency customers want offices to be open

late in the evening and on weekends to allow for their schedules. They want to walk into an office and walk out with a driver's license or vehicle title in a relatively short period of time. They look for immediate turnaround on permits they need to do their jobs. They expect prompt, courteous and professional service at all times. It is a challenge.

### Facing the Challenge

E-government is helping administrators to meet many of the day-to-day challenges related to the balance between ensuring document validity and security and serving customers expediently. Many states now allow their customers to conduct transactions online, reducing wait time for customers who must visit an office in person and easing the burden on employees. Additionally, new interfaces between states and business partners will reduce paper handling and speed up the actual delivery of desired services. Both trends undoubtedly will escalate over the next several years as agencies continue to look for ways to do more with less.

In the decade ahead, motor vehicle administrators will continue to focus on developing and implementing systems and processes that will help increase the safety of our citizens. They will continue to grapple with the best ways to provide secure systems and outstanding service to their customers. They also will continue to look for opportunities to enhance service to citizens of our country even as their scope of responsibility expands well beyond that of verifying a person's ability to drive. Motor vehicle administration is not a job for the faint of heart. It is a champion's job. Each and every day, they will step up to the plate to balance the triad of priorities—highway safety, customer service and safety of our homeland.

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### About the Author

**Linda R. Lewis-Pickett** is president & CEO of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA). AAMVA is voluntary, nonprofit, educational organization striving to develop model programs in motor vehicle administration, law enforcement and highway safety. The association's programs encourage uniformity and reciprocity among the states and provinces, and liaisons with other levels of government and the private sector. AAMVA's program development and research activities provide guidelines for more effective public service.

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**Table A  
Member Status of Driver's License Compact (DLC) and Non-Resident  
Violator Compact (NRVC)**

State or other jurisdiction	DLC/NRVC member status		
	Member of NRVC	Member of DLC	Member of neither
Alabama .....	★	★	...
Alaska .....		★	...
Arizona .....	★	★	...
Arkansas .....	★	★	...
California .....		★	...
Colorado .....	★	★	...
Connecticut .....	★	★	...
Delaware .....	★	★	...
Florida .....	★	★	...
Georgia .....	★	...	...
Hawaii (a) .....	★	★	...
Idaho .....	★	★	...
Illinois .....	★	★	...
Indiana .....	★	★	...
Iowa .....	★	★	...
Kansas .....	★	★	...
Kentucky (a) .....	★	★	...
Louisiana .....	★	★	...
Maine .....	★	★	...
Maryland .....	★	★	...
Massachusetts .....	★		...
Michigan .....			★
Minnesota .....	★	★	...
Mississippi .....	★	★	...
Missouri .....	★	★	...
Montana .....		★	...
Nebraska .....	★	★	...
Nevada .....	★	★	...
New Hampshire .....	★	★	...
New Jersey .....	★	★	...
New Mexico .....	★	★	...
New York .....	★	★	...
North Carolina .....	★	★	...
North Dakota .....	★	★	...
Ohio .....	★	★	...
Oklahoma .....	★	★	...
Oregon .....	★		...
Pennsylvania .....	★	★	...
Rhode Island .....	★	★	...
South Carolina .....	★	★	...
South Dakota .....	★	★	...
Tennessee .....	★	(b)	...
Texas .....	★	★	...
Utah .....	★	★	...
Vermont .....	★	★	...
Virginia .....	★	★	...
Washington .....	★	★	...
West Virginia .....	★	★	...
Wisconsin .....			★
Wyoming .....	★	★	...
Dist. of Columbia .....	★	★	...

Source: The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA), January 2005.

Key:

★—Yes

...—No

Note: Driver's License Compact (DLC) and the Non-Resident Violator Compact (NRVC). Both compacts were established to provide guidelines to states on the licensing process and reciprocity in the treatment of traffic violations or convictions for out-of-state drivers.

(a) Newest members - Hawaii (NRVC), Effective date January 1, 1996; Kentucky (DLC), Effective date August 1996.

(b) Inactive, Tennessee dropped out in 1997.

**Table B**  
**Driver's License Compact (DLC) and Non-Resident Violator Compact (NRVC) Member Joinder Dates**

<i>DLC/NRVC Compact member joinder dates</i>		
<i>State or other jurisdiction</i>	<i>NRVC Effective date</i>	<i>DLC Effective date</i>
Alabama .....	October 1981	1966
Alaska .....	Not a member	September 1996
Arizona .....	January 1993	1963
Arkansas .....	January 1986	1969
California .....	Not a member	1963
Colorado .....	January 1982	1965
Connecticut .....	January 1981	January 1993
Delaware .....	February 1979	1964
Florida .....	October 1981	1967
Georgia .....	February 1980	Not a member
Hawaii (a) .....	January 1996	1971
Idaho .....	October 1992	1963
Illinois .....	July 1984	1963
Indiana .....	January 1980	1967
Iowa .....	November 1980	1965
Kansas .....	January 1983	1965
Kentucky (a) .....	December 1978	August 1996
Louisiana .....	November 1979	1968
Maine .....	January 1982	1963
Maryland .....	July 1979	July 1978
Massachusetts .....	December 1987	Not a member
Michigan .....	Not a member	Not a member
Minnesota .....	October 1978	January 1990
Mississippi .....	March 1979	1962
Missouri .....	October 1980	October 1985
Montana .....	Not a member	1963
Nebraska .....	January 1982	1963
Nevada .....	February 1990	1961
New Hampshire .....	January 1982	October 1986
New Jersey .....	July 1983	1966
New Mexico .....	January 1985	1963
New York .....	June 1982	1965
North Carolina .....	September 1980	September 1993
North Dakota .....	July 1980	May 1986
Ohio .....	January 1985	October 1987
Oklahoma .....	July 1987	1967
Oregon .....	Not a member	1963
Pennsylvania .....	July 1979	October 1994
Rhode Island .....	April 1986	January 1987
South Carolina .....	January 1981	August 1987
South Dakota .....	May 1980	November 1987
Tennessee .....	September 1984	(a)
Texas .....	January 1982	September 1993
Utah .....	July 1985	1965
Vermont .....	October 1985	October 1987
Virginia .....	July 1980	1963
Washington .....	October 1993	1963
West Virginia .....	July 1978	July 1972
Wisconsin .....	Not a member	Not a member
Wyoming .....	July 1987	May 1987
Dist. of Columbia .....	August 1980	November 1985

*Source:* The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA), January 2005.

*Note:* Driver's License Compact (DLC) and the Non-Resident Violator Compact (NRVC). Both compacts were established to provide guidelines to states on the licensing process and reciprocity in the treatment of traffic violations or convictions for out-of-state drivers.

*Key:*

(a) Tennessee joined in 1965 and dropped out in 1997.