

Why Providing Drivers' Licenses to Immigrants is a Public Health Issue: The Case for Supporting the I Drive Colorado Campaign

In 2013, the Colorado state legislature passed SB 251, also known as the Colorado Road and Community Safety Act, which allowed up to six Colorado DMV offices to offer driver's licenses to immigrants without documentation residing in Colorado. The program was seen as key step toward improving the safety of Coloradans on the road by allowing immigrants to take vision and road tests, obtain a license, and secure car insurance. Built on a self-funded model (licenses for these immigrants cost \$79 per applicant, versus the \$25 for other Colorado residents), the program was intended to place no additional burden on taxpayers.

Since the law passed, many of the 120,000 immigrants eligible for this program have faced major difficulties in obtaining a driver's license. The legislature cut the program's budget and used the license fees to fund other legislative priorities. As a result, the number of participating DMV offices across the state dropped from six to three, severely limiting the number of appointments available and forcing immigrants to travel long distances to apply for a license. The budgetary cut also included a directive that DMV offices in Grand Junction and Colorado Springs close once 60,000 licenses were granted. This cap is expected to be reached in 2018, meaning only one office would remain in Denver unless further action is taken. Last but not least, Social Security numbers were not included in the original bill as a form of identification for applicants, excluding many immigrants from being eligible for this program.

In an effort to address this myriad of issues, the I Drive Colorado campaign was established to advocate for greater access to driver's licenses for immigrants without documentation and bring changes to the law through legislative and budgetary fixes in this year's legislative session. As the campaign prepares to introduce bills to improve upon SB 13-251, legislators should consider the significant public health benefits of providing Colorado's immigrants with a standard form of identification and the ability to drive legally.

Why This Matters for Public Health

The campaign's potential for lasting impact on the health and safety of all Coloradans cannot be understated. Transportation determines families' ability to access health care, secure basic necessities, and fully take part in the life of their community. Colorado's immigrants help drive our economy and contribute to the rich fabric of our communities. Helping them lead healthy and productive lives benefits us all. Allowing these Coloradans to obtain a driver's license is therefore an important step toward making Colorado a healthier state.

Lack of transportation causes families to delay needed care

There is a strong connection between a person's access to reliable transportation and their ability to access health care when they need it. In the 2015 Colorado Health Access Survey, 4.7% of Coloradans (or 120,000 people) said they did not get the care they needed because they lacked transportation to the doctor's office or the doctor's office was too far away.

Without proper transportation, people delay care for themselves and family members, which could lead to worsening conditions, reliance on emergency transportation and emergency room use, and even death. When people are able to safely transport themselves and their family members to the doctor's office for routine check-ups or for more urgent needs, health care issues are addressed in a more timely manner and reliance on the 911 system is reduced. Despite the advances made in metro Denver and in the rest of the state in expanding public transportation infrastructure, the remaining gaps leave people with little alternative but to rely on their own personal transportation.

Healthy choices are out of reach without personal transportation

Beyond direct access to health care services, barriers to personal transportation can also affect a person's health in several other ways. Without freedom of movement, immigrants face unnecessary challenges in securing basic human needs, such as healthy foods, safe housing, good education opportunities for children, well-paying jobs, and more. The lack of personal transportation makes a simple trip to the grocery store difficult, hindering one's ability to purchase healthy food products. It can also force families to factor in the availability of nearby public transit options in deciding where to live. In turn, this might mean making sacrifices on the quality of housing -- and potentially being exposed to lead, mold, and unsafe structures -- or having to default to the neighborhood school, regardless of quality. Lacking any of these necessities could contribute to worse health outcomes for immigrants and higher health care costs overall.

Restricted access to personal vehicles force hospitals and clinics to pick up the tab

Health care systems have shared anecdotally that in an attempt to save money on emergency room costs and to increase more consistent access to care, they have had to build into their budgets support for non-emergent medical transportation for anyone who does not have a way to get to the doctor. If more Coloradans were able to access a driver's license and transport themselves, reliance on this support could be preserved for others who need it most.

Driver's licenses protect the driver and the public

To get a driver's license, people must first pass required examinations, such as traffic law and road sign tests and vision examinations. These requirements improve safety on the road and protect other drivers. Obtaining a driver's license also makes it easier to acquire automobile insurance, which has been linked to safer driving conditions overall. Multiple studies indicate a correlation between uninsured drivers and fatal automobile accidents. Studies also indicate that if more motorists are insured in the state, automobile insurance costs would likely decrease across the board, freeing up resources for other life necessities.

Immigrants with driver's licenses participate in communities

Fear of deportation breeds mistrust of our hardworking law enforcement agencies and is a major barrier to immigrants' ability to engage with institutions and their communities. Because the original bill explicitly bans law enforcement from using these driver's licenses for deportation purposes, immigrants can drive without the fear that driving-related infractions could result in

their deportation or their family's. As a standard piece of identification, driver's licenses help facilitate immigrants' interactions with businesses, government agencies, and the community at large. The resultant sense of safety and belonging is critical to any individual's social and professional trajectory.

Immigrants who can safely travel from their home to their place of work (or while on the job) may also have more options for safe, gainful employment, which would both help their families' financial stability and improve Colorado's health systems and economy. Home health workers, for example, are critical assets to the health care industry caring for people in their homes, and the ability to drive from one patient's home to the next is critically important.

Supporting the I Drive Colorado Campaign

Based on the demonstrated public health benefits of enabling immigrants without documentation to qualify for Colorado driver's licenses, the following organizations express our full support for the I Drive Colorado campaign and its objectives to:

- Restore program funding, so that fees from licenses granted under this program go toward sustaining the program, as originally intended, and allow more DMV offices to offer licenses to immigrants without documentation
- Eliminate the DMV appointment cap so that more offices can offer licenses beyond metro Denver
- Streamline the process for renewals
- Enable individuals with Social Security numbers from previous policies to apply

Achieving these objectives will be paramount to safeguarding and improving Colorado's public health. Signatories of this white paper are committed to working with the I Drive Colorado campaign, along with state and local leaders, community members, advocates, and health care providers to improve the health of all Coloradans.

Sources

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