

TOP STORY

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Driver's licenses get a makeover

By Jennifer Nedeau, Special to Stateline.org

Driver's licenses across the country are going high-tech, with invisible features to stop identity thieves scheming to commit credit card fraud or just hoping to buy a beer before turning 21.

Almost half of the states now use specialized technology to make driver's licenses more secure, spelling an end to the days when the most personal information they carried was a driver's name, age and weight.

In November, Iowa became the latest state to adopt [biometric facial-recognition technology](#) to defend against identity theft. It joins Georgia, Massachusetts, Texas and West Virginia in using computer software to digitally map an applicant's facial features to prevent thieves from using multiple identities to get real driver's licenses.

In addition, at least 12 states use a verification mechanism called [digital watermarking](#) to store personalized information within the license. Unlike the colorful watermarks on new \$20 bills, the information is invisible to the naked eye. But a scanner can detect the information and use it to verify the license's authenticity and defend against counterfeiting.

The driver's license is on the verge of its greatest revolution since Missouri became one of the first states to require motorists to be licensed in 1903. Steps taken by states since Sept. 11, 2001, are just the first round of changes to upgrade the security of driver's licenses and state-issued ID cards for non-drivers. States began taking action after discovering that 18 of the 19 hijackers used valid state-issued driver's licenses or ID cards to board the airliners they crashed.

Unless Congress grants states' request for a delay, every state will be required by May 2008 to use advanced technology in issuing driver's licenses and to verify the identity documents of all applicants to spot scam artists, terrorists and illegal aliens. If a state doesn't comply, its citizens would not be able to use their driver's licenses for federal identification purposes, such as boarding an airplane or entering a federal building.

The changes are mandated by the [2005 federal Real ID Act](#), a homeland security measure that for the first time would impose federal standards on state-issued driver's licenses. Lawmakers in more than a dozen states are rebelling because they

say the law usurps state's traditional authority over motorists and imposes an estimated \$11 billion in costs on states. Congress has appropriated only \$40 million to assist states in making the changes, which will require the re-issuance of all 245 million driver's licenses.

The Montana House voted overwhelmingly Jan. 30 to reject the [Real ID Act](#) and refuse to comply. On Jan. 25, both chambers of the Maine Legislature passed a non-binding resolution protesting the law and urging Congress to repeal it. Maine's U.S. senator, Susan Collins (R), has introduced a bill that would give states two more years to meet Real ID's requirements but does not authorize any more money to help states revamp their licensing procedures.

State legislatures in Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Utah, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming also are considering resolutions protesting Real ID.

"States don't object to making licenses more secure, but they don't want to be saddled with the costs of creating what is essentially a national identification card," said David Quam, a lobbyist with the National Governors Association.

States are awaiting specific rules on how to comply with Real ID from the White House Office of Management and Budget, which plans to release them by early April.

Despite the delay of Real ID specifications, states are upgrading driver's licenses anyway. Shirley Andre, director of Iowa's Motor Vehicles Division, said that her state is upgrading its technology for "the same reason anyone is doing it – to have the best available opportunity to make sure people are not becoming victims of identity theft."

Iowa signed a contract with Digimarc Corp. of Beaverton, Ore., to employ facial-recognition biometric technology.

Biometric technology allows motor vehicle agencies to capture physical characteristics – facial features, fingerprints, handprints or iris scans – and feed them into a database. The data is processed by a numerical algorithm to create a digital template of the physical feature. Once a driver's face or thumbprint is in the database, the motor vehicle agency can match his or her true identity against that of anyone who might try to get a license using stolen personal information.

While biometric technology is aimed at stopping identity theft, digital watermarking targets counterfeiting.

"Digital watermarking allows the state to imbed digital information into the driver's

license itself that you and I can't see, but when I scan the document and process it, I can get information," said Scott Carr, executive vice president of Digimarc.

Iowa joins Alabama and Colorado in using both digital watermarking and biometric technology to secure its driver licenses, getting what could be a head start on new federal rules, depending on what's required.

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