

Fresno DMV busy as state starts issuing driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants

By Carmen George



Department of Motor Vehicles manager Joey Penate, left, helps Paula Mora, right, as she applies for a driver's license thanks to AB60 at the Department of Motor Vehicles on Olive Avenue in central Fresno on Friday morning. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

Elias Mejia-Garcia brought a special guest with him Friday to get a special driver's license.

Mejia-Garcia was one of 11,000 undocumented people statewide who streamed into California Department of Motor Vehicle offices on the first day a law allowed them to apply for a license.

At the DMV on Olive Avenue in central Fresno, he waited in line with his 11-year-old son, Brian Mejia, who said he was glad his dad was being allowed to take a driver's license test so his father and other undocumented people "don't have to be scared" when they get behind the wheel of a car.

"It's hard," his dad said of not having a license. "Getting a license will help people be safe."

Along with being able to drive to work and doctor's appointments, the Tranquillity man said he is looking forward to the "happy" moments a driver's license will bring, like driving Brian on school field trips.

Friday marked the first day people who can't prove they entered the United States legally were allowed to apply for a California driver's license, made possible by Assembly Bill 60, signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2013.

By about 11 a.m. Friday, seating was nearly gone in the DMV on Olive Avenue near Golden State Boulevard. A steady line of people streamed in all morning in front of a table set up in the middle of the packed lobby, where a bilingual interpreter helped people applying under AB 60 fill out paperwork and find the proper counters.

By noon, 64 people seeking a driver's license under AB 60 had been served in Fresno and 6,189 at DMV offices statewide, said DMV spokeswoman Jessica Gonzalez. By the end of the day, Gonzalez said, there had been almost 9,500 AB 60 appointments statewide and another 1,500 people who visited DMV offices trying to apply without an appointment.

All told, there were 143 Friday appointments made for driver's licenses at the central Fresno DMV, 66 at the northwest Fresno DMV and 133 in Clovis, Gonzalez said. Of those, it was not known how many were applying for licenses under AB 60.

Gonzalez said more than 9,000 people statewide had driver's license appointments Friday, much higher than an average midwinter day. Two weeks ago, for instance, there were 3,636 such appointments.

Across the state, 1.4 million people are expected to apply for a license under AB 60 over the next three years of a program aimed at boosting road safety and making immigrants' lives easier. California officials couldn't predict how many people would immediately apply, but the number of people making appointments for a license more than doubled when immigrants were allowed to sign up.

Among those applying Friday at the central Fresno DMV was Jaime Mora, 38, a construction worker from Mexico and father of two young girls. Mora has been in the United States almost 12 years. The Fresno man said he drives by necessity — for work or to care for his family — but never felt comfortable without a license.

Neither did his wife, Paula Mora, 34. Walking into the DMV early Friday morning, she was excited — though she'd been up since 3 a.m. studying for the test.

Her husband was confident she'd do great: Paula Mora volunteers as a crossing guard at the school the girls attend, Yokomi Elementary, so she is "pretty familiar with traffic," he bragged.

But it wasn't meant to be Friday. She was turned away for not bringing the proper identification and her test rescheduled to Saturday. It was frustrating for Mora, who said she called DMV for information and was briefed during a special study class about what she needed to bring and thought she had the proper identification.

She wasn't alone — at least a couple others near her also had their appointments rescheduled for the same reason.

Gonzalez said a full list of acceptable identification documents is available on a DMV [webpage](#) via its AB 60 [website](#). Those without proper identification can receive a secondary review, where DMV staff conducts an interview to attempt to verify their identity.

California is one of 10 states that now provide licenses to immigrants in the country illegally. The licenses issued to immigrants without legal status will include a distinctive marking and are not considered a valid form of federal identification.

While applying for his driver's license, Kevin Melendez, 24, of Mendota said AB 60 will help undocumented people "drive better and without fear."

The undocumented farm worker from Honduras has been in the U.S. since he was 14. Without any legal family in the country, he said "it's real hard trying to get your right legal papers."

Melendez said AB 60 is a just law that supports undocumented people who contribute to the American economy. "The government has got to know that we are here and we are part of this community. We pay taxes, we work hard."

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