

State Identification Cards

A key barrier for people seeking employment, housing, utilities, medical care, and participation in essential programs and services that support a healthy and successful life is their inability to obtain legal identification. The following brief recommends ways to address this barrier and improve economic self-sufficiency for those most at risk. The information was provided by clients, community action agencies, and human service agencies.

“I am not a nobody”

Terry had been homeless. She had her eye on a job for which she was qualified, but it required her to have a driver’s license. She had no proof of a former address, and without an address, she couldn’t get a driver’s license or even a state-issued identification card. Without an identification card, she couldn’t even get a place to live.

Wesley was in prison for 12 months. When he got out, he wanted to work and get on with his life, but first, he needed to figure out how to get a driver’s license or a state identification card. To get either of those, he needed his Social Security information and his birth certificate. There were many delays, and because he was born in another state, it took 10 days to secure the information he needed.

Rachel left her home and her abusive parents when she was 18. She took only what she could carry, and she had no legal records to verify who she was. She couldn’t get into a shelter without

identification, and she couldn’t get identification without having an address of record. Fortunately, she remembered her Social Security number, and thanks to the guidance she got from Catholic Community Response Team, she could begin the time-consuming process of tracking down the other legal papers she needed to move forward with her life. Today, she lives in an apartment and receives assistance so she can provide for her son.

David served five years in prison. When he got out, he had to start at ground zero, as he describes it, to get the identification documents needed to get a job, rent an apartment and open a bank account. His efforts paid off. When David finally got all the documents required, he applied for and received a grant from the Bill Gates Foundation so he could go to college.

The Identification Dilemma

These individuals are just four of the thousands in Michigan who live below the poverty line and are trying to make a stable life for themselves and their families. Many are able to work, and they want to. They also want to find a good place to live. A driver's license, which millions of adults rely on for legal identification, can be impossible to get and keep if a person has little or no income. Individuals with minor infractions, such as making an improper turn or speeding, may lose their license because they lack the resources to pay the ticket or the penalty fee. Many never had the opportunity to get a license.

Those who lack a driver's license need to obtain a state identification card, because it is a requirement for obtaining health care and housing to apply for a job and to access social services. Yet, getting an ID – the indispensable card that verifies legal residency, that says you are who you say you are and can open doors to a better life, can be, literally, an insurmountable hurdle. As a result, ***lack of legal identification is keeping people homeless and in poverty.***

The Underlying Issue

To get a State of Michigan ID card, an individual must appear in person, at a Secretary of State's office, have a birth certificate, proof of a social Security number, proof of legal residency in the United States, verification of identity, and at least two documents that confirm Michigan residency. Homeland Security requires that the birth certificate be an original, not a copy.

For those who have been transient or incarcerated, for children and adults fleeing abusive homes, for residents of shelters and those who don't know where they were born or who their parents were, and for men and women dealing with mental illness, putting together that information can seem impossible. Compounding the problem, birth records for Michigan residents born before 1978, who were adopted or whose parents were not married, are sealed and stored in Lansing.

The challenges of obtaining legal documentation of identification become even more complex for adults who have moved from state to state or have come to Michigan from outside the United States.

Additionally, fees charged to obtain legal documents, such as a birth certificate, a Social Security card, and the state ID card, add up to more than many can pay. Ironically, there are provisions in place that permit waiving fees for individuals with *low income*, but none to waive fees for those with *no income*. Online information and application processes for obtaining legal documents can be helpful to those without ready transportation, but homeless individuals – especially those living in abandoned buildings or the street – usually don't have access to a computer.

The face of homelessness in Michigan is changing. Where once, the typical homeless person was a single male, often with a substance abuse or mental health issue, shelters today are accommodating both working and non-working families with children who can't afford more permanent housing and can't assemble adequate legal documentation to apply for jobs, housing and the help they need.

Ways to Simplify the Process

Recognizing the huge importance of having a state ID card and the many impediments to getting it, several organizations in Michigan have implemented resourceful ways to help clients successfully navigate the maze. **Here are some examples:**

Seeking a birth certificate and other documents:

Recommendation: Arrange for the client to meet with a staff person from the county clerk's office rather than dropping in.

Recommendation: Help the client gather background information such as parent names, the earliest city the client remembers living in, and other personal information that can help track down vital documents. Inquire if relatives of the client can provide crucial information such as where your client was born, which can assist in tracking down the client's birth certificate.

Recommendation: Ask if the client has documents such as divorce papers, income tax returns, unexpired passports and insurance contracts that may validate some of the personal identification information needed to get a birth certificate.

Recommendation: Inquire about the client's military record. Every person who has served in the military has been fingerprinted by the military, and military papers can be used to verify his or her identification.

Recommendation: Accompany clients when they go to the office of the county clerk or secretary of state, or prepare clients who are going alone so they understand the process.

Recommendation: Provide bus tickets for transportation to Secretary of State offices and other places clients must go when trying to retrieve necessary documentation.

Recommendation: Draft template letters that clients can present to clerks to explain the documents they are using to verify identity.

Recommendation: Be patient and persistent when working with personnel in the Secretary of State offices. The process of getting state ID cards for clients can be lengthy and inconsistent, especially when offices have high employee turnover.

Dealing with fees:

Recommendation: Cover the costs of a client's document fees. It's often the last hurdle for a person seeking a state ID card, and it makes economic sense. For example, covering a \$10 fee for the state ID card is less than the cost of housing a person for just one night at a shelter or motel.

Recommendation: Write a letter to the county clerk, on behalf of a client, requesting that fees be waived.

Recommendation: Partner with funders, and initiate public/private partnerships to cover fees for obtaining legal documents. (list possible places for funding)

Providing a local address:

Recommendation: Some temporary residences and shelters permit the address of the facility to be used by clients seeking legal documents who need to provide a local address. Some nonprofit service organizations are also providing an address for people who live in abandoned buildings or cars.

Recommendation: Inquire if there is a legal relative of a client who can provide an address for the client.

Documenting children:

Recommendation: Work with schools to identify the large number of homeless children living with their families in a car, motel or other temporary abode. Work with parents to establish information they can use to obtain birth certificates, Social Security cards and other documentation, and assist them in getting state ID cards for their children.

Recommendation: Work with the school district's homeless liaisons on securing identification.

Recommendation: Create a fact sheet that outlines how to get verifiable identification for children.

Offering computer access:

Recommendation: Designate an area with computers for clients to use so they can obtain information and apply for documents online. It's faster and less cumbersome than applying in person.

Long Term Options to Consider

While a substantial and coordinated effort is needed to improve the processes for obtaining a state ID card, here are tangible steps that can generate **positive outcomes** for clients:

Recommendation: Advocate at the legislative level. Talk to legislators about the problems. Lobby to standardize the process for getting vital documents and ask legislators to follow the lead of other states such as California, where a free birth certificate is available to those who are homeless and present a verification letter from the shelter where they reside.

Recommendation: Work with local county commissioners and clerks to request fee waivers for applicants with no income.

Recommendation: Assemble statistics on how much is spent, on average, housing people until they have the money to get a state ID card and can move into permanent housing.

Recommendation: Stress to funders the potential savings of paying a client's document fees.

Recommendation: Provide information on how to get a state ID card at naturalization ceremonies, high school and college graduations, foster-care programs and correctional institutions.

Recommendation: Encourage standardized office procedures to help train employees of local Secretary of State offices to address the significant differences in staff know-how.

Recommendation: Have Michigan Department of Corrections issue state ID cards for parolees prior to release, in their birth name, not alias.

Issuing Alternate Identification

Some cities and counties have issued local ID cards, or are considering them, so they can work around a cumbersome system that can thwart earnest efforts to obtain a state ID card. Localized ID cards make it possible for individuals and families to access services in the city or county where they live, but they are not considered a legal form of identification.

The City of Detroit, where as many as **30 percent of residents** lack either the documents or standing¹ needed to obtain state-issued ID, recently announced it is joining the growing list of U.S. cities that issue municipal ID cards to residents. It is the city's intent that municipal identification cards will provide residents with an additional means of proving their residency in the city so they can access city programs, services and activities, and provide identification to law enforcement. For transient or homeless individuals, returning prisoners, undocumented immigrants, and some elderly residents, the municipal ID card will help open up a world of basic opportunities, from renting an apartment to opening a bank account.

Opponents of localized ID cards are concerned that while the cards are helpful to local residents, they divert attention from the bigger problem, which is the need to overhaul the lengthy processes and often impossible requirements for getting a state ID card.

¹ <http://michiganradio.org/post/detroit-will-start-issuing-municipal-id-cards>
<http://greencard-us.com/the-benefits-of-detroits-new-municipal-id-program-for-undocumented-immigrants20160518/>
<http://www.metrotimes.com/Blogs/archives/2016/05/17/city-council-approves-municipal-id-cards-so-what-do-that-mean-for-detroiters>

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Low-income Persons

Dr. Marcella Wilson, Detroit
Private Sector

Contact Information:

Kris Schoenow, Executive Director
Bureau of Community Action and Economic Opportunity
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
Policy, Planning, and Legislative Services

235 Grand Avenue
Suite 202
PO Box 30037
Lansing, MI 48909

Michigan Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity, a diverse Governor-appointed body serving in advisory capacity to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services/Bureau of Community Action and Economic Opportunity, seeks out opportunities to research and address issues facing people living in poverty. Through focus groups of consumers and professionals alike, information is gathered to develop goals and objectives that will enhance the lives of Michigan residents. This information will be distributed to legislators, key stakeholders and concerned parties interested in making a difference in our state.