



Ohio BMV policy leaves people from Puerto Rico with identity crisis

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Alfredo Jose Pagan needs a photo ID to register for his GED exam. But when he went to the license bureau, he was told his Puerto Rican birth certificate was unacceptable.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The summer of his 19th birthday, Alfredo Jose Pagan of Cleveland had plans.

He would sign up for the GED exam he has been studying for and apply for a job at a downtown hotel that was offering an interview.

Both steps require a photo ID, and last week Pagan walked 25 blocks to the nearest office of the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles to get one.

He left emptyhanded and bewildered. His birth certificate, the one that says he was born in Utuado, Puerto Rico, is no longer good here, he was told.

The state BMV will not accept Puerto Rican birth certificates issued before Jan. 1 of this year.

"I was surprised," Pagan said. "I didn't know what the problem was. And they didn't explain it to me."

The West Side teen was blindsided by a new, little-known state policy that could affect thousands of Hispanics in Greater Cleveland and around the state. For months, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles has quietly refused to accept most Puerto Rican birth certificates, the primary document for people applying for a driver's license or for a state identification card.

State officials say they judge the document to be untrustworthy and note the prohibition is temporary.

By Sept. 30, all Puerto Ricans born on the island are expected to have newly issued birth certificates with enhanced security features. The Ohio BMV is ready to accept those documents, said spokeswoman Lindsay Komlanc.

Until then, people like Pagan face an identity crisis.

At a time when the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections is working to make it easier for Puerto Ricans to vote -- considering bilingual ballots at the urging of the U.S. Justice Department -- the state is making it harder for Puerto Ricans to identify themselves.

"People walk into a registrar's office, get told, 'No, we don't take those anymore,' and no one tells them what they are supposed to do," said David Dawson, the deputy director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

Several Hispanics with experiences similar to Pagan's have contacted the Legal Aid Society in recent weeks. Dawson assumes there are hundreds more who have been turned away from license bureaus and don't know why or where to go.

They are caught up in a dramatic change in the way Puerto Ricans are being asked to identify themselves.

Traditionally, birth certificates are the primary form of ID on Puerto Rico. Most islanders possess several copies and carry them even on the mainland. But Puerto Rican birth certificates, which attest to U.S. citizenship, have become popular among many non-Puerto Ricans, too.

In an effort to stop identity fraud and a black market for Puerto Rican IDs, the commonwealth in December announced plans to nullify all of its birth certificates as of July 1.

The 4 million residents of Puerto Rico, plus the 1.3 million who live on the mainland -- including about 65,000 in Greater Cleveland -- were told to apply for the new, more secure documents that the commonwealth began to issue after Jan. 1.

The deadline for applying was extended to Sept. 30, and the old birth certificates are valid until then -- at least in most places.

The Ohio BMV did not agree to go along with the extension.

"From our perspective, we have a government that comes out and publicly says, 'We do not believe our document has credibility,' " Komlanc said. "We have to take a very hard look at that."

The BMV initially decided not to accept any Puerto Rican birth certificates, she said. It softened that internal policy April 8, when it decided to accept birth certificates issued after Jan. 1.

"We do not take this lightly," Komlanc said.

She said Deputy Registrar License Agencies were notified to try to help Puerto Rican customers by alerting them to other records that, in combination, can confirm age and address and might get them a photo ID. The license bureaus will accept Social Security cards, passports, utility bills and school records, Komlanc said.

Judging by Pagan's experience, that word has not spread through the ranks.

The soft-spoken teen, who aspires to become a mechanic, said he was simply told his birth certificate was unacceptable. He came home and told his mother and they visited another license bureau, where he was told to come back with a new birth certificate in October.

"I want to get a job, so I can help my mom with bills in the house," he said. "They said I have to wait."

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