

There's a Simple and Just Solution to Idaho's Discriminatory Driver's License Law

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Like all human beings, Idaho's immigrants deserve respect for their dignity and human rights, regardless of their immigration status. Though immigrants bring prosperity to Idaho – and employers and consumers across Idaho benefit greatly from immigrants – immigrants are often denied the opportunity to share in that prosperity.

Idaho's driver's license law – which denies driver's licenses to thousands of immigrants – is a prime example. Although driving is central to life in Idaho, thousands of Idaho immigrants are denied the opportunity to apply for a license, based solely on their status as immigrants. **But the Idaho Legislature can adopt a simple solution:** remove the immigration-related requirements from Idaho's driver's license law.

Immigrants Are Key to Idaho

Thousands of Idahoans are immigrants. Idaho is home to an estimated 64,000 immigrants. Immigrants come to Idaho from all over the world – from places such as India, Mexico, Canada, Afghanistan, Russia, Japan, Germany, Bosnia, and many other countries. Immigrants come to Idaho for the same reasons that brought the ancestors of Idaho's U.S.-born residents – to earn a living, join family members, flee persecution, and build better lives. Making the journey to Idaho and establishing a new life is often difficult, traumatic, and even life-threatening.

Idaho industry and consumers continue to prosper from the work of immigrants – and Idaho's economy depends on immigrants' labor. Idaho agriculture has long reaped the rewards of immigrant labor. Over 34,000 workers participated in Idaho's agriculture industry in 2000,¹ and nationwide in 1997 about 33 percent were noncitizens.² Even during the country's recession, Idaho agriculture began to fare well again³ – thanks in large part to the labor of immigrant workers. And Idaho's meatpacking industry has also come to depend on the contributions of immigrant laborers, who put food on the table for Idaho, the United States, and the world.

Immigrants are revitalizing Idaho communities. Immigrants play an important role in revitalizing communities that would decline or disappear without them. Across the country, rural communities are particularly threatened. In many Idaho towns, small, independently-owned businesses depend on their immigrant customers in order to survive.

¹ *Ibid.*

² Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Hired Farm Labor in U.S. Agriculture," *Agricultural Outlook*, October 1998, p. 20.

³ John Thompson, "Farm Economic Picture Brightens," Idaho Farm Bureau, November 7, 2002, available at <http://www.idahofb.org/opinions/voia11-07-02.html>.

Idaho's Immigrants are Trapped in Federal Red Tape

Thousands of Idaho immigrants who want to become citizens are denied legal status.

Federal immigration law makes it extremely difficult for immigrants to become lawful permanent residents (green card holders) and, eventually, citizens. Immigrants generally have to sit on a visa waiting list of anywhere between *five and twenty years* to get formal permission to join family members living in the United States. In other cases, federal law provides no way for immigrants to get legal status, even though immigrants are working, raising families, and paying taxes in the U.S. – and creating prosperity for business owners and consumers. This has left an estimated between 25,000 and 50,000 Idaho immigrants without an opportunity to apply for and receive legal status and citizenship.⁴

Idaho's Driver's License Law Discriminates Unfairly against Immigrants

Thousands of immigrants are unfairly denied driver's licenses. Idaho law now results in thousands of Idaho residents who are immigrants, both documented and undocumented, being denied driver's licenses. Current law requires applicants who do not have a social security number to provide proof of lawful presence in the United States. This means that the estimated 25,000 – 50,000 immigrants denied the opportunity to seek immigration status can not obtain an Idaho driver's license. This policy is out of line with the reality of Idaho's workforce and places immigrant – upon whom Idaho employers and consumers depend – in jeopardy.

Idaho's driver's license policy hurts Idaho's Latino community. Nearly 8 percent of Idaho's population was Latino as of the year 2000,⁵ and in Minidoka County Latinos accounted for over a quarter of the population.⁶ Idaho's Latino community includes U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and people of all immigration statuses, including undocumented immigrants who have been denied the opportunity to get legal status and citizenship. As parents, spouses, sons, and daughters, undocumented workers are crucial members of the families that form Idaho's growing and vibrant Latino community. And policies that hurt undocumented people have a ripple effect that is felt by children, other family members, and the community as a whole.

There Is a Just and Simple Solution: Fix Idaho's Driver's License Law

There is a solution to this problem. It's become increasingly clear that denying immigrants' driver's licenses just isn't working. Ten other states – including Washington and Oregon – have recognized that giving immigrants the opportunity to apply for driver's licenses is the right, sensible thing to do. The Idaho Legislature can do the same.

Say yes to a fair and just solution and remove the immigration-related requirements. Idaho legislators should remove the immigration-related requirements from the driver's license law and take the first step toward fairness for Idaho's immigrants.

⁴ Tyler Moran, National Immigration Law Center, Personal Communication, January 16, 2004. Estimates prepared by the Urban Institute.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Idaho QuickFacts," available at <http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/16000.html>.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Minidoka County, Idaho QuickFacts," available at <http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/16/16067.html>.