

# Los Angeles Times

## Driver's licenses for immigrants here illegally clear key federal hurdle

By [Scott Martelle](#)

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It took a while, but the federal government late last week [finally signed off](#) on the California Department of Motor Vehicles' design for driver's licenses for people in the country illegally.

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The cards, which will be issued beginning Jan. 1, will have the phrase "federal limits apply" on the front. The Department of Homeland Security rejected the initial design, which would have placed a small mark on the front and add to the back the sentence: "This card is not acceptable for official federal purposes." So the new version will be less subtle than backers had hoped (Ted Rall explores that [here](#), and in the cartoon above).

It's a reasonable compromise. The editorial board last year endorsed the state's move under AB60 to issue licenses to immigrants in the country illegally who learn the rules of the road and pass a driver's test, among other requirements. The September [editorial said](#):

"That would bring California in line with at least nine other states that have adopted similar measures. Since 1993, most immigrants living here illegally have been barred from obtaining California licenses (except for some young people who qualify for temporary federal work permits).

"Already, critics of AB 60 are arguing that providing driver's licenses to people who are in the United States illegally rewards them for breaking the law. But that's putting politics before common sense.

"AB 60 doesn't condone illegal immigration. Rather, it recognizes the argument made by some law enforcement officials, including Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck, that we are all safer if those immigrants who are currently driving without a license are taught to operate a car safely and are tested to ensure that they meet the same standards as other drivers. Licenses will also deter hit-and-run accidents by taking away one of the chief incentives to flee the scene."

It's a smart move for the state, and for the country. Since that editorial, the number of issuing states [has increased to 11](#), plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Ensuring that immigrants in the U.S. illegally know how to drive safely does not reward them for violating the immigration laws. Rather, it helps make the roads safer for all of us.

The inevitable reaction to such an accommodation is to say, deport them all. But that's not going to happen. Nor should it. [DHS estimates](#) there are at least 11.5 million immigrants in the country illegally - equal to the population of Ohio - which the New Republic [estimated](#) earlier this year (based on a Center for American Progress [report](#)) would cost \$216 billion to deport, compared with DHS' annual budget of \$60 billion.

And if those here illegally were rounded up and sent home, the effect on the economy would be around \$260 billion a year, the libertarian [Cato Institute estimated](#) based on the assumption of 8.3 million immigrants living here illegally and working in the country.

At some point Congress must find a way to bring these immigrants out of the shadows while creating disincentives for future such immigration. No easy task, I know. But the status quo appeals to no one, and the nation can't deport them all. We need a common sense approach. While pragmatism is hard to find in Congress these days, we still should demand it.