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Another Voice: REAL ID threatens privacy without adding security

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Rep. Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., has an outsized role in deciding whether or not New Yorkers and all Americans will soon begin carrying a national ID card.

As the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, she will soon decide whether she wants funds flowing to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to be used for converting state driver's licenses into a national ID system. Such a system would negatively affect immigrants, minorities and the working poor. Lowey should take up the defense of her constituents' freedom from a national ID.

When the House of Representatives first passed REAL ID in 2005 – without hearings – Lowey rightly opposed it. But the House Republican leadership later attached it to a must-pass military spending bill, which got her affirmative vote.

The law's standards for driver's licenses and non-driver IDs include forcing drivers to present multiple documents for proof of identity, proof of legal presence in the United States and proof of their Social Security number. REAL ID compliance will also require states to share drivers' data and documents with every other motor vehicle agency through a nationwide network of databases.

The combination of federally mandated standards and a federally run information network creates, in effect, a national ID system. The DHS has brow-beaten roughly half of the states in the country into a pared-back version of compliance with REAL ID, but New York is currently non-compliant.

The onerous identification requirements of REAL ID raise concerns for the state's substantial foreign-born population, as well as for the urban poor. Many New Yorkers will have difficulty producing original copies of the large number of documents required by REAL ID, as well as paying for expensive new licenses.

After years of inaction, the DHS has recently stepped up efforts to push REAL ID on New York and other states. In January, it announced that travelers from noncompliant states will be turned away at airport checkpoints starting in January 2018, although that deadline will probably be moved back, as has been done numerous times already.

REAL ID is not good security. A national ID may be intuitive, but analysis shows that it would only mildly inconvenience criminals and terrorists, while subjecting law-abiding people to greater tracking and the risks of hacking and identity fraud. Americans should not trade their privacy and liberty for the false sense of security given by vast government databases.

By defunding REAL ID in the appropriations process for fiscal year 2017, members of Congress can take a stand against a DHS program that threatens the rights and liberties of their constituents.

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