



Stuck in the DMV

October 26, 2013

By Charles Oliver

It took more than two months, but on Thursday Dee Holden found out her Georgia driver's license had been renewed.

"I was so relieved and so thankful," she said.

Holden, a Whitfield County resident, first went to the Dalton office of the Department of Driver Services in August to have her license renewed. A Georgia license holder for almost 40 years, she thought the visit would be routine.

"I went Aug. 15. I called first, and the phone message gave me directions. I was sitting there and I saw something that said you have to have bills and you have to have a birth certificate. The message didn't say anything like that," she said. "So I went out to the car and got some things out that had my name and address on them. I thought surely I wouldn't need my birth certificate to renew a license I've had for more than 30 years."

Last year, the state adopted new rules to help bring it into compliance with the federal 2005 REAL ID Act, which sets requirements for driver's licenses to be used for federal ID for purposes such as boarding commercial airplanes or entering federal courthouses.

To obtain or renew a Georgia driver's license now, a person must present at least one document to prove they are a citizen, one document showing Social Security number and two documents showing the person's address. Women who have been married need their marriage license to show their name change. Women who have been divorced and change back to their maiden name will need their divorce papers.

When Holden couldn't produce a birth certificate, the office sent her away without renewing her license.

Holden, 69, was born in Canada and moved with her family to the United States when she was 1.

She became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1954.

Holden returned to the driver services office on Sept. 4 with a copy of her birth certificate, a copy of her naturalization papers and a copy of her marriage certificate.

“She (the clerk) handed them back to me and said, ‘These are copies. We need the originals,’” Holden said.

So Holden returned the very next day.

“I’m standing there with my bills, with my driver’s license and with my original naturalization papers,” she said. “The lady looks at my naturalization papers and says, ‘These are old.’ I said, ‘Yes, I’m old. They don’t expire.’”

Holden said she was promised she would hear from the office in five working days. She didn’t.

After waiting for two weeks without hearing anything, Holden said she returned to the office with all of her previous documents as well as her current U.S. passport, which is valid through 2019 and which she has used as ID when obtaining her nursing licenses in Georgia and Florida.

“I’m standing there with my Social Security card, my license that I’ve had almost 40 years, my naturalization papers, my passport. I think that surely I’ll be able to renew my license,” she said. “Instead, the girl says they are researching my citizenship papers and can’t renew my license.”

“It’s just frustrating thinking of how many hours of my life I have spent trying to do something that used to take a few minutes,” she said.

According to the Department of Driver Services website, both passports and naturalization papers are accepted as proof of identity. Holden should have only needed to show one of them to obtain a license.

But Susan Sports, a spokeswoman for the Department of Driver Services, said those documents still need to be verified.

“She’s hung up in the Homeland Security database,” Sports said early last week. “She had all the required documents. But we have to go through a series of electronic checks — the Social Security Administration, the National Driver Register, several others. The reason it’s taking longer for her is that her certificate of naturalization is older.”

Most older records have never been entered into any electronic databases, so they have to be researched and physically pulled out of files.

Sports said most driver’s license applications are cleared electronically without any problem. Those that don’t clear are sent to a special help desk at the agency’s headquarters in Conyers. Most of those are resolved within five days, she said. But some can take up to two months or longer.

Sports said the Dalton driver services office did make a mistake by not referring Holden to that special help desk for any questions she might have.

“This is where we refer people who don’t have a birth certificate and don’t know where to turn or their birth records were in a fire and burned up. It’s for people who are caught in various logjams,” she said.

State Sen. Charlie Bethel, R-Dalton, said he has not heard of naturalized citizens being unable to obtain a license despite presenting a valid passport.

“I have heard from people who have had other problems. The most common problem I have encountered is generally pretty quickly remedied,” he said. “We have a number of internationally adopted children. And some paperwork was improperly filed 15 years ago when the child was brought here as an infant. They don’t show up on the Homeland Security database. It generally takes a day to fix. Somebody just takes that paperwork and files it where it is supposed to be filed, and the teen can get a learner’s permit.”

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies for the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank that seeks to promote individual liberty, said situations such as Holden’s are fairly common in states that have moved to implement REAL ID. He said the information in immigration databases isn’t complete.

“It causes problems like this. It causes problems with E-Verify (an Internet-based federal program that determines if someone is eligible to work in the United States),” he said. “It’s a constant problem.”

No state has fully complied with the federal REAL ID law, but Harper said Georgia is one of 20 states that Homeland Security has declared to be in “material compliance” with the law. Fourteen states have passed laws refusing to take part in REAL ID. The rest are in various degrees of compliance and Homeland Security keeps extending the deadline for states to come into compliance.