Making REAL ID Real—Finally

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

The 9/11 Commission suggested it, Congress passed two laws requiring it, and the fiscal year (FY) 2008 budget allocated funds to begin implementing it. Today, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) finally announced a plan to establish minimum standards for state-issued driver's licenses and identification cards that are intended to be used for federal purposes (such as passenger screening at U.S. airports). Congress should do its duty and support the department's plan and fully fund the FY 2009 budget request for REAL ID implementation.

The REAL ID Requirement. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 and the REAL ID Act of 2005 required that when key identification materials, such as driver's licenses (and the documents used to obtain them, such as birth certificates), are issued at any level of government and used for a federal purpose, these documents must meet minimum national standards of authenticity. To prevent tampering, counterfeiting, or fraud, and to enhance privacy protections, the laws also established standard security features concerning identification cards and the processes for issuing them.

These laws are grounded in common sense. Administrators of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators had long recommended similar measures. Requiring more secure documents and procedures for issuance and monitoring is not a "silver bullet," but this strategy will help to combat identity theft, fraud, and other crimes. Billions of dollars are lost each year due to identity theft, the fraudulent obtaining of government benefits, and other criminal activities related to this issue. Making identity credentials more secure will also help to enhance public safety at airports and other public venues.

Not a National ID Card. Real ID does not establish a national identity card. States retain their sovereignty and traditional responsibilities. The federal government does not gain more access to personal information, nor does REAL ID create a national database. In fact, the law *adds* privacy protections such as requiring more security and background checks for government employees who handle personal data.

Smart Implementation. One valid objection to REAL ID concerned the fiscal burden it would place on states to implement the program. The roll-out plan announced today by DHS reduces the initially estimated cost by more than 70 percent with a responsible, phased implementation procedure. By December 2009, states should be able to upgrade the security of their license systems. The new systems will check the legal status of all applicants to ensure that illegal aliens cannot obtain REAL ID licenses. Such documents will only be issued to per-

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sons lawfully living in the United States. Some states are already close to meeting those standards.

What's Next? Congress should fully support the DHS implementation plan. In addition, Congress should appropriate the additional funds required in FY 2009 to assist states in meeting the DHS timelines for full implementation of REAL ID.

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