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Time's running out to get real with Real ID

BY TOM TEMIN

The Real ID program, which has its roots in a law passed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, fundamentally seeks to ensure the authenticity of a state-issued identification – typically a driver's license. Though many years in execution, the program still has a ways to go with fewer than 50% of Americans having a compliant license.

Real ID issuance is no academic question. The latest statutory deadline extension, after which federal facilities and the Transportation Security Administration will no longer accept non-Real IDs, now is Oct. 21. That's when the Homeland Security Department says it will start full enforcement.

Yet many states are far behind, in part because issuing a Real ID-compliant license requires the driver to present a raft of paper documents in person to local vehicle registration offices. The pandemic, which has limited public access to state (and federal) offices tossed in a last-minute roadblock.

PANEL OF EXPERTS

Kyle Cotner, Public Sector Business Development Manager, Kodak Alaris

Michael Leahy, Secretary of Information Technology, State of Maryland

Ian Grossman, Vice President of Member Services and Public Affairs, American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators

Charles Norman, Registrar of Motor Vehicles, State of Ohio

For how states and the IT industry are dealing with Real ID, Federal News Network asked a panel of practitioners:

- Kyle Cotner, the public sector business development lead at Kodak Alaris
- Michael Leahy, secretary of information technology for Maryland
- Ian Grossman, the vice president of member services and public affairs for the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA)
- Charles Norman, the registrar of motor vehicles for Ohio

Grossman said that the states all have the basic capability for Real ID.

"At a macro level, everybody is on track to be compliant with the DHS regulations to produce real IDs and provide them to their citizens," he said. "And then if you scanned all of the states, you would see different levels of implementation."

Those that are on top, and those with a clear strategy for making the deadline despite the setback of the pandemic, back that strategy with a solid technology and workflow plan. The bonus is, the plan is adaptable to many other governmental processes in which require paper processing. Even in the digital age, such processes still exist. Another bonus is that capability in Real ID sets up motor vehicle agencies to position themselves as portals through which citizens access the range of state services.

Dealing with paper

Real ID, as noted, requires people to bring in a variety of documents and records associated with their identities, and for the time being these are nearly always paper.

"The differences between Real ID and say the traditional identification process starts with the requirements in terms of the original documentation, Grossman said. "Frontline clerks are having to review birth certificates, passports, Social Security cards and verify that they're legitimate."

Specifically, the process involves two basic steps.

First, the records must be safely scanned, and returned in good condition to the owner.

Second, registry or DMV staff must verify with the documents' originators that the documents are authentic. That requires some way of accessing other governmental and private sector databases. Registries must complete the process during a single visit.

Technologically, it's a tall order.

"We're constantly trying to balance that desire to achieve efficiency with the need to achieve security as well. And, making sure those documents are authentic, and are real, and the person is who they say they are. That's our challenge, Leahy said, adding, "Every day we're getting better."

Although the deadline hasn't moved, the pandemic, with its COVID-avoiding protocols, has slowed the process down.

In Ohio, according to Norman, the Real ID adoption rate is about 45 percent, and it slipped a bit because of the pandemic. Ohio is among the more technologically adept states, and Norman says more people are not only aware of the Real ID requirement but are actively seeking a compliant license.

Cotner of Kodak Alaris says the paperwork bottleneck – at the point where citizen and motor vehicle registration employee meet – is solvable. He pointed to the Real ID Modernization Act, enacted at the end of 2020, as an enabler to get agencies around some of the technology challenges.

He underscored the issue of unequal levels of Real ID process maturity from state to state. The pandemic compounds this by creating a backlog of people who would normally be flowing through their local motor vehicle registries.

Eventually they will be filing back in.

"Waiting in line – it's not obviously the fault of the workers processing these documents," Cotner said. "It's just they have the existing technology that they've used. And sadly, it just cannot keep up with the workload coming in."

He added that when conditions let agencies open up again, the rush to catch up will likely produce a substantial administrative burden. "Basically, what's important is that the documentation is processed quickly and efficiently."

Practicality and efficiency needed

In practice, creating Real IDs requires a scanning capability that is fast and flexible enough to handle documents of all sizes, materials and conditions. And also with enough intelligence to integrate with a larger IT workflow that encompasses the inter-organizational verification checks, and the motor vehicle bureau's own processes that result in the issuance of a compliant license.

This points to another disparity state-to-state, namely their levels of basic infrastructure.

"Some have modernized their technology and have the most cutting edge tools available. Others are still working on 1970s mainframes that require significant investment to be able to run the types of transactions they need," Cotner said.

Regardless, he said, given the deadline, the volume of individual transactions, the number of documents each transaction requires, and the finite workforces of state agencies, above all Real ID processing needs efficiency.

Efficiency requires scanning and verification take place right at the individual workstation, typically the booth setups that characterize most vehicle registries. Having employees gather the paper and walk to another room with shared facilities adds minutes to each transaction, minutes that translate to hours in given day. It also requires equipment that doesn't chew up the client's paperwork.

In Ohio, Norman said, the efficiency drive starts before the client even comes in. The registry website provides a checklist of needed documents.

"We find generally that people that do go to our website are much better prepared and have a smoother process," he said.

Even so, the verification process for all of the documents means "that in Ohio, a Real ID, transaction takes three-to-four times as long as a standard driver's license transaction. In a state where we have 8 million drivers, you can imagine the backlog," Norman added.

In Ohio, as in other states, the scanning itself take a while. Employees feed documents into a scanner one at a time. Cotner noted that with products like extended flatbeds, multiple documents – and documents of varying size – can scan simultaneously.

He added, scanning may also be coupled with technology that reads the document contents, recognizing whether an address is missing or a set of digits is complete on a Social Security card or birth certificate. Imaging technology can also enhance the on-screen appearance of old or damaged documents.

That's the case in Maryland, a state Leahy said got an early head start on Real ID.

"Our scanning methodology does several things that I think go farther than most. We scan to recognize certain documents and look for information on that document in a specific location, Leahy said. "So we are effectively determining whether the document itself fulfills the request for what it's there for, and can be authenticated."

The collected information can all be cross-checked automatically "to get feedback almost immediately." Leahy added. He said Maryland is exploring ways for those of the digital generation to photograph their documents on a smart phone and email them in ahead of an in-person visit to a Motor Vehicle Administration office. Also in the future is use of digital certificates and blockchain ledgers to increase the speed and security of ID verification.

The Real ID Modernization Act enables states to move beyond a purely paper-based process.

"Specifically," Grossman of AAMVA said, "the idea that someone can take a picture or scan their own documents, upload them in advance, so that it's there waiting for the DMV clerk, as opposed to the clerk having to start from scratch."

Eventually states will have to catch up not only to 2005 requirements, but also to what they can do under Real ID modernization.

"But for the present," Leahy said, "the key is to make certain that we can speed up the process as much as possible for the ordinary citizen coming into the MVA."

How DMVs can harness IoT to beat the status quo

The Department of Homeland Security's REAL ID initiative will require anyone trying to board an airplane or access a federal facility after Oct. 1, 2021 to have an updated identification card that adheres to new minimum security standards. That means the vast majority of citizens around the country are going to have to interact with their respective Department of Motor Vehicles in the near future. But what are DMVs doing to prepare for this influx of citizens and paperwork expected from the millions of REAL ID applications that require processing?

Paul Szemplinski, CEO and founder of Integrated Document Technologies, Inc. and president of CAPSYS Technologies, LLC, said the problem is one of status quo.

"These folks have not been taught that there's a better way to do things," Szemplinski said. "I think it's one of these neglected areas, because agencies have been doing things the same old way for decades. I want to bring some of the things that they can do differently to light so they can become innovative, ask questions, challenge the status quo, and bring real innovation to the state DMV offices and make a better life for the DMV worker."

Part of the issue is the disconnect between what happens on the front lines versus the thinking in the back offices. Bridging that gap is old technology that struggles to provide DHS with access to the data it needs. So while IT is busy trying to put out fires around DHS interoperability, procurement officials are making most of the practical decisions about what technology the front line workers are using.

"But they're not necessarily doing it with knowledge about the alternatives, or what's best for the employees and the citizens," Szemplinski said. "They're doing it in a vacuum; they remain largely anonymous, and don't really consider the inefficiencies that get introduced downstream as a result. It's a casualty of the lowest bid gets the award decision."

The way things are currently done at the DMV, the worker gets a PC in order to drive a new scanner. But that scanner is bought in bulk from the lowest bidder, meaning it's unlikely to include any new innovations. And then an app has to be built because invariably commercial-off-the-shelf software is deemed too expensive due to licensing. But such a decision to develop their own application rarely takes into account the entire software development lifecycle.

"There's an internal cost now that they didn't account for because somebody has to develop a design spec, manage the lifecycle of the app and code it, quality assurance (QA) it, and figure out how to deal with exceptions in the process that arise during the capture process," Szemplinski said. "And it likely hasn't been designed with the end user in mind, meaning the frontline DMV worker. It's designed by an IT person who says, 'Well, I've got this piece of paper, I've got to scan it and I need this information to accompany that document.' And they rinse and repeat that process."

Except that mindset doesn't take into account the myriad things that can go wrong on the front lines. It doesn't account for customers, who in the 21st century expect personalized service and a closed loop process where the input yields guaranteed output.

The problem is that the whole process of acquiring new technology and software for the DMV has been commoditized without considering process efficiencies or optimized workflows. This leads to another challenge

around viewpoints on security. There is a strongly engrained perception that agencies have to build their own internal IT infrastructure with private datacenters. There is cloud avoidance because of perceived security risks with personally identifiable information. Solutions deployed in Microsoft Azure Government Edition or Amazon Web Services (AWS) are highly secure and often a more efficient means for state agencies. Agencies must start overcoming this perception in order to implement better, more capable solutions that incorporate cloud technology.

Sourcing the cheapest scanner that is not the best for job is a short-term solution that is not designed to handle the types of documents coming in through the REAL ID process according to Szemplinski.

"It is a matter of replacing legacy in-house built software and the typical attitude of 'I must have….' I must have a PC, a windows operating system, anti-malware and anti-virus software, my IT department must deploy and support it over a 3-5 year lifecycle, our IT staff must go out to each DMV field office to install and deploy the PCs and scanners," he said. "We have to get people out of this mindset. You don't have to tackle the capture problem at local DMVs using the same old tired method that is costly to the state and aggravating to citizens."

What is the result?

"You've got long lines. You've got broken processes, process inefficiencies, higher costs," Szemplinski said. "So the question is, is there room to innovate? And is there a better alternative?"

The answer, Szemplinski said, lies in the internet of things (IOT): an innovative, network-connected capture solution that sits at the front edge of the process and integrates directly into the DMVs critical line of business systems and applications.

"We have a smart scanning solution powered by a cloud application that completely disrupts the old paradigm and changes the thought process. This solution can be integrated with the state's line of business systems and also the DHS systems. These devices can be delivered to the local DMV office and a non-IT person can take them out of the box in five minutes or less and have them operational. With INfuse Smart Connected Scanning from Kodak Alaris and our application CAPSYS CAPTURE ONLINE we have introduced the concept of positive confirmation in which we can provide direct feedback to the DMV employee or citizen in a self-service kiosk environment – letting them know before they finish their business whether or not the data captured was accepted," Szemplinski said. "This solution can be looking for a specific document type or types, validate whether key metadata necessary for downstream processes has been collected and properly identified such as a social security number, address, date of birth, or some barcode value was read properly."

"Today, they don't have a simplified work environment, which would be pleasant for the employee, and the citizen knows whether or not I've collected all of their documents with the proper information," Szemplinski said. "So with this solution I can service my citizens better, the employees have a better work environment. It's a lower cost overall for the state, and brings innovation to the market that›s been long overdue."

With the ever-increasing demand from citizens to create better experiences, pressure from front-line workers to invest in the right tools to perform critical tasks, and a looming backlog of REAL ID applications that puts further strain on the already taxed system, now is the time for agencies to reevaluate their toolset for the future. Continuing legacy technologies and mindsets in government agencies in a data-driven digital world will only serve to increase costs, drive up state taxes and create process inefficiencies and frustration not only for front-line workers but also for the citizen population.