

Driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants benefit everybody

New Jersey just became the 14th state to offer them.

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For most adults in the United States, being able to drive a car is more of a necessity than a luxury. An overwhelming number of people depend on their car to get to work, school, and doctor's appointments. That number includes the millions of undocumented immigrants in this country—which is why last month New Jersey became the 14th state to pass a law that allows undocumented immigrants to receive state-sponsored driver's licenses.

States have a practical incentive to offer driver's licenses to those without legal status: it brings in revenue to the state from title and license fees, and it generates economic activity through immigrants' purchase of vehicles, auto insurance, gas, and auto parts. Furthermore, by making undocumented immigrants legal drivers, the law cuts down on hit-and-run cases and ensures a more orderly enforcement of

traffic laws.

But most important, the law brings order and common sense to the everyday lives of people like New Jersey resident Margarita Rodriguez, who every six months needs to take her son to an ear specialist in another town. Without the ability to drive legally, she has to take a two-hour bus ride instead of a 20-minute car ride to the appointment. Something as simple as arranging a visit to the doctor puts great stress on her family, forcing her to miss work and her children to miss school. Lacking a license also presents an obstacle to accessing care in an emergency.

New Jersey lawmakers were moved by the testimony of a nine-year-old boy who spoke of the fear his parents have when they drive him to school. Every day they worry about the possibility that they might be pulled over for a traffic violation, which could lead to a charge of driving without a license, which could lead to deportation proceedings. Every day thousands of immigrants make this kind of desperate calculation about how best to do their jobs and care for their families.

The licensing bill languished in the New Jersey state house for 15 years under both Democratic and Republican leadership. Eventually lawmakers recognized that reducing the number of drivers fearful of the police is good for public safety; making it easier for residents to see their doctors and get their immunization shots is good for public health; and helping students get to school benefits their whole classroom and the entire society.

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