

Forms of Identification for Undocumented Immigrants

Why is it important for undocumented immigrants to have identification cards?

Proving your identity is a basic necessity that has been turned into an obstacle for many immigrants. Government-recognized identification cards have become a symbol of inclusion because they ensure undocumented immigrants access to certain public and private services. New York City is reported to have the country's largest municipal identification program with more than 600,000 enrollees who enjoy access to the city's cultural institutions and have the ability to participate in the local economy by banking with more than 75 financial institutions in the city.¹ Denying immigrants access to proper identification may cause immigrants to feel unwelcome within the community, which can intensify fear of interacting with law enforcement and other community members. Alternative identification cards can enable immigrants to enjoy great benefits other residents also enjoy and they can help facilitate their abilities to cooperate with local law enforcement in resolving crimes and other safety concerns.

What are the different types of identification cards available for undocumented immigrants?

Consular Identification Cards:

Also known as Matricula Consular, consular identification cards are widely used among Mexican citizens living in the United States. Matricula Consulars are issued by Mexican Consulates² to Mexican citizens living in the United States regardless of their immigration status and do not grant legal status in the U.S. to whom it is issued. To obtain a matricula consular, the individual must apply in person and provide proof of Mexican citizenship, proof of residence within the consular district, and fingerprints.³

Driver's Licenses:

Undocumented immigrants may apply for driver's licenses by presenting to their state's Department of Motor Vehicle an identification document such as a foreign passport or matricula consular, and proof of residency in the state. Some

states, including Maryland and Delaware, require evidence of tax filings in the state for the preceding two years.⁴ Currently, [12 states and the District of Columbia](#) provide driver's licenses to undocumented residents.⁵

Municipal Identification Cards:

Municipal identification cards are issued by a local city or county government for the purpose of providing identification to residents within the jurisdiction who cannot obtain traditional forms of identification. They can be issued regardless of immigration status. In order to obtain a municipal identification card in most jurisdictions, the applicant must show proof of residency within the city or county and proof of identity with a birth certificate or other document that contains the applicant's date of birth. Several localities across the country currently have municipal card programs, including New York; Los Angeles, California; New Haven, Connecticut; and Newark, New Jersey. The city of Detroit recently approved an ordinance to issue municipal identification cards to residents.⁶

Community Identification Cards:

Immigrants residing in states who have limited access to government issued identification documents may obtain community identification cards that are provided by non-profit organizations. Certain non-profit organizations work with local law enforcement officials to accept the cards as a helpful identification tool. The FaithAction ID program in North Carolina is the most widely known program of its kind and has been reported to benefit many immigrants living in the state.⁷

What are the benefits of alternative identification cards?

- **Helps emergency personnel in providing emergency care.** In medical and security emergencies, having an identification card allows police and emergency response teams to properly identify the individual in distress.
- **Provides access to basic public services.** Having identification provides access to local services such as city-owned recreational areas such as community pools, libraries, community centers, or even museums. Parents

can use identification cards to enroll their kids in school and feel comfortable participating in school activities with their children. It also affords individuals the opportunity to do daily activities such as filling prescriptions at their local pharmacy, which often require proof of identification, or picking up packages from the post office or other courier.

- **Promotes public safety by reducing fear of interacting with law enforcement.** Providing identification cards to undocumented residents helps diminish immigrants' fear of interacting with local police due to lack of documentation. Moreover, having identification may encourage immigrants to volunteer information to police because they feel a part of their communities and feel a responsibility to help protect it. Having identification also helps police properly identify individuals they come in contact with and helps law enforcement keep proper records.
- **Gives access to financial services.** Financial institutions in certain states honor municipal identification cards as valid documentation to open new bank accounts.⁸ Access to financial services protects immigrants and promotes public safety. Immigrants unable to open a bank account due to lack of documentation often carry around large sums of cash and can be targeted for theft. Furthermore, immigrants who cannot access banks and credit unions fall prey to check cashing businesses, which can charge hefty fees for their services. Having identification gives them the opportunity to open bank accounts and enjoy the benefits of depositing their money with a financial institution and eliminate their reliance on check cashing services.

- Most identification cards such as municipal and community identification cards cannot be used to travel through airports or on a plane.
- The cost of the card can be a barrier for immigrants that cannot afford it.

What are the limitations of alternative forms of identification?

- Their use is often limited to the jurisdiction that issued them. Municipal and community identification cards are typically honored within city limits and not recognized in other areas.
- Alternative identification cards do not confer immigration status on the individuals they have been issued to. They are issued for identification purposes only.
- These identification cards do not provide authorization to work legally in the United States. Only the federal government can issue a work authorization document. However, alternative identification cards may be used for identification purposes when applying for jobs.

End notes

- ¹ "Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito Announces Continuing and Expanded Benefits for Year Two of IDNYC Program, The Official Website of the City of New York, December 14, 2015 retrieved from: <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/931-15/mayor-de-blasio-speaker-melissa-mark-viverito-continuing-expanded-benefits-for>
- ² Consular Section of the Embassy of Mexico: <https://consulmex2.sre.gob.mx/washington>.
- ³ Basic Facts about the Matricula Consular, National Immigration Law Center, December 2015, retrieved from: <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Basic-Facts-about-the-Matricula-Consular.pdf>.
- ⁴ States Offering Driver's Licenses to Immigrants, National Conference of State Legislatures, July 8, 2015, retrieved from: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/states-offering-driver-s-licenses-to-immigrants.aspx>.
- ⁵ State, Districts, and Territories providing Driver's Licenses to Undocumented Immigrants, CLINIC, retrieved from: <https://cliniclegal.org/sites/default/files/advocacy/stateandlocal/Drivers-License-Map.pdf>.
- ⁶ Detroit city council approves creating municipal ID cards, Detroit Free Press, Joe Guillen, May 17, 2016, retrieved from: <http://www.freep.com/story/news/2016/05/17/detroit-council-approves-creating-municipal-id-cards/84508736>.
- ⁷ FaithAction ID Initiative, retrieved from: http://faithaction.org/services/id_initiative.
- ⁸ Official Website of IDNYC: <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/idnyc/benefits/banks-and-credit-unions.page>.