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STATE CAPITOL, ROOM 2209
SACRAMENTO, CA 95814
TEL (916) 651-4121

INFORMATIONAL HEARING SENATE TRANSPORTATION AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Department of Motor Vehicles Customer Wait Times

State Capitol, Room 4203
Thursday, October 4, 2018
1:30pm

Introduction

Wait times at California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) field offices have increased significantly this year, leaving customers waiting for several hours and often in uncomfortably hot conditions.¹ The DMV has cited the new federal REAL ID program, which began earlier this year, for the increase in wait times. The Legislature has augmented the DMV's budget to hire extra staff to handle the additional workload caused by the REAL ID program and improvements have been made. However, much more improvement is needed for service to return to its prior level or better.

The purpose of this hearing is to learn about the current actions being taken by the DMV to reduce wait times, and to discuss future steps and goals for reducing wait times and improving the customer experience at the DMV.

Background

Increase in Wait Times

There has been a marked increase in wait times at DMV field offices in 2018 due to the start of the REAL ID program. According to the DMV, the average statewide wait time at field offices as of July 2018 was 23 minutes for customers with appointments and 83 minutes for customers without appointments, which is a 14 and 35-minute increase, respectively, compared to the previous year. However, this is the average of wait times across all DMV offices. At the field offices with particularly high customer demand ("hot spot" offices), the wait times have exceeded three hours.

Also, this wait time does not include the “pre-queue” time spent waiting in line to check-in and get a number, which can be a large part of the total wait time experienced by customers. DMV began measuring this wait time in July 2018. DMV estimates that the pre-queue waiting time in July was on average ~40 minutes.

Federal REAL ID Act

The Federal REAL ID Act of 2005 created new security standards for state driver’s license (DL) or identification (ID) cards. Starting on October 1, 2020, a state driver’s license that meets these standards (or any federal identification, such as a passport) will be necessary to board an airplane, enter a military base, or enter most federal buildings. A REAL ID card must be applied for and obtained in person. This means that all Californians wishing to fly using their state DL/ID card will have to go to a DMV field office within the next two years to obtain a REAL ID card. Currently, there are 30 million Californians that hold DL/ID cards that could be updated.

DMV began implementing the REAL ID program in January 2018, which has led to an influx of customers. The federal standards for obtaining a REAL ID card are more stringent than for a non-REAL ID DL/ID card, which means that the applications can take more time to process. Californians must provide proof of identity (a U.S. birth certificate, a U.S. passport, employment authorization documents, permanent resident card, or a foreign passport with an I-94 form), proof of residency in California, and a Social Security number to obtain a REAL ID card. The public seems to not have been well informed of these new requirements.

Overtime and Staffing Issues

Overtime paid to field office employees have tripled in the first six months of 2018 compared to the same time period in 2017, due to the increased workload at field offices.¹ Also, according to the DMV, there has been a 30% absentee rate in field offices (including planned and unplanned days off), which means that nearly 1/3 of the state’s DMV employees are absent any given day.² The additional work imposed by the REAL ID program has placed significant pressure on current DMV employees, which has led to increased overtime pay and absenteeism, contributing to the longer wait times.

Technological Issues

There are ongoing issues with DMV’s information technology (IT) infrastructure, which the DMV itself calls “old and antiquated”.³ According to the DMV, it has experienced 34 IT outages since January 2017.⁴ Recently, on September 20, 2018, nearly 40% of DMV offices experienced “technical issues” halting customer transactions at 68 sites.⁵

¹ <https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/09/11/dmv-workers-literally-sick-from-stress-overtime-up-232-percent-this-year/>

² The DMV does not have absenteeism data for prior years.

³ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article216632160.html>

⁴ <https://www.sacbee.com/latest-news/article218878900.html>

⁵ <http://www.sfexaminer.com/dmv-outage-leaves-customers-waiting-hours/>

Recent Actions by DMV and Legislature to Reduce Wait Times

Additional Staffing

In the last two state budgets, the Legislature gave the DMV \$23 million (281 positions) for 17-18 and \$47 million (550 positions) for 18-19 to help implement the REAL ID program. As of August 2018, the DMV has hired 519 of the 550 positions under the 18-19 budget. Additionally, SB 856 (Committee on Budget, 2018) augmented DMV's budget by \$16.6 million to hire an additional 230 positions, which are expected to be filled by the end of September.

The Department of Human Resources (CalHR) has also temporarily eased hiring rules for the DMV to hire limited-term employees and retired annuitants. As of August 2018, they have made 287 emergency short-term hires, and brought back 112 retired annuitants. Additionally, over 450 staff members from DMV headquarters and other state agencies and departments have been deployed to DMV field offices to provide support.

The Legislature also passed SB 862 (Committee on Budget, 2018) which provides funding for DMV to hire more staff on an ongoing basis, if necessary, with conditional reporting requirements.

Better Information Technology

DMV has expedited new technology at field offices and IT improvements to help reduce wait times. One recent change is the launch of the redesigned DMV website, where customers can easily access accurate information about the federal REAL ID application, and can now submit changes of address online.

DMV is piloting check-in kiosks in two offices (San Jose and South Sacramento), which will allow customers to check-in without a technician present. Many DMV field offices are now equipped with computer tablets to aid workers in issuing queue tickets, making return appointments, and allowing customers to submit DL/ID card applications online. The DMV has also established a command center that is helping field offices reduce wait times by viewing transactions in real time and shifting resources as needed.

Additionally, 10 new self-service vehicle registration renewal kiosks (DMV Now) have been installed in field offices across the state. DMV also plans to install DMV Now kiosks at 50 grocery store locations bringing the statewide total to 160. This will allow customers to get more of their DMV services done outside of the field offices, leaving the offices free to handle other work, such as REAL ID applications.

Customer Service

The DMV has made several changes to improve the customer experience and to ease the stress of waiting at DMV field office. The DMV is offering text message notification services, which

alerts customers that their assigned number is within approximately 30 minutes of being called. This gives the customer the option to leave and return prior to their number being called. Also, DMV has waived the “no food or drinks” rule in field offices.

DMV has also expanded Saturday service to 62 field offices, and expanded morning office hours (open at 7am) to 16 field offices. DMV has also been mailing driver license renewal notices a month earlier to allow customers more time to schedule an appointment.

What's Next?

According to DMV's monthly reporting to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, DMV's operational improvements and staffing increases have reduced total wait times (queue + pre-queue) by over 20 minutes in August, and are expected to reduce wait times an additional 20 minutes in September. However, there are questions about how DMV will continue to make progress on reducing wait times, given the additional funding and support that the Legislature has provided and the expected growth in customers applying for REAL IDs in the coming years. The committee has requested that the DMV present their work plan for reducing wait times and improving customer service quality at this hearing.

Also, on September 22, 2018, Governor Brown directed the Department of Finance to conduct an audit on the DMV.⁶ The performance audit will look at the DMV's field operations, IT system and governance structure, and develop recommendations. The full report is expected to come out in March 2019.

⁶ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article218804370.html>