

PENNSYLVANIA

Need your birth certificate? Be prepared to wait.

by [Michaëlle Bond](#), Updated: September 14, 2018



HOMELESS ADVOCACY PROJECT

The Philadelphia single mother had gotten her family into a homeless shelter and then into coveted transitional housing. For a home of her own, she needed a city housing voucher.

But first, she needed some form of official identification. So in February, with help from a free legal clinic, she mailed the applications to the state's vital records office in Western Pennsylvania.

In July, she was still waiting. She came up for the precious voucher, and she was out of luck. So the housing program gave her dream to the next person on the list.

"This was essentially a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that she missed, because the Division of Vital Records is running so far behind," said Marsha Cohen, executive director of the Homeless Advocacy Project.

People across the country who need housing, jobs, or government services need proof of their identities. That often starts with a birth certificate. Advocacy groups nationwide [host clinics](#) that have helped many thousands get their records. Cohen's group applied for 700 people last year and nearly 900 in 2016.

But the Pennsylvania Department of Health faces a backlog of requests and anticipates next year will be its busiest. More people will be requesting birth certificates to get IDs that meet federal security requirements post-Sept. 11, 2001. [The REAL ID Act](#) requires either those IDs or passports to board domestic flights or to enter federal buildings starting in 2020. The state processed about 267,000 birth-certificate applications last year, a 17 percent increase from 2016.

Residents need birth certificates to get identification cards and identification cards to get birth certificates. This "chicken and the egg" predicament is often worse for people who are homeless, impoverished, or addicted to drugs, because many don't have any documents.



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Homeless Advocacy Project hosted a birth certificate clinic at law firm Morgan Lewis in Center City on July 26.

A Pennsylvanian with an ID who can afford to pay at least \$10 extra in fees can apply online for a copy of a birth certificate, which costs \$20. Currently, the wait is one to five weeks. If a person has time to wait at an office in Harrisburg, Scranton, Pittsburgh, Erie, or New Castle, Lawrence County — open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday — birth certificates are available the same or the next day, according to health officials. Philadelphia's office processes requests in three days for pickup. ([Times fluctuate based on demand and staffing.](#))

"It's incredible to think there's not a place you can go in Southeastern Pennsylvania that you can go and get a birth certificate across the counter," said State Rep. John Lawrence, a Republican representing parts of Chester and Lancaster Counties, who introduced a bill aimed at shortening wait times.

Someone sending an application to the state's central office in New Castle, which processes all mailed requests, can expect to wait at least five months. The health department has no plans to expand the service to other offices.

"It's basically set up [in such a way that] people who are lacking resources have an exponentially longer wait time," said Anna Brickman, director of the legal center at Face to Face Germantown, a social services nonprofit. "These are arguably the people who need the document the most." Attorneys such as Brickman can break the cycle of lack of identification by applying for birth certificates on others' behalf, writing letters stating clients are who they say they are.

Jacob Eden, staff attorney at the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania, does this for clients of Prevention Point Philadelphia, a health services nonprofit for people addicted to drugs. Eden said he stopped applying by mail; several times last year, Prevention Point's checks — good for 60 days — expired before the state could process them.

The state budget passed in June included \$2.35 million to decrease wait times by hiring 27 new staffers to process vital records requests. The state has hired for nearly every position, said Sarah Boateng, the health department deputy secretary. "We feel confident with 55 full-time, fully trained staff we will be able to meet the demand," Boateng said.

In June, the House passed Lawrence's bill, which would allow local registrars to process birth-certificate applications, direct some of the application fee to the health department, and require a review to increase efficiency.

The Wolf administration hasn't yet decided whether to support the bill but is looking for areas to streamline, Boateng said.

New Jersey residents can get their birth certificates from the registrar in the municipality where they were born as well as online and from the state's health department. Online orders typically arrive in two weeks. Residents can wait about an hour at the department's Trenton office and walk out with their records.

Health officials in Pennsylvania are aiming to process requests within three week. In years past, the longest an applicant waited for a birth certificate was four to six weeks. Waits stretched longer than four months in January and grew to 7½ months last spring. The current five-month wait is better but still a hardship, advocates say.

People call Brickman every week from halfway houses asking whether their birth certificates are in, so they can restart their lives. "They're treading water, essentially," she said.

In addition to addressing the backlog, advocates said the state should allow caseworkers and others to apply for people without IDs, allow attorneys to apply online, and waive fees. For struggling Pennsylvanians, the \$20 cost can be a hurdle. New Jersey charges \$25 but grants waivers for homeless people in shelters.

Pennsylvania waives the fee for military families and, as [of January, for people seeking opioid addiction treatment](#). The Wolf administration has no plans to extend the waiver. Edith, who lives in Montgomery County and asked that her last name be withheld, said she's fortunate that she can pay. And good thing she can: She said she applied for her birth certificate last year and although the state cashed her check, she never got the document in the mail that would allow her to get a federally approved ID.

So she applied again in February. The state cashed her second \$20 check in March.

"This is ridiculous," she said in early August. "Even if you have all kinds of resources, you still cannot get this document." Her birth certificate arrived late last month. As for the Philadelphia single mother, her documents finally came last month — six months after she applied. The woman and her children now stay with family or friends.



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