

Eliminating the Barriers to Getting a State ID

■ **By Evan Dubchansky and Michael Taub**

People experiencing homelessness come to the Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) for help on an array of issues, but one issue stands out as being the gateway to resolving a great many others: lost or stolen Pennsylvania photo ID cards.

Many landlords and housing programs will not accept applications for housing unless the applicant possesses a valid state ID. However, people living in a shelter or on the street lack a safe place for storing important documents, so ID documents are often lost or inaccessible just when they are needed most. For those without photo ID, it is also nearly impossible to deposit a stimulus check, start a new job, or make use of many other benefits that those of us with state-issued ID take for granted.

The cost for a state ID in Pennsylvania has risen 133% since 2014 to \$31.50. This increase has rendered state ID cost prohibitive for those with limited or no income. For many years, at least one organization has written checks to PennDOT to help people pay for state ID, but the organization simply does not have the funding to meet the demand of all those in need of housing. As a result, unhoused people and others in need of financial assistance are left without clarity on how to access their essential documents.

Having seen far too many Philadelphians suffer the repercussions of not having photo ID, HAP, in

conjunction with Dechert LLP and the Philadelphia Foundation, began looking into whether a state ID fee waiver for people experiencing homelessness was possible



in Pennsylvania, as is the case in 10 other states across the country.

As the price of an ID is established through the Transportation Bill, it was determined that a fee waiver was possible, but only if passed by the state legislature. In contrast, the Wolf administration was able to waive the cost of replacement birth certificates for people experiencing homelessness in 2019 without new legislation. HAP, Dechert, and the Philadelphia foundation were instrumental in achieving that fee waiver, too.

Due to the collaborative efforts of HAP, Dechert, and the Philadelphia Foundation, a bill was introduced in the Pennsylvania State Legislature in November

2020 to waive the cost of new or renewed state IDs for all Pennsylvanians who meet the federal definition of being homeless. Governor Wolf signed the law shortly after it was introduced, and by February of this year, PennDOT began issuing the new state IDs to people across Pennsylvania experiencing homelessness. For those who have been able to obtain a free ID, they have had easier access to employment opportunities, government benefits, and housing applications.

Despite the success of HAP's efforts to obtain the fee waiver, there remains work to be done to eliminate barriers for people experiencing homelessness who need a state ID. Under the new law, only new or renewed state IDs are free. As a result, the change offers no support for those who have lost or had their ID stolen prior to its expiration date. HAP is now exploring ways in which the new law can be expanded to provide fee waivers for all who are experiencing homelessness, and our elected officials have the power to make this happen. If they do, no one will be prevented from obtaining housing, depositing a stimulus check, or otherwise accessing needed benefits solely due to a lack of photo identification.

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