

Immigrants leary of license

Undocumented encouraged to apply

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WATERBURY — Lorenzo Hernandez has been in Connecticut for seven years. He has been driving without a license for just as long and he wants to change that.

Beginning Jan. 1, 2015, a new state law will allow “individuals who cannot provide DMV with proof of legal U.S. residence or a Social Security Number” to obtain driver’s licenses “for driving purposes only.”

With a valid form of identification and proof of residence in Connecticut, undocumented immigrants may apply and undergo the process of obtaining a driver’s license without fear of deportation.

Still, many undocumented immigrants are scared to go through with the process.

“They feel like this is some sort of way for the government to keep track of them,” said Victor Lopez, executive director of the Waterbury Hispanic Coalition. “Most of the immigrants don’t know all the information they need to know.”

The Hispanic Coalition has been working with the Naugatuck Valley Project to hold workshops and seminars that explain the eligibility requirements and process for the opportunity.

Elizabeth Rosa, an NVP organizer, said the organizations have been traveling to churches to get the word out.

A list of contacts for undocumented immigrants wanting help obtaining a driver’s license,



Jose Paniagua, senior pastor of Centro Cristiano CCAMR Church on Congress Avenue in Waterbury, discusses workshop plans with Elizabeth Rosa, an organizer at the Naugatuck Valley Project. Organizations in Waterbury have been working with undocumented immigrants to obtain

driver's licenses.

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Applicants may begin submitting their documents in September and complete required educational classes ahead of time. In January, they can complete the remaining steps of the process just as a citizen would.

“We take them through it step by step,” Rosa said. “If they need to write their country for a birth certificate, we’ll do that. We will get them ready.”

Hernandez, who participated in a workshop at his church, Centro Cristiano CCAMR on Congress Avenue, said in Spanish that although he’s going through with the process, he does have some fear.

“Sometimes when people say they’re going to help you, there’s something behind that,” he said. “I’m going to do it and encourage people to do it, but I hear and see the fear among us as well.”

The senior pastor of Hernandez’s home church, Jose Paniagua, has held workshops at churches throughout Connecticut.

In Spanish, he said he gained the trust of a pastor in a Derby church that allowed him to give the presentation to immigrant members one evening. Although about 40 members of that church are undocumented, only 10 showed up. “They don’t believe they’re safe. We have to convince them there will be no city officials or police present,” Paniagua said.

The Connecticut Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission has posted a fact sheet on its website explaining that the new law “prohibits detaining the person unless the officer determines that specified public safety risk factors exist.” These circumstances include being convicted of a felony and having an outstanding arrest warrant.

The driver’s licenses would allow the immigrants to drive legally, register their cars, pay taxes and have auto insurance. “It provides them with stability and it also provides us legal drivers with a sense of security and safety,” Lopez said.

Like Hernandez, many undocumented residents drive illegally in Connecticut with no registration or insurance. Some use public transportation and others gather in areas to hitch rides from people.

“I am a perfect driver. I’ve never been pulled over for speeding or not wearing my seat belt. I’ve been driving without a license for seven years and now I want to know the other side of the coin,” Hernandez said. “I know the license will show I’m undocumented but I have learned that in this country I have to take risks to get things.”

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