

Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 20, 2011

Mass. Suspends Driver's Licenses Transferred from Ariz.

Arizona created quite a national furor a year ago by enacting a law to crack down on illegal immigrants, but the ease with which non-English-speaking people can obtain driver's licenses there has attracted refugees now living in Massachusetts. The Bay State has suspended the driver's licenses of 124 Massachusetts residents who obtained licenses from Arizona, which they then converted into Massachusetts licenses, the Boston Globe reported Monday. State Police are investigating hundreds of other cases in which Massachusetts residents may have gained driving privileges through Arizona's more flexible policy.



Massachusetts offers the written exam required for a driver's license in English and 26 other languages, second only to California. But the state requires the applicant to take the exam unaided, while Arizona allows the services of a translator. Arizona also allows applicants to bypass the written test altogether with certificates from state-approved private driver schools. And while Arizona requires proof that the applicant is in the country legally and requires multiple documents for proof of identity, the state, unlike Massachusetts, does not require proof of in-state residence. As a result, many recent refugees, whose native languages are not among the more than two dozen offered on the Massachusetts exam have made the 4,000 mile round-trip to get a driver's license in Arizona and transferred it to a Massachusetts license on their return. Many whose licenses have been suspended are now struggling to find transportation to and from school or work.

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Lynn resident Abdikadir Mohamed, a refugee from Somalia, said he needs a license to drive to his factory job on the graveyard shift and to take his children to their schools. The father of six failed the written test in Massachusetts twice due to the language barrier before going to Arizona and getting his license there after he had enrolled in a private driving school.

"You go because you don't have any other option," he told the *Globe* through an interpreter at the Chelsea Collaborative, where he is studying to become a U.S. citizen. "The people speak my language there." The license suspensions are for 60 days and those seeking to have them reinstated will have to pay a \$100 fee and take the written and road test to get Massachusetts licenses. Maine and a few other states allow a translator to assist a license applicant on the written exam, and Awies Hussein, a community organizer at the nonprofit Chelsea Collaborative, said Massachusetts should do the same.

"The main obstacle is getting that permit, the written test," Hussein told the *Globe*. "They don't have to provide an interpreter. We can help. But they need to let us do it."

"Driving is absolutely crucial today for survival," said Jozefina Lantz, director of services for new Americans at Lutheran Social Services of New England, an agency that resettles refugees. "Refugees were really undermined here."



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Brian Zimmer, president of the Coalition for a Secure Driver's License, said some states have discovered that many applicants who passed the test with the services of a translator did not really know the rules or road signs.

Massachusetts residents who went out of state to get their driver's licenses broke the law, Rachel Kaprielian, head of the state Registry of Motor Vehicles, told the *Globe*. They could have sought help by enrolling in English classes or in other programs offered by the state, she said.



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