

Transportation and Driver Licenses

The transportation person is responsible for arranging the refugees' transportation until the family is able to do this independently. When public transportation is available, he or she should introduce the refugee family to the system quickly and encourage them to use it. Both the transportation person and the refugee should maintain copies of public transportation schedules.

It is best if the location of the refugee's housing and employment do not require long-term reliance on the cosponsoring group for their transportation needs. We have found that lack of public transportation causes feelings of frustration and isolation that hinder independence. Hence our strong recommendation that your refugee family should be resettled in towns or cities near your group with adequate public transportation.

Some refugees will be interested in acquiring a car. Unless someone in the cosponsoring group is able to donate a used automobile, the refugee will need to work with the finance person to develop a plan for purchasing a car, maintaining it, and arranging for automobile insurance.

In most cases, the transportation person will need to arrange for driving instruction and/or help the refugee prepare for his or her driver's license. **The Connecticut DMV now offers the learner's permit test in Arabic, in addition to Russian and French.** However, s/he will still need to learn the information in the CT Motor Vehicles Drivers' Manual (currently in English only) and be able to read and interpret common signs. The road test is administered in English. A translator may be present to explain the process before the exam begins but may not be present during the actual test. Getting a driving license can be a trying ordeal, and many refugees do not pass it on their first or second attempt.

It is important to emphasize that until the refugee holds a valid Connecticut driver's license, s/he is expected to work with the employment and transportation persons in your group to obtain employment. Thus it is imperative that these group members coordinate closely in surveying the feasibility of jobs in terms of English proficiency, skills, and geographical constraints.

A Note on IDLs and US Driver's Licenses

In our experience, those refugees who know how to drive are understandably determined to get a US driver's license as soon as possible. Not only would this enable the refugee to work at jobs that require a US driver's license, it would allow them the kind of independent mobility they may have been accustomed to at home (i.e., especially in Iraq and Syria, where many people owned and drove cars).

In Connecticut, use of an international driver's license (IDL) for extended periods is only permitted if the driver is a visitor and is not intending to settle in the state. ***Refugees become residents of Connecticut as soon as they apply for benefits through the Department of Social Services (DSS).*** This means that once refugees become residents of the state, they may only drive legally with a valid Connecticut Driver's License. Thus use of IDLs by refugees is unlawful.

Now that the driver's test is administered in Arabic and French (the only languages most common among most IRIS clients), there is no need for traveling to other states to undergo examination and road testing in their native languages (i.e., primarily New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine). ***This is not legal, because they are legal residents of Connecticut and, in effect, would be lying about their residence in the other state.*** While the practice is somewhat common among refugees in other parts of the country, it is nonetheless very risky. ***If during the course of their green card applications it is discovered that they were untruthful in obtaining a driver license outside their state of legal residence, they risk being disqualified.***

IRIS worked very hard with the Connecticut DMV to collaboratively and successfully bring a workable solution to a problem that put our clients at risk. Thus we ask you to work with your family to facilitate the DMV process in as practical a manner as possible, factoring in ability to carry insurance and to afford all auto-related expenses themselves.

Driver's License Guidelines for Holders of Bona Fide Home Country Licenses

1. Go to ct.gov/dmv
2. "How can we help you?" Click on circle with "Driver's licenses & ID's"
3. Under heading "Applying for a License" click on ">Driver's License"
4. Under "Verified Driver's License" Click on "Ages 18 and older"
5. You will see in bold letters "Individuals exempt from this 90-day requirement are:" The third bullet is "Any customer that held a driver's license in the past. This includes...out-of-country license. Must provide expired license...from previous state or country."

For additional questions, call 1.800.842.8222, press 1, then 2, then 1.

A list of approved DMV translators can be found here:
<http://www.ct.gov/dmv/cwp/view.asp?a=805&q=558024>