

Editorial

# New York's Immigrant Drivers

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Gov. Eliot Spitzer made a very important if politically hazardous decision yesterday. He decreed that New York State's Department of Motor Vehicles will award driver's licenses to those who can prove who they are and pass the tests, not only those in good standing with the federal immigration authorities. That decision is correct for all who use New York's roads.

Like other governors and mayors, Mr. Spitzer is trying to deal with Washington's failure to produce a coherent immigration policy that would deal humanely with the 12 million illegal immigrants who have come to America to work, often in the lowliest of jobs. That lack of resolve forced states and sometimes local communities to figure out how to cope with reality — housing, working conditions, all sorts of local problems. Mr. Spitzer's licensing rules are an attempt to deal with higher accident rates among unlicensed drivers — many of whom flee the scene because they fear immigration authorities.

The new rules would expand the kinds of documents that would be accepted by the state to get a license. A Social Security card would no longer be required if there are enough other documents, like an up-to-date passport, a birth certificate or other items. The governor promised new security measures — such as making sure state officials are trained in verifying foreign documents and using photo comparison technology to make certain one person does not get more than one license.

Mr. Spitzer and his administration argue that licensing more people would not only make the roads safer, it might result in a lowering of New York's high automobile insurance rates. If that really does happen — and it is worth reminding the governor of this promise — less costly insurance would be another bonus.

The move drew angry responses from Republicans in the state who charged that the governor was in danger of giving valid state identification cards to potential terrorists. That argument is absurd on its face; organized terrorists hardly lack access to forged documents. It also fails to deal with the need to bring more of the state's immigrant workers out of the shadows so that if they drive — and they will drive — they can do it safely. Also, New York State would have a better idea who many of these residents really are.

With these enlightened changes, New York will join eight other states that do not require applicants for drivers' licenses to prove their immigration status. Like New York, these states want a drivers license to achieve what it is supposed to do — certify a safe driver.