



REAL ID 2026 GUIDE



REAL ID 2026 NEW \$45 FEE



**New \$45 TSA Fee
Rule Explained**



**Step-by-Step Real ID
Application**



Documents You Must Bring



**Deadlines & Compliance
Dates**



What Is Real ID?

The Real ID Act, passed by Congress in 2005 following 9/11 Commission recommendations, establishes minimum security standards for state-issued driver's licenses and identification cards. Real ID-compliant cards are designed to reduce identity fraud and improve national security.

How to Identify a Real ID:

Most states mark compliant cards with a gold or black star in the upper portion. Non-compliant cards are often marked "Not for Federal Purposes" or "Federal Limits Apply."

Enhanced Driver's Licenses (EDLs):

Five states—Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Vermont, and Washington—issue Enhanced Driver's Licenses. These display a U.S. FLAG marking instead of a star but are equally TSA-compliant. EDLs also work for land and sea travel to Canada and Mexico.

- ❏ **Important:** Some states have automatically issued Real ID-compliant cards for years. Check your current license for the star marking before assuming you need to upgrade.



What's New in 2026: The \$45 TSA Fee

Real ID enforcement began May 7, 2025. But starting February 1, 2026, there's a new consequence for travelers without compliant ID: [a \\$45 fee every time you fly](#).

How the TSA ConfirmID Fee Works:

When you arrive at airport security with only a standard driver's license, TSA directs you to a separate verification lane. You pay \$45, undergo biometric facial recognition scanning, and receive a digital receipt valid for 10 days.

Key Facts:

Fee Amount

\$45 per verification

Valid Period

10 days from payment

Payment Portal

Pay.gov (official government payment site)

Accepted Payments

Credit card, debit card, ACH bank transfer, PayPal, Venmo

Time Added

10-30 minutes depending on airport volume

Who's Exempt

Anyone with Real ID, passport, passport card, military ID, or Global Entry card

Children

Under 18 traveling with adults are exempt

Critical Warning:

The \$45 fee is non-refundable and does not guarantee boarding. If TSA cannot verify your identity through their database checks, you will still be denied entry to the secure area—even after paying the fee. This is not a "pay to fly" pass; it's a verification attempt.

The Real Cost:

Flying twice a year with trips more than 10 days apart costs \$90 annually—[\\$900 over 10 years](#). A Real ID costs \$20-60 once. A passport card costs \$65 once. The math is clear: get compliant now.

When You Need Real ID



Required For:

- Boarding domestic flights within the United States
- Entering federal buildings that require identification
- Accessing military bases
- Entering nuclear power plants and other secure federal facilities



Not Required For:

- Driving
- Voting
- Accessing hospitals or health clinics
- Visiting post offices
- Applying for or receiving federal benefits
- Participating in law enforcement proceedings

Your Standard License Still Works For:

Everything except boarding planes and entering federal facilities. You can still drive, vote, cash checks, and handle everyday identification needs with a non-compliant license.

Key Statistics



Metric	Data
Enforcement Date	May 7, 2025
TSA Fee Start Date	February 1, 2026
TSA Fee Amount	\$45 per verification
Fee Valid Period	10 days
Real ID Cost	\$20-60 (varies by state)
Passport Card Cost	\$65
Daily U.S. Domestic Passengers	2.9 million
Americans Needing to Upgrade	Approximately 18 million



Timeline of Real ID Implementation:



Acceptable Alternatives to Real ID

If you prefer not to get a Real ID, these federally approved documents work for domestic air travel:

Alternative ID	Cost	Valid Period	Best For
U.S. Passport Book	\$165	10 years	International travelers
U.S. Passport Card	\$65	10 years	Domestic-only flyers (best value)
Global Entry Card	\$120	5 years	Frequent international travelers
Enhanced Driver's License	\$30-85	Varies	Residents of MI, MN, NY, VT, WA
U.S. Military ID	Free	Varies	Active duty, retired, dependents
Permanent Resident Card	N/A	10 years	Lawful permanent residents
Tribal ID	Varies	Varies	Federally recognized tribal members

Mobile Driver's Licenses (mDLs):

TSA now accepts mobile driver's licenses at a growing number of airports in approved states. These digital IDs are stored in Apple Wallet, Google Wallet, or state-specific apps. However, always carry your physical ID as backup—technology failures at checkpoints do happen, and not all airports support mDLs yet.

Best Value for Most People:

The passport card at \$65 is often the smartest choice. It costs less than two TSA fee payments, requires no DMV visit, lasts 10 years, and works for all domestic flights plus land/sea travel to Canada, Mexico, Caribbean, and Bermuda.

Document Requirements: Identity & Legal Presence

To obtain a Real ID, you must prove your identity with one original document from this category:

Acceptable Documents:

- Valid, unexpired U.S. passport or passport card
- Certified copy of U.S. birth certificate (with raised seal or registrar signature)
- Consular Report of Birth Abroad (Form FS-240)
- Valid, unexpired Permanent Resident Card (Green Card)
- Foreign passport with valid U.S. visa and approved I-94
- Unexpired Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- Certificate of Naturalization (Form N-550 or N-570)
- Certificate of Citizenship (Form N-560 or N-561)

Critical Requirements:

Documents must be originals or certified copies

Photocopies are never accepted, even if notarized

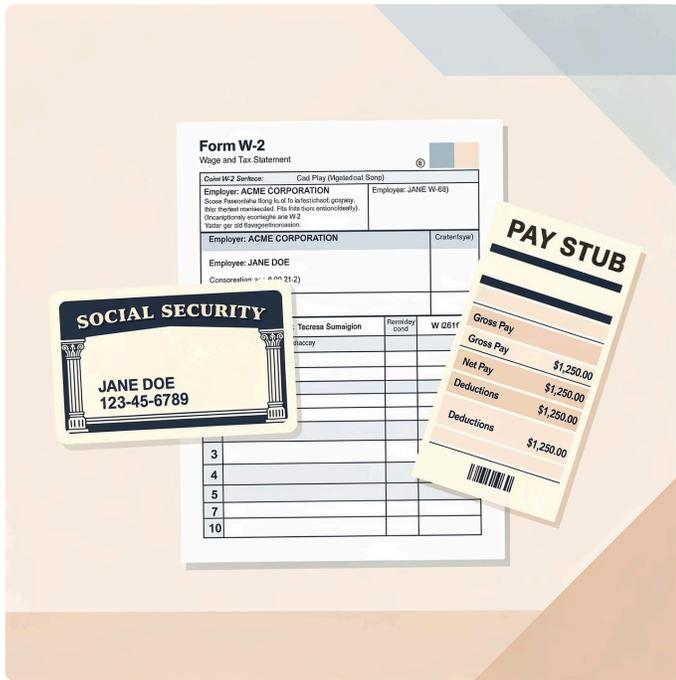
Documents cannot be laminated (except cards designed to be laminated)

Expired documents are typically not accepted

Missing Your Birth Certificate?

Contact the vital records office in the state where you were born. Processing takes 2-8 weeks depending on the state. Budget \$15-30 for certified copies. Order extras while you're at it.

Document Requirements: Social Security & Residency



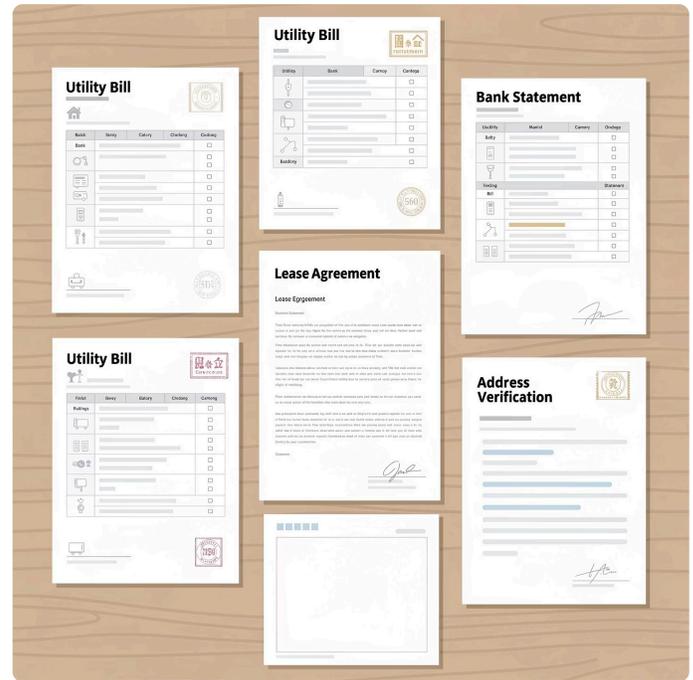
Social Security Number Verification

Most states require one document showing your full Social Security number:

- Social Security card (must NOT be laminated)
- W-2 form showing full SSN
- SSA-1099 form
- Pay stub showing full SSN
- 1040 tax return

Laminated Social Security Cards:

Many states reject laminated cards because lamination can interfere with security features used to detect fraud. If yours is laminated, request a replacement at ssa.gov or your local Social Security office. Replacements are free and arrive in 7-14 days.



Proof of Residency

Most states require two different documents showing your current address:

- Utility bill (electric, gas, water, cable) dated within 60-90 days
- Bank or credit card statement dated within 60-90 days
- Mortgage statement or property deed
- Residential lease agreement
- Vehicle registration or title
- Insurance policy or bill
- W-2 or 1099 form from current year
- Government correspondence (IRS, state agency)

Important: The two documents must be from different sources. Two bank statements from the same bank typically won't work. Your name and address must match exactly on both documents.

Document Requirements: Name Changes

If your current legal name differs from your identity document (like your birth certificate), you must provide documentation for each name change.

Acceptable Name Change Documents:



**Certified
marriage
certificate**



**Divorce decree
specifying name
change**



**Court order for
legal name
change**



Adoption papers

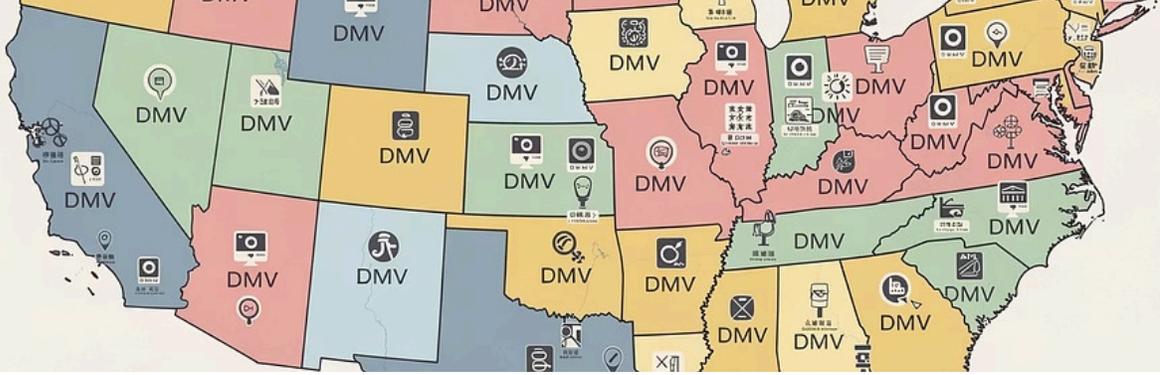
Multiple Name Changes:

If you've changed your name multiple times, you need documentation showing the complete chain. For example, if your birth certificate shows "Jane Smith," you married and became "Jane Johnson," then divorced and became "Jane Williams," you need both the marriage certificate and the divorce decree.

Social Security First:

Some states require you to update your name with the Social Security Administration before visiting the DMV. Delaware, for example, requires a 48 to 72 hour wait after your SSA name change before you can apply for Real ID. Check your state's requirements.

- Tip:** If your middle name appears differently across documents (full name vs. initial), some states may require additional verification. Colorado enforces strict middle name matching. Contact your state DMV before your appointment.



State Variations in Requirements

While all states follow federal guidelines, specific requirements and processes vary. Here are notable differences:

State	Key Variation
Alabama	Must visit ALEA Driver License exam office, not license commissioners
Alaska	Accepts SSA ineligibility letter if no SSN; residency docs must be within 90 days
Arizona	Verbal SSN allowed (electronically verified); cards valid up to 8 years
California	Online pre-verification available; AB 60 license holders ineligible for Real ID
Colorado	Full middle name must exactly match SSA records
Connecticut	Residency docs must be computer-generated and within 90 days
Delaware	Name changes require 48-72 hour wait after SSA update for database sync
Florida	Smart ID app suspended; physical ID required at all times

Find Your State's Requirements:

Visit dhs.gov/real-id and use the state lookup tool to find your official state DMV Real ID page with current requirements.

Before Your Visit:

1. Search "[Your State] DMV Real ID" online
2. Look for official .gov websites only
3. Use your state's document verification tool if available
4. Note any appointment requirements

Step-by-Step Application Process

01

Determine If You Need Real ID

- Do you fly domestically?
- Do you visit federal facilities?
- Do you already have a passport or other compliant ID?

If you have a valid passport, you don't need Real ID for air travel.

02

Check Your State Requirements

Visit your state's DMV website. Use their document verification tool if available. Note processing times and whether appointments are required.

03

Gather Required Documents

- One proof of identity and legal presence
- Social Security number verification
- Two proofs of current residence
- Name change documentation (if applicable)

04

Pre-Verification (If Available)

Many states offer online document pre-verification. Upload or enter document information before your visit to catch problems early and speed up your appointment. California, Florida, and other states report this can cut DMV time in half.

05

Schedule an Appointment

Most DMVs accept walk-ins, but wait times can exceed 3 hours in urban areas. Online appointments significantly reduce wait times. Choose mid-week, mid-month for shortest waits. Some states allow authorized third-party providers for a convenience fee.

06

Visit Your DMV

Bring all original documents. Complete the application. Pay your state's fee. Have a new photo taken.

07

Receive Your Real ID

Some states issue temporary paper IDs same-day. Permanent cards typically arrive by mail in 1-4 weeks. Verify the star marking is present on your new card.

Timeline and Costs



Processing Timelines

- **Same-day:** Temporary paper ID issued at most DMVs.
- **1-3 weeks:** Permanent card arrives by mail (typical).
- **3-4 weeks:** Some states during normal periods.
- **6-8 weeks:** Peak periods or states with backlogs.

Appointment Wait Times:

Vary from same-day availability to several weeks, depending on location. Urban areas and certain times of year experience longer waits, with appointments sometimes booked weeks in advance.



Typical Costs

- **New Real ID license:** \$25-60
- **License renewal with Real ID upgrade:** \$20-45
- **Duplicate license with Real ID upgrade:** \$15-40
- **Real ID state identification card:** \$10-35
- **Enhanced Driver's License (5 states):** \$30-85

Check your state's DMV website for current fee schedules.



Hidden Costs to Consider

- Birth certificate replacement: \$15-30
- Marriage certificate copy: \$10-25
- Court document copies: \$10-50
- Transportation to/from DMV
- Time off work

Special Situations

Children Under 18



Children traveling with an adult companion do not need Real ID or any identification for domestic flights. TSA does not require ID for minors under 18 when accompanied by an adult with acceptable identification.

Military Personnel



Active duty military can use their military ID for domestic air travel. Department of Defense IDs issued to dependents are also acceptable alternatives to Real ID. The Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC) is also accepted at TSA checkpoints.

TSA PreCheck Members



Having TSA PreCheck does NOT eliminate the need for Real ID. PreCheck expedites screening but doesn't replace identification requirements. You still need compliant ID regardless of PreCheck status.

Expired ID Buffer



TSA accepts driver's licenses expired up to two years for identification purposes. This provides flexibility during the transition period. However, you'll still pay the \$45 fee if the expired license isn't Real ID compliant. An expired Real ID is still better than a current non-compliant license.

Foreign Nationals



Non-U.S. citizens must provide documentation of lawful status. Acceptable documents include permanent resident cards, valid foreign passports with approved visas and I-94 forms, or Employment Authorization Documents.

U.S. Territories



Residents of U.S. territories should check with local licensing authorities. Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands have their own Real ID implementation procedures.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Bringing Photocopies Instead of Originals

All documents must be originals or certified copies. Regular photocopies, even notarized ones, will be rejected. You'll need to reschedule and return with proper documentation.

Mismatched Names Across Documents

Names must be consistent across all documents. Even minor differences—middle initial vs. full middle name—can cause problems. Colorado enforces strict matching. Verify everything matches before your appointment.

Laminated Social Security Card

Many states reject laminated Social Security cards because lamination interferes with fraud detection. Request a free replacement from SSA before your DMV visit. Allow 7-14 days for delivery.

Waiting Until You Need to Travel

Last-minute applications risk missing your flight if documents are rejected. Apply at least 4-6 weeks before travel.

Insufficient Name Change Documentation

If your current name differs from your birth certificate, you need legal documentation for every name change. Missing one link in the chain means starting over.

Only One Proof of Residence

Most states require two separate documents proving your address. They must be from different sources and show your complete current address including apartment numbers.

Assuming TSA PreCheck Replaces Real ID

PreCheck speeds up screening but doesn't eliminate ID requirements. You need compliant identification regardless of your trusted traveler status.

Thinking the \$45 Fee Guarantees Boarding

It doesn't. If TSA cannot verify your identity through database checks, you'll be denied boarding even after paying. The fee is non-refundable.

Planning Timeline: Avoid the \$45 Fee

If You're Traveling Within 30 Days

Immediate Options:



- Pay the \$45 TSA fee via Pay.gov for this trip (fastest option)
- Apply for expedited passport processing (\$60 extra, 2-3 weeks)
- Check if your state offers same-day temporary Real ID

After This Trip: Apply for permanent solution before your next flight.

If You're Traveling in 30-60 Days



- Apply for passport card with routine processing (4-6 weeks)
- Apply for Real ID if your state processes under 4 weeks
- Check your state's current processing times before deciding

If You're Traveling in 60+ Days



You have time for any option:

- Real ID: Schedule DMV appointment, gather documents
- Passport Card: Apply at post office or passport facility
- Passport Book: Best if you might travel internationally

Recommended Action Timeline

This Week:

- Check if your current license has the Real ID star
- Determine how often you fly annually
- Calculate potential \$45 fee costs vs. one-time ID cost
- Decide which compliant ID fits your needs

Within 30 Days:

- Gather all required documents
- Schedule DMV appointment or passport application
- Apply for your chosen compliant ID

Before Next Trip:

- Verify your new compliant ID has arrived
- Make a copy for your records
- Update your travel wallet

Important Contacts and Resources

Official Government Resources

Department of Homeland Security

- Real ID Information: dhs.gov/real-id
- Real ID FAQs: dhs.gov/real-id/real-id-faqs
- State Requirements Lookup: dhs.gov/real-id (state lookup tool)

Transportation Security Administration

- ID Requirements: tsa.gov/travel/security-screening/identification
- TSA PreCheck Info: tsa.gov/precheck
- TSA Contact Center: 1-866-289-9673 (Mon-Fri 8am-11pm ET, Weekends 9am-8pm ET)
- ConfirmID Payment: [Pay.gov](https://pay.gov)

Passport Services

- State Department: travel.state.gov
- National Passport Information Center: 1-877-487-2778 (Mon-Fri 8am-10pm ET, Sat 10am-3pm ET)

Social Security Administration

- Replacement Cards: ssa.gov
- Office Locator: ssa.gov/locator
- Phone: 1-800-772-1213

Finding Your State DMV

Search "[Your State] DMV Real ID" and look for official .gov websites. Each state has specific:

- Document checklists
- Online verification tools
- Appointment scheduling systems
- Current processing times
- Fee schedules

Action Checklist

1

Determine Your Needs

- Check if your current license has the Real ID star marking
- Assess how often you fly domestically
- Calculate your potential annual \$45 fee cost
- Decide if Real ID, passport card, or passport book fits best

2

Gather Documents

- Locate proof of identity (birth certificate or passport)
- Find Social Security card (not laminated)
- Collect two proofs of current residence
- Gather name change documents if applicable

3

Apply for Compliant ID

- Check your state's current processing times
- Schedule appointment if required
- Complete application with all original documents
- Pay required fee

4

Verify and Prepare

- Confirm your new ID has arrived
- Verify the star marking (or flag for EDL) is present
- Make a copy for your records
- Update your travel wallet before next trip

Guide Last Updated: February 2026

Official Sources: Department of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration, U.S. Department of State

For the most current information, always verify with official government websites: dhs.gov/real-id, tsa.gov, and your state's DMV website.