

Review of the Department of Public Safety Driver Service Bureau's Management of Customer Service Delivery

CONCLUSION: The Department of Public Safety (DPS) Driver Service Bureau suffers from inefficiencies driven by staffing shortages, changes in the technological and legal environment, and issues with kiosk services resulting in increased wait times for customers. Although the Bureau is filling examiner vacancies and improving the functionality of kiosks in order to lessen wait times at field offices, PEER recommends promoting online and kiosk services, improving the website, expanding appointments, utilizing management information from its new computer system to more efficiently allocate resources, exploring youth testing and licensing alternatives, and partnering with counties.

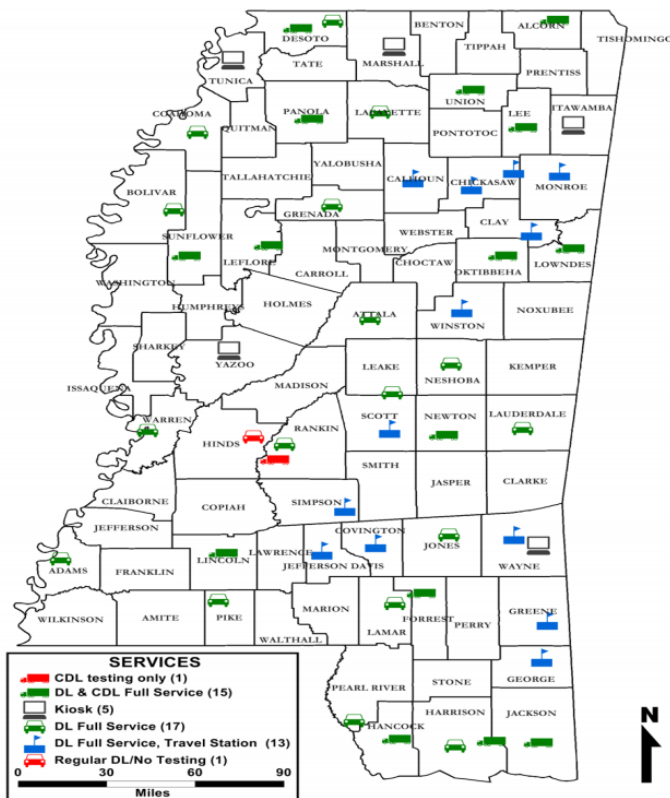
Background:

The Department of Public Safety's Driver Service Bureau issues drivers' licenses to persons who wish to drive the state's roads, commercial drivers' licenses to those who drive commercial vehicles, and identification cards to persons who require a form of identification for such transactions.

The Bureau maintains 34 permanent offices, which provide full services (i.e., drivers' testing, license renewals), and thirteen travel offices, which also provide full services, but are open only on a part-time basis. As of October 2019, the Bureau's field offices are staffed by 129 examiners.

Changes in federal and state laws have impacted the functions of the Bureau, and necessitated an upgrade in the Bureau's computer system. Upon becoming operational in the fall of 2018, the new system has contributed to increased customer wait times.

Exhibit 1: Driver Service Bureau Locations



Have wait times for customers increased at Driver Service Bureau field offices?

On average, customers' wait times to obtain drivers' licenses or ID card renewal services from Bureau field offices have tripled between FY 2017 and FY 2019.

For example, at the Gulport field office, average wait times increased from 11 minutes in FY 2017 to 1 hour and 33 minutes in FY 2019. In Jackson, at the Metrocenter field office, wait times increased from approximately an hour in FY 2017 to 2 hours and 20 minutes in FY 2019.

What are the primary causes for the increases in customer wait times at Bureau field offices?

There are varied reasons for the increases in customer wait times at the Bureau's field offices. Among these are an increase in the vacancy rate for examiner positions at the Bureau's field offices—which increased from 20% vacant positions in June, 2018 to 30% vacant positions in June, 2019. Additionally, issues associated with the development and implementation of the Bureau's new computer system have impacted wait times, specifically trouble interfacing with federal and out-of-state databases for some transactions, and issues with data migration and retention from the old computer system.

Other challenges of the new computer system include its demanding documentation features (born out of necessity to comply with federal mandates) that lessens examiners' flexibility in processing transactions and contributes to increased wait times. Further, the training necessary to operate the new computer system and changing documentation requirements have challenged the Bureau's examiners and impacted wait times. Finally, processing times for routine transactions (i.e., driver's license, ID card, and CDL renewals) have increased 40% to 50% since implementation of the new computer system. While no single factor is overwhelmingly significant, when taken together, all contribute to increased times customers must wait.

Are there tangential factors that have prevented customers from receiving timely service?

The Bureau maintains 11 kiosks installed at 9 locations through the state and 5 stand-alone kiosks at county courthouses. However, problems with functionality, such as error messages that do not explain the nature of the error, and difficulty in accepting addresses input by customers inhibit the kiosks' usefulness. Further, incomplete or missing information on the DSB website affects the website's utility and impedes drivers from receiving timely services. For example, the DSB website contained an outdated application that would not be accepted at Bureau field offices, thus increasing wait times as customers filled out the correct form at the counter. The website does not publish an up-to-date location list and phone numbers for each field office, and does not inform customers of REAL ID requirements (i.e., documents required to obtain the new gold star license that the Bureau has issued since January 2019).

Due to staffing shortages, the Bureau closes as many as 5 field offices per day, which prevents customers from receiving timely services. In offices with only two examiners, if an examiner is sick or giving a road test, the office must temporarily close, or close for the full day inhibiting drivers from receiving services.

Finally, incomplete or inaccurate information provided by Bureau examiner staff impacts a customer's ability to provide required documentation needed to complete transactions. Posing as a customer, PEER asked each DPS district headquarter office what documentation is required to change a maiden surname to a married surname on a driver's license. Nine headquarter offices told the "customer" to provide proof of marriage, while only one examiner described the three documents required to complete such a transaction.

Can other states' driver customer service delivery models provide solutions for Mississippi's wait time issues?

Contiguous states (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee) provide potential solutions to Mississippi's increased wait time issues in two categories: face-to-face office services and online services.

Face-to-face office service solutions reveal a trend of the contiguous states' departments of public safety or state police partnering with counties to offer driver services in Tennessee, while Alabama and Arkansas partner with another state agency to assist in service delivery. In addition to these inter- and intra-governmental partnerships, Louisiana trains and certifies private driving academies to administer road skills tests (the only option for such tests in Louisiana). Contiguous states' driver service delivery models provide local services in all counties and parishes except in Tennessee which has offices in 70 of its 95 counties. In contrast, the DSB has service offices in 43, or approximately half, of Mississippi's 82 counties.

While Mississippi and all other contiguous states offer license and ID card renewals, CDL medical certification submissions, and driving history records requests online, some of the contiguous states also offer services unavailable in Mississippi including the ability to change an address, pre-register for new licenses and ID cards, obtain graduated licenses, and schedule regular road skills tests.

What actions have been or could be taken to address customer wait time issues?

Actions taken by DPS to improve issues with customer wait times:

- Filling vacant examiner positions;
- Implementing appointment scheduling for license renewals in 6 offices and weekend testing for youth drivers on a limited basis; and
- Providing new kiosks and increased kiosk functionality to reduce the number of failed transactions.

DPS should analyze the use of local county offices, such as tax collectors, which already process motor vehicle tag registrations, and county clerks to provide renewal of drivers' licenses and ID cards.

DPS should consider other options to improve issues with customer wait times:

DPS should consider implementing a home or school-based online testing protocol for youth drivers and certifying and accepting results from school-based driver education instructors as proof of mastering driving skills, if feasible. Additionally, DPS should allow young eligible drivers to obtain graduated licenses through the online portal when restrictions are removed as young drivers age.

Further, the Bureau should utilize its new computer system to provide management information that can enhance efficient operations of the bureau by examining the types of services requested to determine if fast service queues are appropriate, analyzing examiners' workloads to determine which offices require additional staffing, potentially closing infrequently-used offices and reallocating those resources to busier offices, and finally, analyzing supervisor workloads to allocate them to field offices in a more equitable manner.

DPS can improve website information by posting all field office telephone numbers, ensuring it maintains accurate information and forms online, posting the location of field offices and kiosks, and promoting online portal and self-service kiosks. Finally, DPS should consider expanding appointment scheduling to include road test appointments for obtaining new drivers' licenses.