WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF LICENSING

Driver Licensing Office Future Operations 2025

Senate Bill 5161, Section 208, subsection 6

Washington State Department of Licensing

Legislative and Policy Office | Director's Office

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Purpose

The Department of Licensing (DOL) was directed in the 2024 transportation budget to prepare a report by November 1, 2024, with recommendations on the future of licensing service office operations based on recent implementation of efficiency measures designed to reduce the time for licensing transactions and wait times, and the implementation of statutory and policy changes. The 2025 report serves as an update of the previously submitted report from 2024; pursuant to Senate Bill 5161, Section 208, subsection 6.

Driver Licensing Office Overview

The primary role of driver licensing offices (DLOs) is to issue state official photo ID cards and driver licenses granting proof of identity and driving privilege to Washington residents. The DLOs provide essential services that must be conducted in person, including:

- First-time Washington driver license and ID card to establish identity and a photograph.
- Driver license and ID card renewal when the photograph on file is more than 16 years old (8 years for under 30), or the applicant is over age 70.
- Washington commercial driver license, including license endorsement to operate vehicles transporting hazardous material.
- First-time Washington enhanced driver license and enhanced ID card meeting federal REAL ID Act requirements.
- Testing driving knowledge and skills to qualify for a Washington driver license.
- Re-testing the driving knowledge and skills of persons reported as unsafe drivers to the Department of Licensing.

The agency operates 44 DLOs across Washington, comprised of 43 full-time and 1 part-time office based on the local population. The full-time offices are open five days a week, either Monday through Friday or Tuesday through Saturday. The alternate work week schedules make in-person service accessible six days a week. The part-time office has limited operations and is only open on Wednesdays.

The number of DLOs in the state has declined since 2009. Eleven DLOs closed in 2009 due to budget reductions during an economic recession. Additionally, three part-time offices closed in 2020, and one full-time office closed in 2022 when their leases expired with no option for lease extension. In 2024, one part-time office closed following unsuccessful lease negotiations. Six part-time offices closed in June 2025 due to budget reductions and

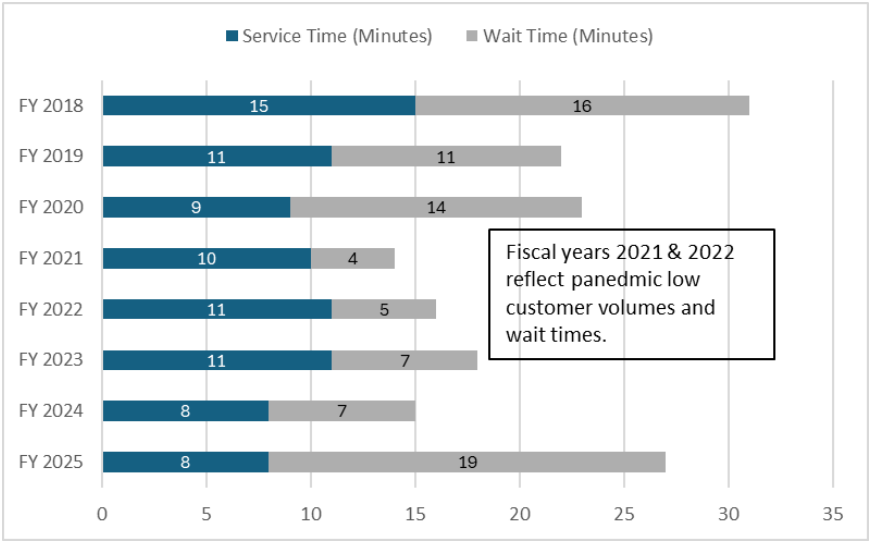
staffing limitations. These rural communities are supported on a less frequent basis by DOL2Go, the mobile team that brings licensing services to under-represented and service gap communities around the state. Since 2023, DLO staffing has been reduced by one-quarter to align with 2023-25 and 2025-27 budgetary reductions directives.

To meet the needs of Washington's residents, DOL has focused resources to maximize service efficiency within the DLOs and to expand the services offered outside of brick-and-mortar offices. The outcomes achieved to date are described in the two sections below.

Driver Licensing Office Improved Service Efficiency

As previously reported, DLOs provide a more efficient and timelier customer experience and transaction process efficiencies; with some of the ideas generated by staff, as well as technology enhancements put into place since 2018. The Legislature and DOL have prioritized funding and resources to improve the delivery of essential driver license and ID card services, including a significant investment in the 2018 transportation budget. As a result, the DLOs have lowered transaction service time by 6 minutes since 2018. Faster service contributes to shorter wait times and less time customers spend in the offices. Legislative funding reductions within the 2023-25 and 2025-27 biennia aimed at reducing driver licensing office staffing and growing customer volumes have made maintaining lower wait times increasingly more challenging as reflected in the visual below. Figure 1 below compares statewide service time and wait time annually beginning with fiscal year 2018.

Figure 1. Driver Licensing Office average service and wait times in fiscal years 2018–2025.



Appointment Incentive Service. Medium and large-sized DLOs add new appointments daily and weekly based on staffing. This prioritizes customers with appointments and smooths out customer peaks and valleys, giving customers and employees a better experience. Customers with urgent needs, who are over 70 and must renew in person or have an expired credential, are not turned away, but customers without an urgent need are directed to schedule an appointment.

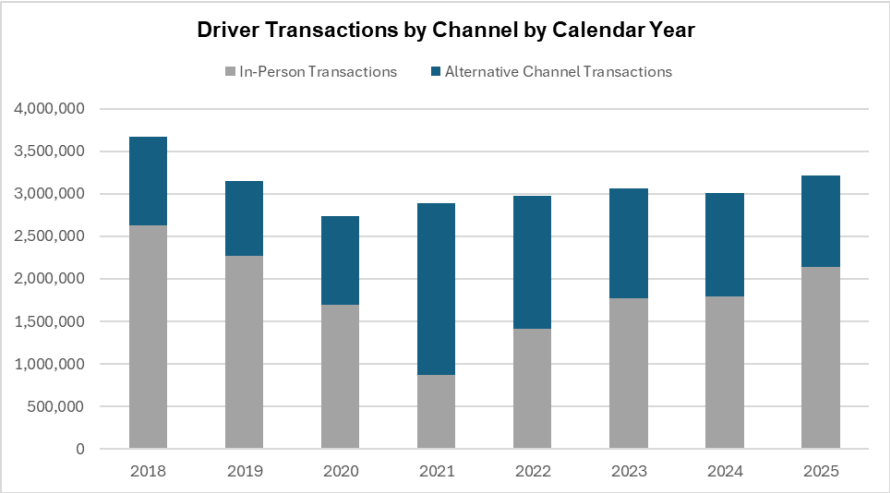
Regulatory reform. DOL completed work to implement Senate Bill (SB) 5800, DOL-requested legislation passed in 2024, that improves access to DOL-issued driver licenses and ID cards. Effective January 1, 2025, this legislation:

- Expanded the eligibility on the required adult signature for a minor's driver license or motorcycle endorsement application to include "responsible adult," which has now been defined in RCW 46.20.075.
- Provided more flexibility in how DOL verifies eligibility for at-cost ID cards, including electronic verification. It also allows participants in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program to qualify for an at-cost ID card from DOL.
- Directed the agency to conduct a study on the feasibility of offering reduced fee ID cards (Due December 1, 2025).

Expanded Access to Services

DOL services are available by mail, over the phone, online, and in-person. During 2025, year-to-date through August, 31% of driver transactions were conducted outside of a DLO. Figure 2 below illustrates the annual volume of driver transactions occurring in-person in a DLO and through an alternate service channel (online, by mail, over the phone) during the years 2018 through 2025.

Figure 2. Driver transactions by service channel for fiscal years 2018-2025



To serve all Washingtonians, DOL continues to focus resources toward increasing service channels, improving accessibility, and easing interactions with the agency. Below are examples of the priority work being done to achieve DOL's Purpose – helping every Washington resident live, work, drive, and thrive.

DOL2Go Mobile Licensing. Launched in July 2023 as a pilot program, the DOL2Go mobile unit provides ID cards and driver licensing services to people with barriers to visiting a driver licensing office. Ongoing funding for one five-person team was provided in the 2025 transportation budget.

- DOL2Go serves rural communities in service gap areas, people experiencing homelessness, assisted living centers, tribal communities, schools, and emergency responses such as wildfires. The team provides critical licensing services in communities where DOL has closed part-time offices due to budget reductions and staffing limitations. In these areas, DOL2Go is the only in-person licensing option available, ensuring residents are not left without access to essential identification and licensing services.

- During DOL2Go's first 26 months, the team helped over 9,900 Washington residents and issued 7,305 driver licenses and ID cards at 221 events.
- Demand for DOL2Go service continues to increase due to heightened public awareness and part-time office closures. The team is turning down as many events as they are attending due to insufficient staff and scheduling conflicts.

Photo: DOL2Go mobile licensing team passenger van

- DOL has shown the intent of this program, to serve those with difficulty accessing driver licensing services, can be met. To better meet demand, DOL has submitted a budget package for the 2026 supplemental session to fund a second DOL2Go team.

Customer Contact Center call-in services. The Customer Contact Center (CCC) is Washington residents' primary point of contact for identification, driver, vehicle, and vessel licensing questions, over the phone driver license and ID card transactions, and for online support. Giving residents the ability to obtain service by phone is crucial for people with barriers to conducting their business at a driver licensing office, online, or by mail. It also means DOL can help Washington residents using the service channel that best fits their lifestyle.

- DOL used existing funds in the 2021-2023 biennium to replace the CCC call management system with WaTech Connect, an Amazon technology solution, in June 2023. The new contact center system provides a modern, secure technological foundation. The new system also supports adding emerging tools like live chat to improve customer and employee experience, increase efficiency, and provide greater access to DOL services. Currently, DOL does not have the funds to implement these new tools.
- Currently, the CCC lacks the capacity to answer 23% of incoming calls because the staffing level has not kept pace with call demand. DOL submitted a budget package for the 2025 legislative session to meet the CCC's service demand with a combination of additional staff and technology enhancements. This proposal,

however, was not funded in 2025 and DOL has resubmitted a budget package for the 2026 supplemental session. The proposed technological enhancements are designed to shift the CCC's call demand to new self-service options and live chat communication channels.

Language access. A policy was created to certify dual-language employees working counters in the DLOs. These employees receive dual language pay. If funding allowed, more employees could be certified.

Online services. Online services are an alternative method to conduct the most frequently requested services related to driver licenses and ID cards. Continued investments are needed to improve online services.

In recent years, DOL added new online services, including:

- Instruction permit renewal.
- Add a veteran's designator to a driver license or ID card.
- Add military or military dependent status in the system.
- Interactive REAL ID document checklist would enable customers to be prepared when applying for an enhanced driver license or ID card and avoid multiple trips to the DLOs because of insufficient documentation.
- Request a reinstatement letter containing the steps needed to reinstate a suspended driver license. Submit commercial driver license (CDL) medical documents to DOL as required for certain types of CDL endorsements.

Back-office transactions. Since 2019, DOL has worked with the Department of Corrections to ensure individuals in custody have valid identification upon release. With the passage of SHB 2099 in 2024, DOL expanded its efforts to ensure individuals in custody or care of municipal jails possess valid state identification prior to release or discharge. DOL currently uses back-office processes to provide this service in agreement with multiple agencies.

Mail-in services. DOL added a new mail-in service for people to add or remove disability and medical designations in the system. These designations can give first responders information about how a person communicates or inform them that a person has one or more conditions that might affect a health emergency.

Payment accommodations. DOL has agreements with customer advocacy and community interest groups to accept their vouchers as payment for DOL services. The community interest groups help people obtain a Washington driver license or ID card. In doing so, hundreds of Washingtonians receive a valid photo ID or driver license each year.

Driver Licensing Office Current Operations

In fiscal year 2025, increased demand for enhanced credentials meeting REAL ID requirements, needed in-person visits post-pandemic, and budget cuts caused long customer lines, lengthy wait times, and crowded lobbies. The DLOs served 2.06 million customers, just 3% below the customer volumes in the peak fiscal year of 2018. Additionally, the DLOs are operating with fewer staff than in 2018. The agency's 2023-2025 biennial budget for DLO workload was reduced by $7.1 million, and by $6.01 million for 2025-2027, requiring DLO staffing reductions to align with the new funding level.

Table 1. Key workload and performance indicators for Driver Licensing Offices (DLOs); compares fiscal year 2025 to 2024.

Workload in Fiscal Year (2025 & 2024)	FY 2025	FY 2024
Customers Served in DLO	2,051,239	1,715,020
Enhanced - Originals Issued	505,399	184,751
Initial Walk-In Wait Time Average (minutes) [1]	23	8
Initial Appointment Wait Time Average (minutes) [2]	7	4

Table 1 Data Notes:

1 -Customer Walk-In Experience Time Average: Total time customer spends in office from check in to end of transaction for customers who walk-in for service. Initial wait time is included here (may include subsequent wait time).

2 -Initial Appointment Wait Time Average: From check in to first service counter visit for customers with an appointment.

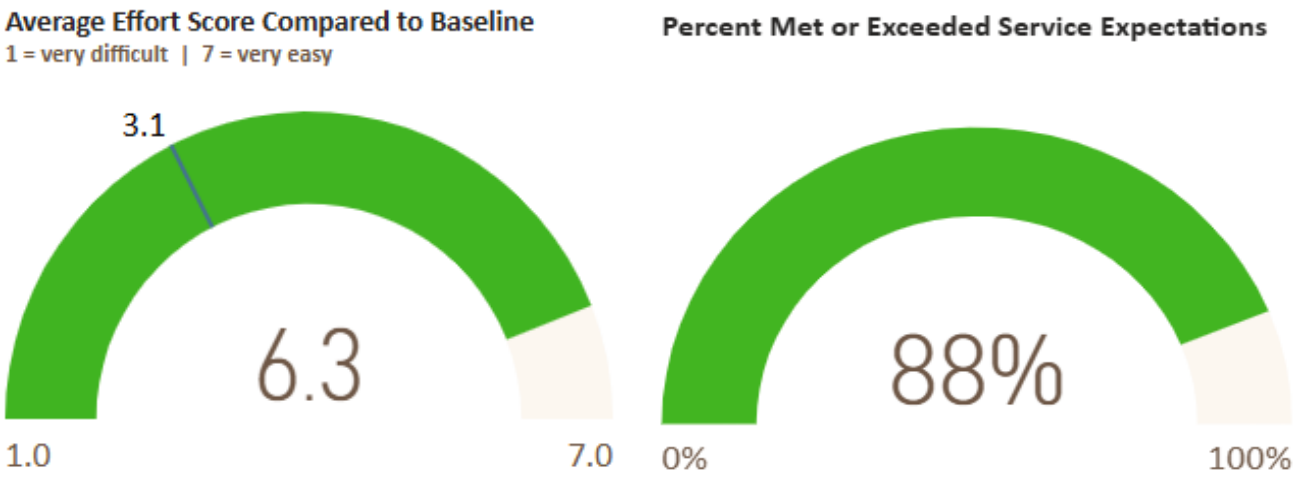
To manage long lines and growing wait-times, medium and large-sized offices began using an appointment-incentive system to meter customer flow. By adding more appointments daily and weekly, based on staffing, customers with appointments are prioritized and encourages them to plan ahead. This has improved customer and employee experiences.

The search for a Puyallup office location was suspended in fiscal year 2025. The office has been closed since Dec. 5, 2022, when the lease was discontinued. Under current funding protocols, DOL is unable to sign a letter of intent with property managers until full funding is secured. This restriction puts the agency at a disadvantage in a highly competitive real estate market.

Additionally, six part-time offices closed in June 2025 due to budget reductions and staffing limitations. Part-time offices are staffed by employees who travel to and from full-time offices during work hours. To maintain a minimum level of service in full-time offices, employees were no longer sent to part-time offices. As part-time offices have closed, the agency has deployed DOL2Go to these rural communities, enabling them to access driver licensing services without having to travel longer distances. With only one DOL2Go team and a greater need for their services across Washington, the team is stretched trying to balance rural service gap events with community events targeted at those experiencing homelessness. The need for services cannot be fully met in either area.

Satisfaction with a customer's DLO visit is largely dependent on how long they wait for service and how easy it is to complete their transaction. Overall, customers report getting their business done at a DLO is easy, and the service they received met or exceeded their expectations. Figure 3 below shows survey responses for fiscal year 2025, where customers said it was very easy to get the service they needed: score 6.3 on a scale of 1=very difficult to 7=very easy. Also, 88% of these customers said the service they received met or exceeded their service expectations.

Figure 3. DOL survey responses from customers who visited a Driver Licensing Office (Fiscal Year 2025)



The agency anticipates in-office license renewals to increase during fiscal years 2026, 2027, and 2028. These renewals are a result of the transition from a five-year to a six-year renewal cycle beginning in 2014, as well as the extensions and online renewal waivers used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Impacted customers will have a photograph older than 16 years, the statutory limit, requiring them to renew in person and have a new photograph taken.

Future Vision

DOL plans to address the challenges of a growing state population by using technology solutions, quality improvement, regulatory reform, and additional service delivery channels to provide Washingtonians with more efficient and effective service.

Flexible service delivery channels. The agency is exploring alternative ways to deliver services with fewer physical offices. Having the ability to quickly pivot customer service in the DLOs, DOL2Go, and the CCC, including during unforeseen events such as office closures and peaks in demand, is critical to limit interruptions in vital driver license and ID card services. DOL submitted budget packages for the 2026 supplemental to continue and expand the DOL2Go mobile licensing unit, and to increase the CCC's service capabilities with a combination of additional staff and technology enhancements.

Interagency collaboration. DOL is interested in exploring a shared services model with partner agencies.

- Working with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to help youth under the age of 16 receive an ID card through a partnership with public schools. Having a valid form of identification is essential for access to academic opportunities, housing, jobs, and banking later in life. This would provide an important service that would help increase safety and reduce identity fraud to younger residents at an age where establishing identity is easier than it is for adults and make future access to a credential seamless.
- Working with the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) during DOL2Go events has proven to be an efficient way of assisting customers, particularly those most in need. Having DOH in the same space allows customers needing a birth certificate easy access to this critical document. Currently, customers who qualify for a low-cost ID card must provide a physical voucher of eligibility from a DSHS office. With DSHS sharing space in a DOL driver licensing office, customers could get the required voucher and apply for benefits without traveling back and forth to another government agency. Shared services may allow the state to conveniently offer important services people need upstream and give them the best chance of not ending up in a critical state.

Some exciting things possible in the future include:

- **Allow customers to submit their photo and signature electronically at renewal.** Remote photo capture technology allows driver license and ID card renewal customers to upload a new photo and signature while conducting online transactions. This technology could permanently reduce the number of customers required to renew their license in-person at a DLO each year. Efforts to develop remote photo capture technology with a contractor did not meet DOL standards for release and the project was put on hold in 2023 while the agency implemented other time-sensitive projects. As this technology matures, it warrants further consideration.
- **Mobile driver licensing application.** In 2023, the Washington Legislature directed the agency to study the feasibility of implementing a mobile driver licensing

application; also known as “mDL” (see Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1125, Section 208, subsection 2 for the full proviso language). This new technology could be used on a mobile phone or tablet to display a driver license or identification card to external parties, such as TSA, law enforcement, retail liquor stores, and other entities that use a driver license for identity or age verification. Additionally, DOL is researching its capacity to accept this type of credential from other states that have implemented an mDL, as a form of identification for in-office and online services. The study was submitted to the Legislature and the Governor’s Office in December 2024.

- **Introduce virtual service**. DOL can further its commitment to providing equitable access to services through a new virtual service channel. For example, customers could utilize a computer station in their local office to meet virtually and conduct their transaction with staff who speak their language but work in a different office. DOL has a limited number of certified dual language speaking employees who provide interpretation services in their offices or program areas. With additional funding, interpretation through certified employees could be expanded should a virtual service channel be implemented.
- **Offer the option for a shorter driver license and ID card renewal cycle.** DOL is exploring this option to accommodate customers who cannot afford $61 for a six-year driver license or ID card and customers who are paying for years they will not use, for example, they plan to move out of state or stop driving and surrender a license for an ID card. Applicants would pay the existing per-year cost, but their license or ID card would be valid for a shorter period. DOL has yet to study the impacts to state revenue and the impact of increased in-person visits to driver licensing offices.
- **Evaluate new self-service technology.** DOL will evaluate technology with the potential to introduce 24/7 self-services, such as a kiosk located outside of DOL offices. This is a potential pathway to service for residents who cannot visit driver licensing offices during traditional business hours or are unable to access DOL services online.

- **Improve lobby management.** DOL is evaluating lobby kiosks that would allow customers to check-in by scanning their current driver license or ID card, like many medical providers and other facilities offer. Customers who don't need an updated photo could renew or complete other simple transactions through the kiosk. While the appointment-incentive system has the ability to smooth out the customer peaks and valleys of the day, adding technology enhancements could help smooth out the year ahead. By notifying customers of their upcoming expiration date and offering an appointment scheduling option through text or email, this would proactively manage lobbies and customer flow.