

## REAL ID Deadline Triggers New Wave of Scams Preying on Confused, Rushed Travelers

May 12, 2025 - With the federal REAL ID requirement now in effect for domestic air travel, cybercriminals are exploiting confusion, pressure, and last-minute panic — and it's costing consumers dearly.

As of this week, travelers 18 and older must present a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or a valid passport to board domestic flights. The change, long in the making, is part of a post-9/11 push to tighten identity verification. But as deadlines tend to do, it has created a perfect storm for scammers.

Text messages, social media ads, and emails are popping up, all claiming to offer quick ways to secure a REAL ID without the need for an in-person visit. Some direct people to official-looking websites that prompt users to upload sensitive documents like birth certificates and passports. Others pretend to be from the TSA or DMV, demanding personal information under threat of travel delays.

None of them are legitimate.

Consumer protection groups and cybersecurity experts say scammers are deliberately targeting people who feel rushed or unsure about the new rules. It's a classic tactic: create urgency, offer a shortcut, and count on the confusion.

And it's working. According to the Federal Trade Commission, Americans lost \$789 million to government impersonation scams in 2024 — a staggering increase from \$171 million the year before.

The REAL ID rollout has become the latest bait. Many victims are older adults, non-native English speakers, or people simply trying to avoid long waits at their local DMV. But anyone can be vulnerable when faced with the pressure of an approaching travel date and unclear rules.

Experts emphasize a key point: no government agency will ever reach out by phone, text, or social media to request personal information. The only way to obtain a REAL ID is to apply in person with the proper documentation. While some states allow you to begin the process online, you must complete it at a Department of Motor Vehicles office.

The scams come in many forms, but the goal is almost always the same — to steal financial information, hijack accounts, or sell personal data on the black market. Some fraudsters even advertise fake REAL IDs to those looking to bypass the law entirely, but these forgeries rarely withstand inspection.

Travelers are being urged to stay cautious, especially during this period of adjustment. Airport security lines may be longer as TSA agents check an array of credentials. Experts recommend arriving early, verifying information through official channels, and reporting any suspicious activity to the Federal Trade Commission or Better Business Bureau.

Deadlines create pressure, and pressure creates opportunity — not just for travelers, but for the scammers waiting to strike.

by Jim Malmberg

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