

Helping Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Obtain Identification Documents

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HOMELESS &
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About This Guide

This resource is for service providers looking to guide individuals experiencing homelessness through the process of obtaining the “Big Five” forms of identification (ID):

- birth certificate,
- state-issued ID,
- Social Security card,
- Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty (DD214), and
- Green Card.

Without ID, people are often blocked from resources crucial to their life goals and ongoing stability, such as housing or employment. It’s important to have ID and important to know how to obtain it.

- States and local government regulate state-issued IDs and birth certificates, so practices for obtaining these documents will differ. Typical steps in this process are listed in this guide.
- Federal programs regulate Social Security cards, Green Cards, and U.S. Department of Defense DD214 documents. Therefore, guidance on these documents herein is more comprehensive as the process will be similar across localities.

Waiting for an ID does not have to be an idle time. For example, you can start the application process for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) without an ID. Obtaining ID while the SSI/SSDI application is pending can save months of waiting.

How to Use This Guide

This guide includes the following information for each of the “Big Five” forms of identification.

- **About:** A brief description of the ID
- **Who and why:** Examples of agencies that require a certain form of ID and for what purpose
- **Steps for obtaining the ID:** Typical steps for processes that differ among jurisdictions and specific steps for processes regulated at the federal level
- **Costs:** Fees associated with obtaining ID and strategies to waive or reduce fees

The Best Practices section at the end of the document offers experts’ advice on developing an ID



replacement program, building relationships in the community, engaging individuals in the process of obtaining ID, and establishing proof of residency.

Categories of ID Documents

Each jurisdiction defines forms of ID differently and requires different combinations to suffice as valid identification. It is important to comply with specific requirements of the issuing agency. For example, the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\) provides a list of acceptable documents \[PDF\]](#) (page 3 of the form) for employment eligibility verification.

Generally, ID documents are categorized as either primary or secondary.

- **Primary** documents, such as passports, driver’s licenses, and permanent resident cards, usually stand alone when seeking to establish identity.
- **Secondary** documents, such as those listed below, may be used in tandem or with a primary source to establish a person’s identity.
 - Birth certificate
 - Medical records, private health insurance card, or Medicaid/Medicare card
 - Active medical or life insurance policy
 - Bank statements, checkbook or savings book, or loan documents
 - Work ID, pay stub, or union membership card
 - IRS/state tax forms (e.g., W2) or property tax receipts
 - Social Security cards or SSI/SSDI checks or direct deposit verification
 - Lease/rental agreement or utility bill
 - Addressed mail
 - Vehicle registration, title, bill of sale, or purchase contract, or traffic ticket
 - School records, such as school ID, diploma or proof of GED completion, transcript of grades, or elementary immunization records
 - Military ID, Selective Service card, or military records (e.g., assignment orders, Leave and Earnings Statements)
 - Native American tribal documents
 - Court documents, letters from attorneys, or prison IDs
 - Certifications from shelters or notarized items
 - Voter’s registration card
 - U.S. naturalization certificate or consulate identification card



Birth Certificate

About

A birth certificate is a vital record that documents the birth of a child and serves as proof of identity and age. It is considered valid proof of U.S. citizenship by federal, state, and local government agencies and is often required to gain access to other forms of ID. Birth certificates include information such as the mother's full name at her own birth, father's full name, name of the baby, date of the birth, and county/state where the birth took place. The federal government does not provide copies of birth certificates; copies can only be obtained from the state or county where the documents were originally filed (i.e., where the person was born). Most states provide a centralized office from which birth certificates can be ordered. Each state has its own rules, instructions, and fees for ordering certified birth certificates.

Who Requires Birth Certificates and Why?

Federal, State, and Local Departments	Purpose
State department of motor vehicles	Issuing a new or renewing a driver's license or state photo ID
Bureau of Consular Affairs	Proving citizenship to obtain a passport
Marriage licensing departments	Proving identity to obtain a marriage license
Social Security Administration	Proving identity to issue a new copy of a Social Security card

Other Common Users	Purpose
Educational institutions	Registering at public/private schools and universities

Typical Steps for Replacing a Birth Certificate

- **Determine the state of birth:** First, ask the individual you are assisting where (in which state) they were born. If they do not know where they were born, ask questions that may trigger their memory or lead to discovering their birth state, such as what they remember from growing up or what school they attended, or ask if they can contact a relative.
- **Understand state requirements:** After the state where the person was born is identified, contact the vital records office and obtain the required form and instructions specific to that state. Typical requirements for obtaining a birth certificate are name, date of birth, place of birth, and name of parent(s). Some states require a valid state ID with address, so it's important to check requirements specific to the state. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [maintains a list of vital records offices by state and U.S. territory](#) where you can learn more about each jurisdiction's process and fees. You may also try the recorder's office for the county where the person you are serving was born.
- **Prepare the application:** Help the individuals you are serving complete the birth certificate request form and determine what [secondary documents](#) they currently have and what they will need to obtain.



- **Accuracy and completeness are important!** Many states will keep the fee for the search itself, even if they are not successful in locating the record.
- **Make sure to request a certified copy, not a certified informational copy.** Informational copies **do not** establish identity.
- **What if the person doesn't have a valid ID?** In some states, the application can be notarized in place of an ID. Find a notary to complete the application. Many banks have free notary services. The application can sometimes be notarized if someone with a valid state ID (e.g., attorney, family member, service provider, friend) is willing to legally vouch for the person's identity.
- **Submit the application:** Create a checklist and ensure that all required documents are included in the application. Some states will process applications more quickly than other states; be sure to manage expectations by informing individuals seeking a birth certificate about the length of the process.

Costs

Birth certificates vary in cost from \$5-34, depending on the state. Check with each state's vital records office to determine the cost for the person you are serving. For approximate costs, use the [CDC's vital records office locator](#) and select the appropriate state.

Some states have processes for waiving birth certificate fees, and local non-profit organizations may be able to help cover the costs of obtaining a birth certificate. Reach out to community partners to learn more about the resources available in your community.

State-Issued ID

About

A state-issued ID card includes the person's photo and name, and may include date of birth, address, height, weight, and hair color. A driver's license and a state ID can be interchangeable, and the local [department of motor vehicles \(DMV\)](#) or [state motor vehicle agency](#) usually administers state ID cards.

Someone who is ineligible for a Social Security number but is legally present in the United States may be able to apply for a state-issued ID card.



Who Requires State-Issued IDs and Why?

Federal, State, and Local Departments	Purpose
State department of vital records	Issuing a birth certificate
Bureau of Consular Affairs	Establishing identity to obtain a passport
State department of elections	Establishing identity to vote
Social Security Administration	Issuing a new copy of a Social Security card
Public benefit department	Issuing mainstream benefits, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), general assistance, and Medicaid
State employment department	Issuing unemployment insurance
Marriage licensing department	Establishing identity for a marriage license

Other Common Users	Purpose
Financial institutions	Opening a bank account
Landlords/property managers	Completing a rental application
Private and public employers	Hiring new employees
Payday loan businesses	Cashing checks
Pharmacies	Filling prescriptions
Rental agencies	Renting a hotel/motel room or car
Educational institutions	Registering at public/private schools and universities

Typical Steps for Replacing a State-Issued ID

- **Understand state requirements:** Each state has different requirements for obtaining a driver's license or state ID. Go to the [DMV or state motor vehicle agency](#) website for the state in which the person resides to learn what documents qualify and which are required.

Some states will allow you to obtain a replacement ID card without providing additional documentation if the ID is not yet expired. Look into your state's laws regarding this first.

- **Prepare the application:** Help to complete the application and determine what [secondary documents](#) the person currently has and what will need to be obtained.
- **Submit the application:** Ensure that all required documents are included in the application, along



with the applicable fee. Some states process applications more quickly than other states, so be sure to manage expectations by informing the person seeking ID about the length of the process.

Costs

State ID costs vary from state to state, ranging from \$15 to \$30, depending on the state and whether the person is seeking a new or replacement ID. Check with the state DMV office to determine costs and ask if any waivers exist. Some areas have programs or non-profit organizations that will help with the fee for obtaining state IDs, and some states provide waivers for state ID fees for individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

Social Security Card

About

The Social Security Administration (SSA) issues a nine-digit [Social Security number](#) to U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and temporary (working) residents. There are three [types of Social Security cards](#), all of which show a person's name and Social Security number.

- Cards that are issued to U.S. citizens and U.S. permanent residents
- Cards that are issued to people who have temporary work authorization in the United States and read "valid for work only with DHS [Department of Homeland Security] authorization"
- Cards that read "not valid for employment," which are issued to people who are lawfully admitted to the U.S. without work authorization from the Department of Homeland Security but have a valid non-work reason for needing a Social Security number, or who need a number because of a federal law requiring a Social Security number to get a benefit or service

Because SSA is a federal agency, the process for replacing a Social Security card is the same across the country. A Social Security card can be replaced for free if it is lost or stolen, but only three replacement cards will be issued per year and 10 per lifetime. Legal name changes and other exceptions, such as changes in immigration status, do not count toward these limits. Also, individuals may not be affected by these limits if they can prove they need the card to prevent a significant hardship.



Who Requires Social Security Cards and Why?

State and Local Departments	Purpose
State department of vital records	Establishing identity
State DMV	Issuing a driver's license or state ID
Public benefit department	Issuing and tracking mainstream benefits and other government services

Other Common Users	Purpose
Private and public employers	For tax-reporting purposes when hiring new employees
Hospitals	Facilitating Medicare and/or Medicaid reimbursement

Note: Some departments may allow you to present your Social Security number rather than show your Social Security card.

Steps for Replacing a Social Security Card

- **Gather required documents:** [SSA maintains a list of documents that are needed](#) to obtain, replace, or correct a Social Security card for an adult or child who is a U.S.-born citizen, foreign-born citizen, or noncitizen. To apply for a replacement Social Security card, one document is needed to establish identity.
 - **Proof of identity:** An acceptable document must be current (not expired) and show the person's legal name, date of birth or age, and a recent photograph or physical description (height, eye and hair color, etc.). As proof of identity, Social Security must see the person's
 - U.S. driver's license,
 - state-issued non-driver identification card, or
 - U.S. passport.

In some circumstances, SSA may ask for additional documentation to establish citizenship or age, such as when applying for an original Social Security card or if the individual was born outside of the United States. Requested documentation may include the following.

- **Proof of citizenship:** Generally, a U.S. birth certificate or a U.S. passport is used. In some instances, a Green Card may be used to show resident status to get a Social Security number.
- **Proof of age:** If the person has a birth certificate, it is required. If a birth certificate does not exist, other acceptable documents include
 - a religious record made before the age of 5 showing their date of birth,
 - U.S. hospital record of their birth, or
 - U.S. passport.



- **Secondary sources:** If the person seeking a new Social Security card does not have any of these specific documents or cannot get a replacement within 10 days, SSA will ask to see other documents, including
 - employee identification card,
 - school identification card,
 - health insurance card (not a Medicare card), or
 - U.S. military identification card.
- **Submit the application:** You can submit a [paper application](#) [PDF] (Form SS-5) to the [local SSA office](#) or complete the application online using a [my Social Security Account](#).

If the person seeking a new Social Security card cannot provide the identification documentation listed, SSA will work with them to build enough ID evidence to get a Social Security card. These could include doctor's records and former military paperwork.

The Social Security office can provide an [interpreter free of charge](#) to help someone apply for a Social Security number or card. Call the Social Security office at 1-800-772-1213 to tell them that you or the person you are serving prefers to speak with SSA in a different language. You can also get help from an interpreter when you visit the SSA office in person.

Costs

There is no fee to obtain a Social Security card.

What if the person was never assigned a Social Security number?

Anyone age 12 or older requesting an original Social Security number must appear in person for an interview. SSA will ask for evidence to show they do not have a Social Security number. Below are examples of typical documents used to prove a Social Security number was never assigned.

- If the person lived outside the U.S. for an extended period:
 - Current or previous passport
 - School and/or employment records
 - Any other record that shows long-term residence outside the United States
- If the person lived in the United States and is applying for an original Social Security number:
 - Information about schools attended
 - Copies of tax records that show a Social Security number was never assigned



DD214

About

If the person you are serving is a Veteran with no identification documents, try to get their DD Form 214 (DD214), also known as a Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty. The [U.S. Department of Defense](#) issues this document upon a military service member's retirement, separation, or discharge from active duty service. A DD214 will provide the Veteran's name, date of birth, and Social Security number. Remain vigilant in your search, as a Veteran's information must be available in government records.

The DD214 contains information normally needed to verify military service for benefits, retirement, employment, and membership in Veterans' organizations. Information on the DD214 may include the following information about the service member:

- Date and place of entry into active duty
- Home address at time of entry
- Date and place of release from active duty
- Home address after separation
- Last duty assignment and rank
- Military job specialty
- Military education
- Decorations, medals, badges, citations, and campaign awards
- Total creditable service
- Foreign service credited
- Separation information (type of separation, character of service, authority and reason for separation, and separation and reenlistment eligibility codes)

Who Requires a DD214 and Why?

Federal, State, and Local Departments	Purpose
Veteran benefit agencies	Documenting Veteran status, which allows the Veteran or Veteran family member access to Veteran housing, medical care, and other services

Steps for Replacing a DD214

- **Gather required information:** The request for a copy of the DD214 must contain the following basic information to locate service records.
 - Complete name used while in service



- Service number
- Social Security number
- Branch of service
- Dates of service
- Date and place of birth (especially if the service number is not known)

Providing the following optional information is recommended to streamline the request.

- The *purpose or reason* for the request, such as applying for Veterans' benefits or employment in a position that offers a Veterans preference
- Any *deadlines* related to the request—for example, the person you are serving may be applying for U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits and needs to provide proof of military service by a specific date
- Any other *specific information, documents, or records* the individuals you serve require from their Official Military Personnel File besides the DD214
- The individual's *homelessness status*, which can shorten the process from 6 weeks to 2 weeks
- **Request the DD14** by assisting the Veteran with [signing into milConnect](#) or [by completing an online request through the National Archives](#). Make sure that all requests are signed and dated by the Veteran.

[Other methods for obtaining your military service records](#) include the following.

- Mailing or faxing a Request Pertaining to Military Records ([Standard Form \[SF\] 180 \[PDF\]](#)) to the [National Personnel Records Center \(NPRC\)](#)
- Writing a letter to or visiting the NPRC
- Contacting the state or county Veterans' agency

Note: Veterans experiencing homelessness may make [emergency requests to NPRC for DD214 documentation](#) if the deadline is urgent (e.g., required to enter homeless shelter or services).

Costs

In general, Veterans can obtain free copies of their DD214 and other military service records. Avoid companies that advertise DD214 research services for a fee.

Green Card

About

A Green Card is given to someone who has been awarded permanent resident status and is authorized to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis. As proof of that status, USCIS grants a person a permanent resident card, commonly called a "Green Card." Green Card holders are given most legal rights under U.S. law, except for the right to vote, which is available only to U.S. citizens.



Green Card status is valid for life, even though the proof of Green Card status (the plastic card) itself is valid for 10 years and must be renewed.

Who Requires Green Cards and Why?

Federal Departments	Purpose
U.S. Customs and Border Protection	Entering the United States without the risk of being denied entry by an immigration official
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)	Acquiring U.S. citizenship through naturalization
Social Security Administration	Issuing Social Security benefits to noncitizens upon retirement

Other Common Users	Purpose
Private and public employers	Proving resident status to employers
Financial institutions	Opening bank accounts for noncitizens
Educational institutions	Proving permanent resident status to receive financial aid or in-state/resident tuition for university and college
Insurance agencies	Providing health or life insurance to noncitizens
Foreign tax agencies	Facilitating a possible tax benefit for some Green Card holders who may be taxed as "non-resident" in their home country

Steps for Obtaining or Replacing a Green Card

- **Gather documents**, including Form I-90, which is available at the [local USCIS field office](#) or on the [I-90 page of the USCIS website](#). Supporting documentation that must be submitted with the completed Form I-90 includes the following:
 - a copy of the Green Card or, if the Green Card is not available, another proof of identity (exception: if someone is filing because of a USCIS error, the ORIGINAL Green Card containing the incorrect information must be sent);
 - a police report copy, if one was filed, due to theft of the Green Card;
 - evidence of any name change, such as a copy of a court order; or
 - evidence of actual information (such as a copy of a birth certificate with the correct spelling of a name), if filing to correct a USCIS error.
- **Submit the application** by mail or online via the [I-90 page of the USCIS website](#).
 - A [USCIS online account](#) provides the opportunity to pay the filing fee online, check the status of a case, receive notifications and case updates, view personalized case completion date estimates, respond to requests for evidence, and manage contact information, including updating an address.



- The I-90 request can also be filed by mailing a paper application to one of the addresses below.

U.S. Postal Service:

USCIS
Attn: I-90
P.O. Box 21262
Phoenix, AZ 85036-1262

FedEx, UPS, and DHL Deliveries:

USCIS
Attn: I-90 (Box 21262)
1820 East Skyharbor Circle S
Suite 100
Phoenix, AZ 85034-4850

Costs

USCIS requires an application fee of \$455. A biometric services fee of \$85 may also be necessary for fingerprinting, photographing, and electronic capture of the person’s signature. Filing and biometric service fees are final and non-refundable, regardless of any action taken on the application, petition, or request, or if the request is withdrawn. Prior to filing the application, [visit the USCIS I-90 website](#) for information about current fees and use their [Fee Calculator](#).

Individuals filing [Form I-90](#) because they never received their Green Card do not have to pay a filing fee if USCIS mailed the card more than 30 days ago, it was returned to USCIS as undeliverable, and they have not moved from the address provided.

USCIS will consider homelessness when reviewing a fee waiver request. To request a fee waiver, file [Form 1-912](#).

- If the individual receives services from a homeless shelter, include a currently dated letter from the shelter. The letter should be on the shelter’s letterhead, should include a statement that the individual receives services from the shelter, and must be signed by a shelter employee attesting to the individual’s situation.
- If an individual is experiencing homelessness but does not reside in a shelter, include an affidavit from a member of good standing in the community who knows the individual and can support the claim that they are experiencing homelessness and unable to pay the fees.

If the individual needs legal advice about an immigration matter but cannot afford to hire an attorney, they may be able to ask an attorney, an association of immigration lawyers, a state bar association, or an organization specially accredited to provide such assistance about the availability of free or reduced-cost legal services on immigration issues.

Best Practices for ID Replacement

Take it from the experts! Below, you can find best practices from some of the country’s most experienced service providers.

Developing an ID Replacement Program

In developing an ID replacement program, it is important to define the scope of services. Some key questions to consider include the following.



- Whom are you serving? How might a particular subpopulation affect your program model (e.g., youth)?
- What services will the program provide: all social services, all legal services, documentation replacement only, or a specific type of documentation replacement only (e.g., state ID)?
- Who will staff the program: volunteers or staff? Will you require certain professional qualifications or certifications?
- How will you account for the costs associated with obtaining IDs, such as grant-writing, budgeting, and building partnerships with other organizations?

Once you decide on the scope of service, you can identify where resources should be allocated.

Make sure that the ID replacement program accounts for the circular nature of proving identification and can navigate the various definitions of [primary and secondary documentation](#) based on the particular form of ID sought. Research what works in your state for the people you are serving.

For example, Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) store a good amount of relevant information. At the point of initial contact, search the local HMIS for scanned copies of ID documents to supplement what you have collected from the person you are serving. Copies (rather than originals) of documents are sometimes sufficient.

Establish a training program so that all supervisors, staff, and volunteers understand the reasons that ID is crucial for accessing a range of social services and benefits and procedures for assisting with this process.

Building Relationships in the Community

Build formal and informal relationships with government agencies and other community-based organizations that issue IDs. Strong working relationships build trust, which can foster flexibility and streamline processes. Consider the following.

- Setting regular times for program staff to meet with local government agencies so they become familiar with each other on a personal level. Ask staff to hand out business cards with the organization's logo as they interact with government workers, so your program name builds a positive reputation.
- Ensuring that program staff maintain frequent communication with other providers in the community. Make sure other organizations understand what your program has to offer individuals that they serve so that both organizations mutually benefit from the relationship.
- Contracting with other local service providers who can offer services that your program cannot accommodate. This can be done through a formal memorandum of understanding. However, having positive (informal) working relationships with partner organizations can facilitate many processes, such as signing and verifying affidavits of residency.
- Coordinating with a local law school to develop a law student volunteer program or clinic. ID replacement is a great opportunity for law students to develop research skills.
- Building relationships with landlords in your community, to facilitate possible flexibility regarding ID for



housing. Some landlords will accept non-traditional forms of ID in order to sign a lease, such as a DD214 as proof of Social Security number, or a VA hospital card.

Engaging Individuals in the Process

ID replacement can be a long and bureaucratic process, so it is important to manage expectations about how long the process may take.

- Set regular, frequent meetings with people you are serving to keep the momentum moving forward.
- Add a question to your intake process that requests information about what forms of ID the person has in their possession.
- It is important to be patient with people who struggle to remember or convey information. Make sure staff and volunteers are trained to ask questions in different ways to elicit the information needed.
- Always assume the miscommunication is on your end if you're not getting the information you need from the person you are serving. Try rephrasing the question in various ways before moving on.
- If the individuals you serve don't have a safe place to keep important documents, offer storage in your office files.

Establishing Proof of Residency

Establishing proof of residency can be a barrier for someone experiencing homelessness. The following tips may help.

- Partner with or find service providers in the area who allow individuals and families experiencing homelessness access to a post office box via their agency.
- Ask the shelter to verify that the person seeking to establish proof of residency is staying at the shelter address.
- Help the person experiencing homelessness use the [U.S. Postal Services website](#) to change their mailing address to the address of the shelter where they are staying. There is a nominal fee.
- Consider the possibility of obtaining a sworn affidavit if a person is residing with someone and their name is not on the lease.



Appendix: Required Documentation Checklists

Birth Certificate

Each jurisdiction has different documentation requirements. List your jurisdiction's requirements below:

Requirements	Status	Complete



State-Issued ID

Each jurisdiction has different documentation requirements. List your jurisdiction's requirements below:

Requirements	Status	Complete



Social Security Card

Requirements	Status	Complete
For Replacement Card (U.S. Citizens):		
<p>Proof of identity—one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. driver's license • State-issued non-driver identification card • U.S. passport <p>May suffice: <i>Employee identification card, school identification card, health insurance card (not a Medicare card), U.S. military identification card</i></p>		
Additional Documents Required for New Cards and Replacement Cards for Noncitizens:		
<p>Proof of citizenship—one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth certificate • U.S. passport 		
<p>Proof of age—one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth certificate • Religious record made before the age of 5 showing date of birth • U.S. hospital record of birth • U.S. passport 		



DD214

Requirements	Status	Complete
Complete name used while in service		
Service number		
Social Security number		
Branch of service		
Dates of service		
Date and place of birth (especially if service number is not known)		
Recommended (optional, to streamline process)	Status	Complete
The reason for the request		
Any deadlines related to the request		
Any other specific information, documents, or records the person requires from their Official Military Personnel File		
Evidence of any name change, such as a copy of a court order		



Green Card

Requirements	Status	Complete
Government-issued ID that contains name, date of birth, photograph, and signature		
Copy of police report if the Green Card was stolen		
Evidence of any name change (e.g., copy of a court order)		
Evidence of correct information (such as a copy of a birth certificate with the correct spelling of a name), if filing to correct a USCIS error		



Learn More about the Homeless and Housing Resource Center

Providing high-quality, no-cost training for health and housing professionals in evidence-based practices that contributes to housing stability, recovery, and an end to homelessness.

Contact Us:

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