

back-bar inspection

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Continuing with Part II of a three-part series, this edition of the “back-bar inspection” will look into a number of safety features designed to reduce the likelihood that identification documents issued by the State of California become easily forged. By no means intended to make our readers experts, it will greatly enhance their ability to distinguish legitimate documents from fictitious duplications.

Granted, with 50 states issuing varying styles of drivers' licenses and identification cards it is extremely difficult to stay abreast of the continuing changes in security features on a national level. However, for officers working in California, it is conceivable that a majority of their contacts will involve persons who are in possession of drivers' licenses or identification cards issued by the State of California, Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Based on the quantity of counterfeit licenses recovered from college students, it is obvious that many of these licenses are counterfeited for the purpose of purchasing alcoholic beverages or gaining admission into nightclub type establishments by underage individuals. Therefore, it is imperative that officers working an ABC assignment familiarize themselves with anti-counterfeiting features of California drivers' licenses and identification cards. Regardless of assignment, all officers should be aware of basic security features built into drivers' licenses and identification cards.

The DMV installs a number of safety features into drivers' license and identification cards to reduce the likelihood that these documents can be counterfeited. Safety features are constantly modified and updated as counterfeiters become more adept at reproducing these documents. This article will by no means address all anti-counterfeiting measures employed by the DMV, but will cover several basic safety features which will aid officers during field contacts.

California identification documents are issued to both adults and minors (those persons under the age of 21 years at time of issuance). Each drivers' license or identification card bears two photographs of the applicant; they are the same photograph. The smaller photograph is a duplication of the main photograph and will appear lighter in color. A frontal head shot is the only type of view that will be displayed and the background will be light-blue in color. Adult photographs are located on the left side of the document and minors on the right.

Identification documents issued to a minor (based on the age of the applicant at the time of issuance) may contain color stripes that can be used to quickly assist in verifying age. A blue stripe will indicate that the license is provisional and will specify the year that the holder will turn 18. This can be useful to retailers in determining age regarding tobacco sales. A red strip will indicate the year that the holder will turn 21 years of age and can be an effective tool to aid retailers selling alcoholic beverages. No stripes will be present on licenses or identification cards if the person was over the age of 21 years at the time of issuance.

Signature lines appear on the bottom portion of all identification documents issued by the DMV. The process used, digitally reproduces and reduces the size of the applicant's signature. Signatures can appear to be as much as one-quarter of their original size. Officers and retailers encountering documents bearing large signatures (those taking up a majority of the space on the bottom of the license or identification card) should suspect a counterfeit document. Although the size should never be the sole indicator of a counterfeit document, it should cause an officer to look further into the possibility that the document may be fictitious.

The DMV worked with the Polaroid Corporation to develop the several anti-counterfeiting technologies that are incorporated into current California drivers' licenses and identification cards. When moved under a light source, the front side of drivers' licenses and identification cards will display a hologram pattern. The checkerboard pattern alternates between the California State Seal and the DMV logo. Ink used in the process changes color when viewed from different angles and is extremely difficult to reproduce on copy machines and other low-grade counterfeiting technologies. A fine-line color-design printing technology similar to that used on new US currency, also hampers photocopiers and scanners and will be discussed in Part III of this article.

Officers routinely rely on California drivers' licenses or identification cards as a means of establishing the true identity of individuals contacted during field encounters. Retailers likewise use these documents as a means of establishing the age of individuals attempting to purchase tobacco products and alcoholic beverages. By remaining cognizant of the above safety features, both officers and retailers will be better able to perform their duties and enhanced the overall safety of our communities.

Part III of this article will continue in the next edition and will take a closer look at additional safety features and anti-counterfeiting measures employed by the California DMV.