

TENNESSEAN COM

Puerto Rico-born Tennesseans will have to get new birth certificates

Rampant fraud leads to July 1 invalidation

By Chris Echegaray • THE TENNESSEAN • March 17, 2010

Ivan Porto is among Tennessee's 15,000 Puerto Ricans with soon-to-be invalid birth certificates after the island's government deemed fraud was so prevalent it had to reissue them.

On July 1, all Puerto Rican birth certificates issued before that date will be worthless. Island natives will have to scramble to meet the requirements, sending applications by mail or, in some cases, traveling to the island.

It's particularly important this group possess valid birth certificates, some say, because they're the only Latinos with automatic U.S. citizenship and face frequent pressure to prove their status.

Puerto Rico's legislature passed the new law in December after police raids that yielded 14,000 Puerto Rican birth certificates, both copies and originals.

Porto, who moved to Nashville in 1994 to work at Gaylord Opryland, said he hadn't heard of the new law until a reporter told him, and he found the news alarming.

"I am sure a lot of people living here don't know they changed that," he said. "You don't know who could have your information."

Black market operatives stole Puerto Rican birth certificates from schools and other institutions to sell for up to \$10,000 each, according to the [Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration](#). The certificates were used illegally to obtain passports, licenses and other government and private sector documentation and benefits.

Illegal immigrants trying to get jobs often bought birth certificates or Social Security numbers from rings in Puerto Rico, said Ivan Ortiz, [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) spokesman

in Puerto Rico.

"In another case, a family was convicted for buying them from drug addicts and selling them to contacts in the U.S." Ortiz said.

After discovering that 40 percent of passport fraud cases involved Puerto Rican birth certificates, the State Department approached Puerto Rico's government about the problem. Puerto Rican birth certificates with common Hispanic names are highly desirable in the black market because of the island's unique citizenship status.

The problem will affect more than a third of the 4.1 million Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. The new birth certificates will cost \$5, and veterans and people over 60 can get them for free. The new ones will be tougher to forge.

Certificate is form of ID

Lilliana Machado moved 21 years ago from Puerto Rico to the Bronx, N.Y., and relocated to Nashville shortly after. But she gave birth to her 8-year-old daughter on the island, so she and the girl will need new birth certificates as soon as possible.

Other than a passport and a Social Security card, a birth certificate is considered one of the best forms of identification, and Machado needs them for job applications, school enrollment and after-school sports.

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