



## Operators' Licenses and Permits

### Alcohol Beverage Laws

#### Fact Sheet 3104

This fact sheet provides information about operators' licenses and permits and when they are required. An operator's license, often called a "bartender's license," is issued to an individual to serve alcohol beverages at a premises authorized to make retail sales. Every municipal governing body must issue an operator's license to any applicant who is qualified per state statute sec. [125.17\(1\)](#) Wis. Stats.

### Qualifications for Obtaining an Operator's License or Permit

Applicants for operators' licenses and permits must meet the following qualifications:

- The applicant must be at least 18 years of age when the license is issued. The applicant is not required to be a Wisconsin resident.
- Subject to Wisconsin's Fair Employment Law, [Ch. 111](#), Wis. Stats., the applicant must not have been convicted of a felony or be a habitual law offender. Wisconsin's Fair Employment Law prohibits the denial of a license based on a pending arrest or conviction record unless the record substantially relates to the licensing activity.
- The applicant must have successfully completed an approved responsible beverage server training course. A [list of approved courses](#) is available at revenue.wi.gov.

Applicants are not required to complete the training course if they are renewing an existing operator's license or permit, have completed the training course within the last two years, or have held a retail license, manager's license, or operator's license or permit anywhere in Wisconsin within the last two years.

### Validity of Operator's Licenses

An operator's license is valid only in the municipality where issued, but it may be used at any premises within that municipality. An operator's license from any municipality may be used on a permitted vessel (boat).

An operator's license may be issued for one or two years, as determined by the governing body of the issuing municipality. Operator's licenses in first class cities (City of Milwaukee) expire on December 31 and on June 30 for all other municipalities.

An application for an operator's license must be made in writing to the municipality where the applicant intends to serve alcohol beverages. The applicant must pay any fee established by the municipality for the operator's license, if applicable.

### Validity of Operator's Permits

A state-issued operators' permit is valid in any Wisconsin municipality and may be used at any licensed/permitted premises within Wisconsin. A statewide operator's license may be used on a permitted vessel (boat).

An application for an operator's permit must be made to the Division of Alcohol Beverages (DAB) using an online application system. The applicant must pay the fee established by DAB for the operator's permit. To assist clerks and law enforcement, there is a statewide operator's permit [lookup tool](#) and [user guide](#) now available to confirm the validity of individual permits.

## Required Supervision of Premises Authorized to Make Retail Sales

While open for business, a premises authorized to make retail sales of alcohol beverages must have **one** of the following persons present:

- The licensee or permittee (if the licensee or permittee is an individual)
- If the licensee or permittee is an individual, an adult member of the licensee's or permittee's immediate family who resides in the household
- If the licensee or permittee is a corporation or limited liability company, the agent appointed for the alcohol beverage license or permit
- The holder of a valid provisional operator's license
- The holder of a valid operator's license or permit or manager's license

A Class "A" licensed premises is not required to have one of the persons listed above on the premises between 12 midnight and 6 a.m.

Retail licensees or permittees may be prosecuted for not having one of the persons listed above on their premises.

An adult working under the immediate supervision of any of the above-named persons does not need an operator's license or permit. Immediate supervision means that the licensed or permitted person must be able to watch and supervise each unlicensed or unpermitted person's actions. The licensed or permitted person must be in the same room or areas as the unlicensed or unpermitted person, near enough to see and talk to him or her, and able to actually supervise the unlicensed or unpermitted person. A municipality may not require every bartender or server in a licensed establishment to obtain an operator's license per sec. [125.17\(1\)](#) Wis. Stats. There only needs to be enough individuals who are licensed, permitted, or who have the privilege of an operator adequately supervise the premises.

## Questions?

If you are unable to find an answer to your question about on the division's website, you may email, write, or call the division.

<b>Website</b> . . .	<a href="http://revenue.wi.gov/pages/AlcoholBeverage/home.aspx">revenue.wi.gov/pages/AlcoholBeverage/home.aspx</a>
<b>Email</b> . . .	<a href="mailto:DORAlcohol@wisconsin.gov">DORAlcohol@wisconsin.gov</a>
<b>Write</b> . . .	Division of Alcohol Beverages P.O. Box 8934 Madison, WI 53708-8934
<b>Phone</b> . . .	(608) 266-2526

*Last updated February 24, 2026*