

Why getting NJ MVC appointments for permits, license transfers has been so difficult

Katie Sobko *The Record newspaper (owned by USA Today) published 3/21/2022*

Staffing shortages, limited space at facilities and high demand for certain transactions have some motor vehicle customers waiting weeks for an appointment, especially in North Jersey. The problem is particularly frustrating for first-time drivers looking to get permits. Those appointments sometimes take months to get because of high demand. Neil Epstein said his daughter was unable to find a permit appointment when she searched in late February. She ended up booking an appointment for late April in Egg Harbor, hours away from her North Jersey home. Chief Administrator Sue Fulton said the agency is working to make more appointments available but with record numbers of customers coming in and staff shortages persisting, it's an uphill battle.

"Since the start of this year we've been able to add about 1,200 [appointments] per day statewide, and most of those within the last month," Fulton said. "So we're moving in direction of we're trying to address the immediate demand." Epstein said he has seen more appointments available lately. "It seems that they have opened up more appointments, but they still have a lack in northern New Jersey," Epstein said. "The process seems archaic ... I applaud them for using new technology; they just need to do it a little faster."

Spokesperson William Connolly said the agency processed 285,219 total transactions the week of Feb. 28 and 274,578 total transactions the week of March 7. "In the last two weeks we have transaction figures, we've processed about 22-27% more than our pre-COVID average of about 250,000 transactions per week," Connolly said. Where you live and what transaction you need to complete have a lot to do with how difficult or easy it will be to get an appointment. ***Fulton said a name change or securing a license after passing the road test can be done on a walk-in basis.*** Appointments to get a new registration, take a road test or complete title transactions can be booked about a week out. Appointments for first-time permits, knowledge tests and out-of-state transfers have significant wait times, up to a month or two, due to increased demand, Fulton said. Fulton attributes the permit and knowledge test demand to an influx of customers after COVID-related school closures and the transfers to people moving into the state. Fulton said it is harder to get an appointment in the northern part of the state simply because it is more populated. She said the agency has looked to add facilities, but real estate has been difficult to find in North Jersey. The size of current locations also plays a part in how many appointments can be offered.

"The space we have dictates how many stations we can build in and the number of stations dictates how much staff can be effectively deployed there," Fulton said.

The commission, like countless other businesses throughout the country, is also facing staffing shortages. Fulton said the MVC is "aggressively" trying to hire people to fill spots of employees who recently retired or left the agency. Additionally, the agency has faced issues with staffers contracting COVID-19 or having to stay

home to care for family members with the virus, Fulton said. “Those folks in those offices work hard every day. They take a lot of abuse. They’ve been exposed to the public five or six days a week, because we do work Saturdays,” Fulton said. “It is a very tough job that our people do, and they don’t get nearly enough credit for what they do.”

Permit demand

Knowledge tests, the written test drivers need to pass to get their permit and eventually their license, are also in high demand. Fulton said there are two reasons: School closures because of the pandemic reduced the ability of schools to do permits through their drivers' education programs, so future drivers needed to come in individually, and those taking the test have a failure rate of 50%, requiring a second appointment. The department is taking steps to offer more knowledge tests, like partnering with state colleges to hold offsite testing events. Those allow for about 100 tests a day. Fulton said agency locations are increasingly allowing customers who come with a permit appointment to also take the knowledge test if there is a station available.

"Since we have added so many appointments, they may be turned down because they may be full, but if there's a no-show or if people are taking less time to take the test and there is an open station, they should be able to take the test in that appointment," Fulton said.

Dave Bellizzi, president of The Riding Academy of NJ, a motorcycle school in Little Falls, said his customers can take the required road training at his school, pass the written and skill test and then need to get a permit appointment to add the motorcycle license to their license. Between 90 and 100 people pass his course each month, and he said many are unable to get appointments, at least in the area. He said his customers have 180 days from the time they pass his course to get to motor vehicle, and with the monthslong wait for an appointment, there isn't much room in case of a problem. “People have told me they are booking multiple appointments. They get one that's in a few months and are still checking for newer ones but don't cancel the original appointment if they get it,” Bellizzi said. “And when they do get them, they are two hours away.”

Connolly said the agency's no-show rate ranges from 20% to 30% and continues to be a "persistent problem" and "prevent us from serving more customers."

In-person vs. online

While 80% of transactions can be done online, there are still a handful that require an appointment and a trip to a motor vehicle agency office.

The agency is getting ready and already making appointments for customers interested in getting Real ID, the federal standard for identification that will be required for air travel beginning next year.

Here are some of the transactions that still require in-person visits to the agency:

- Out-of-state license transfer
- Real ID
- Permit
- Non-driver ID
- New title or registration
- Knowledge test
- Road test