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Maine revolts against digital U.S. ID card

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By Jason Szep

BOSTON (Reuters) - Maine lawmakers on Thursday became the first in the nation to demand repeal of a federal law tightening identification requirements for drivers' licenses, a post-September 11 security measure that states say will cost them billions of dollars to administer.

Maine lawmakers passed a resolution urging repeal of the Real ID Act, which would create a national digital identification system by 2008. The lawmakers said it would cost Maine about \$185 million, fail to boost security and put people at greater risk of identity theft.

Maine's resolution is the strongest stand yet by a state against the law, which Congress passed in May 2004 and gave states three years to implement. Similar repeal measures are pending in eight other states.

"We cannot be spending millions of state dollars on an initiative that does more harm to our state than good," said Maine's House Majority leader Hannah Pingree, a Democrat, in a statement that called it a "massive unfunded federal mandate."

The ID act sets national standards for licenses which will have to include a digital photo, anti-counterfeiting features and machine-readable technology.

States will have to verify documents presented with license applications such as birth certificates, Social Security cards and utility bills, and will have to link their license databases so they can all be accessed as a single network.

States also will have to verify that a person applying for a license is in the country legally. States will be able to issue separate credentials to illegal aliens so that they will still be able to drive.

The National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators said in a September report that the law would cost states more than \$11 billion over five years and take at least another seven years to implement.

"It's a national ID card on steroids," said Barry Steinhardt, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Technology and Liberty Project. "This will indeed be a real nightmare."

But backers say the driver's license -- a primary means of identification in the United States -- is fundamentally insecure because of widespread identity theft.

Some 227 million people hold drivers' licenses or identity cards given out by states, which issue or renew about 70 million each year.

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