

Puerto Rico to cancel birth certificates in July

Puerto Rico plans to cancel previously issued birth certificates in July

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (March 15, 2010) -- Recent legislative action by Puerto Rico will soon begin affecting U.S. servicemembers from that territory.

In January, the government of Puerto Rico implemented a new law aimed at strengthening the issuance and usage of birth certificates to combat fraud and to protect the identity of all people born in Puerto Rico. As of July 1, the law will invalidate all birth certificates issued before that date by the Puerto Rico Health Department, through its Vital Statistics Record Office.

Why such extraordinary measures? According to a fact sheet by the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, many common official and unofficial transactions on the island "unnecessarily" required the submission, retention and storage of birth certificates. Meaning: hundreds of thousands of original birth certificates were stored without adequate protection, "making them easy targets for theft."

Subsequently, many birth certificates have been stolen from schools and other institutions; sold on the black market for prices up to \$10,000 each; and used to illegally obtain passports, licenses and other government and private section documentation and benefits.

The administration fact sheet also noted that because of such problems, "approximately 40 percent of the passport fraud cases investigated by the State Department's Diplomatic Security Services in recent years involved birth certificates of people born in Puerto Rico." This left Puerto Rico born-citizens vulnerable to identity theft, ruined credit, stolen Social Security benefits and increased random security checks at airports.

Recognizing such enormous risks - including homeland and nation security concerns - the government of Puerto Rico took action to enhance the safekeeping of birth certificate data and to better protect the public from fraud and identify theft.

Accordingly, the Vital Statistics Record Office will begin issuing new birth certificates July 1, incorporating technology to limit the possibility of document forgery. Moreover, the new law will invalidate all birth certificates issued before July 1.

Does this mean that everyone will need to run out and request a new birth certificate immediately? No, said Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration officials. In fact, they recommend that only people who have a specific need for their birth certificate for official purposes - such as passport application - request a new document.

"Those people who want to obtain a copy of the new birth certificate for their records are encouraged to do so at a later date to prevent an unnecessary rush of applications," said officials, "and to ensure those individuals who have a specific need for the birth certificate are able to obtain them in a timely fashion."

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