

# LATEST NEWS!

## PUERTO RICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE (MIAMI OFFICE)

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***Puerto Rican Birth Certificate update:*** The Government of Puerto Rico has approved an amendment that extends the validity of current Puerto Rico birth certificates for three months, through Sept. 30, 2010, to provide a transition period as the Island begins issuing the new, more secure certificates starting July 1, 2010.

*By ISOLDE RAFTERY*

Puerto Ricans facing the imminent mass invalidation of their birth certificates have received a reprieve from the Puerto Rican government.

People born on the island – including the nearly 1.4 million Puerto Ricans living on the United States mainland, about 300,000 of them in New York -- now have until Sept. 30 to continue to use their old birth certificates.

Last December, in an effort to curb passport fraud, the Puerto Rican legislature created a new, more secure birth certificate that would be available as of July 1. The initial plan was to invalidate all previously issued birth certificates as of the same date. But over the weekend, the government finalized a measure that keeps the old birth certificates valid until Sept. 30, while also making the new certificates available as of Thursday.

"We planned we would give a short period of overlap that we would not announce until the very end," Kenneth D. McClintock, secretary of state of Puerto Rico, said Monday. "If you announce it early enough, the bureaucracy takes it easy."

For decades, it was common practice for Puerto Ricans to order a dozen copies of their birth certificates and hand them out to just about anyone – the ballet instructor, the elementary school secretary, the prospective employer.

It seemed a benign practice, one borne of habit more than necessity. But in time, it resulted in rampant fraud.

School break-ins increased as thieves broke into schools to rifle through cabinets for birth certificates, which were sold on the black market for \$5,000 to \$10,000.

In one study, the American authorities examined 8,000 passport fraud cases and found that 40 percent of them involved Puerto Rican birth certificates (Puerto Ricans are, of course, United States citizens). There were tens of millions of unsecured birth certificates, which Mr. McClintock said made Puerto Ricans vulnerable to identity theft.

"You had many people waiting until they turned 65 to request full benefits," he said. "They would go to the Social Security office and found that someone else had been getting partial benefits in their name since they were 62. That was creating major problems."

Though many Puerto Ricans agreed with the effort to reduce fraud, some questioned whether the government was prepared to field so many requests for new birth certificates. Angelo Falcon, president and co-founder of the National Institute for Latino Policy, challenged officials on this point.

"Many of us are wondering, if over five million people have been born in Puerto Rico, how are they going to handle the requests for these birth certificates?" Mr. Falcon said.

And with so many official documents produced with the help of stolen birth certificates, Mr. Falcon said he wondered whether fraud would be cut back.

"They're asking for copies of a driver's license," Mr. Falcon said. "You could still falsify the information."

Mr. McClintock said that that was a concern, but that the renewal of birth certificates was expected to significantly reduce fraud.

Mr. Falcon, who was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the mainland as an infant, said he was waiting to apply for a new birth certificate because he would not be traveling this summer.

Mr. McClintock urged others to do likewise. Unless Puerto Ricans are getting married this summer or applying for a first-time driver's license or passport, he said there was no need to request a new birth certificate right away. Though the government hired 47 summer employees to respond to the birth certificate requests, he hoped to reduce the backlog by asking people to wait.

There are three ways to acquire a new birth certificate – mail-in, walk-in or through [PR.gov](http://PR.gov), Puerto Rico's government Web site. Through the site, applicants must submit a scan of a government-issued picture identification, like a driver's license, passport or military identification. Each new certificate costs \$5, unless the person is a veteran or 60 or older.

On the streets of Spanish Harlem last Thursday, several older Puerto Ricans said they had planned trips to their home island to order a new birth certificate in person. There, they could apply at one of the island's 78 municipalities and receive a birth certificate within a day.

Other Puerto Rico-born New Yorkers hadn't heard about the law, or had heard but didn't realize the deadline fast approached.

Elizabeth Vega, a housekeeper who lives in the Bronx, said she was vague on the details. A friend tried to order a new birth certificate online for her, but she wasn't certain if that worked.

"I care because I need a new one, and it's important to have papers," Ms. Vega said. "But I don't know too much."