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N.H. suspends 900 licenses after review, but Sununu says it's a 'different situation' than Mass.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#), [Vernal Coleman](#) and [Martin Finucane](#) Globe Staff, August 28, 2019, 2:55 p.m.



Governor Chris Sununu said the backlogs in New Hampshire were “constantly being addressed” but the process of addressing them had been accelerated. PAUL HAYES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE 2019

CONCORD, N.H. — New Hampshire officials said Wednesday they have suspended the licenses of more than 900 residents after an internal review of unprocessed mailed notifications of driving violations committed in other states.

New Hampshire Division of Motor Vehicles Director Elizabeth Bielecki acknowledged her agency had fallen well behind in processing the alerts, creating a backlog totaling more than 13,000 notices.

State authorities also confirmed that in July 2016 the DMV had stopped mailing notifications to other states when their drivers committed violations in New Hampshire. The state resumed those notifications this summer.

The stunning admissions at a press conference led by Governor Chris Sununu came on the heels of similar procedural failures at the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles. The resulting scandal was sparked after a June 21 truck crash that killed seven motorcyclists in northern New Hampshire.

The truck driver, 23-year-old [Volodymyr Zhukovskyy](#) of West Springfield, Mass., has pleaded not guilty to negligent homicide. Registrar Erin Deveney stepped down following revelations that Zhukovskyy's Massachusetts license should have been suspended because of a past drunken driving arrest in Connecticut that Massachusetts had failed to process. Another Massachusetts official, [Thomas Bowes](#), was fired.

But Sununu sought to distance New Hampshire's problems from Massachusetts' on Wednesday, saying the RMV's procedural lapses represent a "massive systematic failure . . . That is a real crisis there."

New Hampshire was in "a completely different situation," he said. The state's review showed no in-state fatalities associated with the unprocessed alerts.

Sununu also said his state had a long-term plan to reduce the backlog, but he was not made aware of the backlog itself until after the deadly June crash.

Earlier this month, Sununu's office lashed out after Deveney and other Massachusetts officials stated that New Hampshire had also failed to transmit notifications about out-of-state drivers whose licenses should have been suspended.

"Make no mistake: The deficiencies within the Massachusetts RMV under the leadership of Ms. Deveney resulted in the horrific crash in Randolph," Sununu spokesman Benjamin Vihstadt told the Globe in early August.

On Wednesday, Sununu acknowledged the state has not been sending Massachusetts notifications about driver violations but said the information-sharing between New Hampshire and other states is complicated by New Hampshire privacy laws.

He said the backlog of unprocessed violations was "constantly being addressed by DMV staff."

The process was accelerated following the deadly June crash, he said.

"I think the idea was that as things become more and more automated, the backlogs would ultimately be taken care of," he said. "This just gave us the impetus to say . . . let's make sure we do it today."

Massachusetts officials on Wednesday had a diplomatic response to New Hampshire's vehicle registry problems.

"Massachusetts is collaborating with New Hampshire on improving communications relative to driver licensure issues and the Registry welcomes other states calling for a national solution to automating state-to-state communications," said Patrick Marvin, spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, in a statement.

David Watters, a New Hampshire state senator and chair of the Transportation Committee, said members were aware of staffing challenges at the DMV but not the backlog. “If there are staffing issues or laws that at all compromise public safety, we look forward to working with the governor to address them,” Watters said.

The discoveries of large backlogs of unprocessed motor vehicle violations in two states have raised questions about just how widespread such problems may be nationally.

States rely on paper notifications sent by mail to notify each other when a driver from another state should have his or her license suspended, including for serious infractions such as drunken driving.

Communication between states is vital for keeping potentially dangerous drivers off the roads across the country, said Shaun Kildare, director of research at Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, a consumer group focused on driver safety.

“But if you have 49 states that are enforcing all the rules and another that isn’t, that’s a big blind spot,” he said.

New Hampshire and Massachusetts both launched reviews of their systems for tracking drivers’ records in the wake of the Randolph, N.H., accident.

As a result, more than 2,400 Massachusetts drivers’ licenses have been suspended for violations committed in other states. Massachusetts also was not notifying other states of violations committed by their drivers in Massachusetts.

In New Hampshire, Bielecki said reviews of the backlogs resulted in more than 900 New Hampshire residents receiving a suspension notice because of violations committed out of state.

She also said New Hampshire sent 13,912 notices of violations committed in New Hampshire by drivers from other states. Nearly half of those notifications involved the suspension of driving privileges in New Hampshire.

Another 1,508 suspension notices were sent to New Hampshire residents because of state court defaults, while 1,433 notices were sent to nonresidents, she said.

A report on the review released by state officials said any future backlog could be prevented by “converting all manual processes to electronic, which will improve efficiency, public safety, and customer service.”

“Until all manual processes are converted electronically, the DMV will rely on trained staff to assess and reassess the quantity of work, and timeliness for processing transactions,” the report said.

“The working men and women of the New Hampshire DMV stand committed and ready to ensuring public safety,” the report continued.

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