How Bad Is DMV?
Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

The California Department of Motor Vehicles has been in the news for its long lines, IT issues and other problems. Steven Gordon, a former Cisco Systems executive, is the fourth DMV director Governor Newsom has appointed since February to fix the agency.

Just how bad are the problems at DMV? Pretty bad, in my personal experience.

My 95-year-old mom, Gloria Sr., lives with me. She uses a wheelchair, and we have a handicapped placard so we can park in disabled spaces to load and unload her from the car. We must use a disabled space, because the driver cannot drop my mom off in her wheelchair, then leave her to park in a more distant space; she must be accompanied at all times.

The disabled placard is good for two years, and DMV supposedly automatically renews the placard just prior to its expiration, sending the new placard in the mail. There is nothing one can do to obtain the renewal except wait for it to arrive.

My mom’s most recent placard expired at the end of June 2019 and should have been automatically renewed by DMV with a new placard expiring June 30, 2021.

At the end of June, because I had not received the automatic renewal in the mail, I filled a DMV “application for replacement plates, stickers, documents” form stating that the placard had not been received. There was no response to the form and no placard arrived.

In early July, I visited DMV in person, at the Mt. Shasta office in Siskiyou County. It takes two months to get an appointment at the DMV in the Bay Area, and I could not wait this long to obtain the disabled placard renewal. They told me their records indicated that the renewed placard had been sent to me in May, and it should arrive by the time we returned to our home in Santa Clara County on July 10th. They informed me that we should continue using my mom’s current placard because it is automatically renewed and it would show as valid if DMV records were checked.

The updated placard still did not arrive in the mail.

On August 27, I visited the DMV again, this time at the Yreka, California office. They informed me that their records showed the renewed placard had been issued that very day! Because that did not sound plausible, I filled out and submitted another copy of the DMV “application for replacement plates, stickers, documents,” stating that the placard had not been received, and I submitted the form there in person.

DMV again informed me that we should continue to use my mom’s current placard.

On a visit to Ashland, Oregon on September 1, we received a $190 ticket for parking in a disabled space without a permit (actually, with a permit that was expired, since our disabled permit was hanging on the rear-view mirror.)

On September 6, I spoke with the California DMV on the phone. They informed me that the renewed placard had been issued three days previously, and I should be receiving it soon. At this point, they had told me that it had been issued in May, in August and in September.

The DMV suggested that I visit the California State Automobile Association, where I am a member, and that they could issue the renewal and also a print-out of the record for the disabled permit, showing that it had been in force, so that this proof could be used to have tickets dismissed. I visited CSAA, who informed me that the DMV record they had showed “no action” on the permit “this year,” but they were not able to help or provide me with the record.

On September 9, my mom’s caregiver and my mom parked in a handicapped space at a Trader Joe’s in San Jose. My mom’s handicapped placard was displayed on the rear-view mirror.

We received a citation for “disabled space: PKG in or Blocking,” with an invalid placard, with a fine of $400.

Finally, I had a caregiver and my mom go to DMV in Los Gatos on September 10, and they were able to obtain the handicapped placard renewal, from June 30, 2019 to June 30, 2021. DMV would not provide them with a print-out of the placard record to assist in fighting the tickets in Ashland and San Jose.

After three months, three visits to DMV at far-flung locations with shorter lines, filing two forms, multiple phone-calls after being on hold for hours, two tickets totaling nearly $600, and multiple letters and online objections to the tickets, we finally have a valid handicapped placard for my mom, when it should have been automatically renewed in June.

The problems that beset DMV range from not taking actions automatically when their policy calls for this, to providing misinformation, to not acting on forms that have been filed.

Nothing short of a complete overhaul can fix California’s DMV.