

Summary

Driver Examination Stations

Key Facts and Findings:

- The Department of Public Safety’s Driver and Vehicle Services Division (DVS) operates Minnesota’s driver examination (exam) stations. (p. 3)
- In 2019, DVS administered more than 282,000 knowledge tests and 136,000 road tests for the Class D license—Minnesota’s standard driver’s license. (p. 11)
- To address COVID-19 safety concerns, DVS consolidated from 93 to 15 exam stations in May 2020. This saved staff travel time and increased the daily number of road tests. (pp. 37-38)
- Following the station consolidation in May 2020, the location of DVS exam stations no longer fully satisfied a legal requirement to make Class D exams available either in, or adjacent to, each Minnesota county. (p. 18)
- DVS has been unable to consistently satisfy a requirement in law that establishes a maximum wait time of 14 days for Class D road tests. One aspect of the requirement, however, is unclear. (pp. 21-22)
- DVS lacks a systematic approach to forecasting demand for Class D road tests. (p. 25)
- DVS has experienced persistent staff shortages at exam stations and has struggled to fill key exam-station positions in a timely manner. (pp. 29, 32)
- DVS relied on extensive staff overtime to help reduce the 2020 backlog, which is not sustainable long term. (p. 35)

- Over the past two years, DVS has improved its exam-scheduling process for Class D road tests. (p. 41)
- Though it lacks the explicit legal authority to do so, DVS has allowed people to take the online Class D knowledge test in their homes. (p. 50)
- Additional changes could improve road-test administration or road safety, but they also pose challenges. (p. 57)

Key Recommendations:

- The Legislature should clarify the requirement that an applicant receives a Class D road-test appointment within 14 days of request. (p. 22)
- The Legislature should clarify whether individuals should be allowed to take the online Class D knowledge test at home. (p. 53)
- DVS should (1) continue to strive to meet the statutory 14-day goal on road-test appointments and (2) measure “next available appointment” at the time a customer schedules an exam. (p. 23)
- DVS should develop a robust method to regularly forecast demand for Class D road tests. (p. 27)
- DVS should identify alternatives to relying on extensive, long-term staff overtime to increase its capacity to conduct road tests. (p. 36)
- DVS should reopen exam stations strategically at the end of the temporary consolidation that began in 2020. (p. 38)

DVS eliminated its 2020 backlog of Class D road tests but has not consistently met a legal requirement for timely road-test appointments.

Report Summary

Minnesota drivers can obtain several types of driver's licenses, including the Class D license, which is the standard driver's license required to drive on Minnesota's public roadways. To obtain a Class D license, drivers must complete some combination of education, instruction, practice, and examinations, depending on the age of the license seeker.

The Department of Public Safety's Driver and Vehicle Services Division (DVS) oversees licensing, including administering the requisite exams at its driver examination (exam) stations. Knowledge tests come in written or computerized formats and test a person's knowledge of Minnesota traffic laws. Road tests take place behind the wheel of a vehicle and test a person's ability to control and maneuver that vehicle. Some individuals must take the exams more than one time before they achieve a passing score. In 2019, DVS conducted more than 136,000 Class D road tests and more than 282,000 Class D knowledge tests.

Citizens and legislators have expressed concern about a backlog of Class D road tests and the resulting wait times to take the test. DVS had also received criticism for reserving road-test appointments to which only certain driver education programs could bring their students. DVS discontinued the practice, known as "standing appointments," in early 2020.

DVS has had mixed success meeting statutory requirements on exam availability.

Minnesota law establishes two standards for customer access to Class D driver exams. The first requires DVS to provide Class D knowledge tests and road tests either in or adjacent to each Minnesota county.¹ Prior to the exam-station closures precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, DVS exam stations were located in 80 counties. The remaining seven counties were served by

one or more exam stations in neighboring counties, satisfying the legal requirement.

When DVS reopened driver exam stations in May 2020, the division temporarily consolidated to 15 stations, no longer meeting the location requirement established in law. While DVS has since reopened 10 additional stations, the division has indicated that it does not plan to reopen all of its original 93 exam stations. We recommend that DVS reopen exam stations strategically to ensure that it meets the statutory requirement to provide adequate coverage across the state.

A second legal standard requires DVS to provide a road-test appointment within 14 days of a request by an eligible applicant.² The statute is unclear because it does not specify whether the 14-day requirement applies to an appointment made anywhere in the state or closer to an applicant's home. We recommend that the Legislature clarify this statute.

The broadest interpretation of the requirement is that an appointment must be available *somewhere in the state* within 14 days. DVS's appointment data from October 2018 through July 2020 show that only 34 percent of Class D road-test appointments were scheduled to occur within 14 days. However, DVS does not collect systematic data on the "next available appointment" at the time a customer schedules a test. This means that DVS does not know the percentage of road tests that *could have* occurred within 14 days, but were scheduled further into the future due to customer preferences. We recommend that DVS systematically track data on the "next available appointment" and continue to strive to meet the 14-day statutory requirement.

DVS does not systematically estimate demand for Class D road tests. Regularly forecasting demand would allow DVS to make informed decisions on staffing to meet the 14-day requirement in state law. A DVS manager told us that they have estimated the demand for road tests only on an ad hoc basis. We recommend that DVS develop a robust method of forecasting demand on an ongoing basis.

Nearly two-thirds of Class D road-test appointments from October 2018 through July 2020 were scheduled to occur after the required 14-day threshold.

¹ *Minnesota Statutes* 2020, 171.13, subd. 1(c).

² *Minnesota Statutes* 2020, 171.13, subd. 1(d).

Further, DVS's estimates should be based on factors, such as the expected number of retests, most likely to affect demand.

DVS has struggled to maintain adequate staffing at exam stations.

DVS has experienced persistent staff shortages at exam stations. Exam stations rely on three main groups of staff: regional supervisors and assistant regional supervisors, examiners (who conduct road tests), and counter staff. As of late May 2020, DVS had a total of 214 supervisor, examiner, and counter staff positions, only 184 of which were filled; 14 percent were vacant. From 2016 through 2019, DVS averaged vacancy rates of 23 percent for examiners and 36 percent for counter staff.

DVS's late May 2020 complement of exam-station staff is smaller than DVS has estimated it needs to consistently meet the demand for Class D road tests. For example, DVS estimated in early 2020 that it needed 195 examiners to staff its original 93 exam stations, which was nearly twice as many as DVS employed in May 2020. At that time, DVS had 118 examiner positions, only 100 of which were filled.

DVS has struggled to fill its exam-station vacancies in a timely manner. Since 2016, the length of the hiring process has increased for most exam-station positions. For example, from 2013 to 2016, it took an average of less than three months to hire new examiners; since then, the hiring time has increased, reaching an average of more than six months for positions posted in 2020.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made it even more difficult to adequately staff exam stations. Between late March and the end of June 2020, "paid COVID-19 leave" accounted for 21 percent of all exam-station employees' work hours. This further reduced the number of hours that exam-station staff were available to deliver services, such as road tests.

To address a backlog of road tests after pandemic-related exam-station closures, DVS consolidated the number of exam stations and used significant overtime.

The two-month exam-station closures in spring of 2020 resulted in the cancellation of more than 19,000 Class D road tests. Exam-station consolidation, staff overtime, and other exam-station changes allowed DVS to successfully meet its goal of conducting nearly 81,500 Class D road tests from June through October 2020. This accounted for the backlog as well as the regular summer demand for road tests.

To increase its road-test capacity, DVS consolidated more than 90 exam stations to 15 locations (14 of which administered road tests). DVS's reduced number of exam stations resulted in greater station efficiency. One reason was that it eliminated the time that exam-station staff spent traveling to smaller, more distant exam stations.

DVS used significant staff overtime to extend the hours at open stations. From mid-May through June 2020, exam-station staff worked about 1,800 overtime hours. Relative to all hours worked, this was more than twice as high as the proportion of overtime hours worked during 2019.

While significant overtime helped eliminate the backlog of Class D road tests, its use is not sustainable in the long term. In response to an OLA survey conducted in August and September 2020, one-fifth of DVS supervisors and assistant supervisors commented specifically on the toll that the additional hours had taken on staff. We recommend that DVS identify alternatives to relying on extensive, long-term staff overtime to increase its road-test capacity.

Since late 2018, DVS has improved the process customers use to schedule Class D road tests.

DVS improvements started with the rollout of a new online scheduling system in October 2018. The new system featured improved

Despite staffing challenges, DVS met its goal of eliminating the backlog of Class D road tests by October 2020.

search capability and allowed customers to search for a new road-test appointment without losing a previously scheduled one.

DVS also expanded—from six weeks to six months—the window for which it made appointments available, giving customers more appointment options when scheduling online. Further, DVS discontinued the practice of reserving appointment slots for use by customers of only certain driver education programs, making the process more equitable.

DVS made additional scheduling changes upon reopening exam stations in late May 2020. One was to require appointments—and discontinue walk-in service—for both Class D road tests and knowledge tests. This allowed DVS to control the number of customers in waiting areas and helped manage customer expectations.

It is unclear whether DVS has legal authority to allow customers to take online knowledge tests at home.

In 2020, the Legislature directed DVS to allow driver education programs and other authorized entities to administer Class D knowledge tests online.³ In October 2020, DVS began allowing customers to take the knowledge test online from third-party administrators or in their own homes with a qualified adult serving as a proctor. The

statute authorizing online knowledge testing states that an “entity” must apply to the Department of Public Safety to administer the test. DVS has determined that licensed individuals age 21 or older can be considered “entities” for proctoring tests. OLA questions whether the law intended “entities” to include individual proctors and whether the knowledge test can legally be taken from home. We recommend that the Legislature clarify this law.

Some changes with the potential to improve test administration or road safety would require legislative action.

Possible changes introduced by legislators and others include (1) the use of third-party testers for Class D road tests, (2) the expansion of third-party testing for commercial driver’s licenses, (3) no-show fees, and (4) an increase in the age for which driver education is required.

While OLA does not offer recommendations on whether the Legislature should adopt these changes, Chapter 4 presents arguments for and against each. For example, charging fees when customers fail to show up for scheduled road tests could prevent wasted appointment slots. At the same time, such fees could be a burden for some applicants, and the extent to which they would reduce no-shows is unknown.

DVS has allowed customers to take the Class D knowledge test at home, but it is unclear whether the division has the legal authority to do so.

³ *Laws of Minnesota 2020*, Second Special Session, chapter 2, sec. 2, codified as *Minnesota Statutes 2020*, 171.13, subd. 9.

Summary of Agency Response

In a letter dated March 12, 2021, Department of Public Safety Commissioner John Harrington said that “DVS appreciates all of the analysis OLA put into” its recommendations. He said that he is proud of the improvements DVS has made in scheduling and providing road tests and that DVS would continue to strive towards a service model focused on “customer access, experience, and convenience.” He added that DVS would “measure and track data to better anticipate demand and maximize operational efficiencies statewide while always prioritizing our focus on safe drivers.” Commissioner Harrington also addressed the four potential policy changes presented in Chapter 4. He said that he “appreciates the OLA’s efforts to provide the pros and cons” of allowing third parties to administer Class D road tests. He said that such a change would be concerning because of its impact on public safety. However, he indicated support for the other potential changes: the expansion of third-party testing for commercial driver’s licenses, no-show fees, and requiring “driver education earlier in the testing process.”

The full evaluation report, *Driver Examination Stations*, is available at 651-296-4708 or:
www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2021/driverexams.htm