# Reentry ID: Helping Rehabilitated Citizens Regain Their Government Issued Identification

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*Abstract*—With the largest prison population in the world, the United States releases more than 650,000 individuals from prison every year. A significant hurdle encountered by many released individuals is that their state issued identification documents such as driver licenses have expired while they were in prison and the process of obtaining identification has significantly changed due to the advents of technologies such as the internet and smartphones. While various Checklists, Guides, and ID programs around the country have attempted to address this issue by disseminating information about the steps needed to obtain a government issued ID, they have proven to be either too rudimentary to be useful or too complex to navigate. Hence, this paper reports on the development of the Reentry ID tool at Santa Clara University (SCU), which helps guide users through the process of finding all the information they need for obtaining their state identification cards. As part of doing so, the tool warehouses various lists of all eligible proof of identity and residency documents accepted for applying for state identifications, such as driver's licenses, by each of the 50 US states' Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), into a single database.

*Keywords*—*Criminal Justice Reform, Digital Society, Government Identification, Legal Technology, Paper Prisons, Web Application*

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the largest prison population in the world, the United States releases more than 650,000 individuals from prison per year as reported by the United States Department of Justice [1]. In order for these newly released individuals to reintegrate into their communities, they need housing, jobs, and maybe the ability to drive. All these activities require the possession of some form of government issued identification, such as a driver's license, which many recently released inmates do not possess due to it, for example, having expired while they were incarcerated. This issue was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic when a significant increase in releases occurred for low-level or non-violent offenders in order to slow the spread of the virus within the United States' prison system. This abrupt release of inmates caused logistical issues regarding reintegration into society. Although inmates may be released along with their prison ID card and release papers, many states do not allow the use of these documents to easily procure state issued identification that allows them to become a productive member of society again. The lack of a government ID - or the "ID Gap" - is however not a problem limited to reentry populations: it is estimated that 11% of Americans do not have government issued ID [2] and that the problem disproportionately impacts African American individuals [3].

To make matters worse, government agencies are severely understaffed due to chronic budget cuts and, at the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic. This has further impacted people's ability to simply walk into a Department of Motored Vehicles (DMV) office to be guided through the process by a staff member. Hence, many released inmates may need to apply for identification through the web. Thus, the recently released inmates may be once again pushed to the margins of society if they do not possess the technology or knowledge to effectively navigate the internet. Furthermore, bureaucratic websites are sometimes prohibitively complicated, especially for a person that may have been in prison since before websites were a mainstream consumer technology. For this reason, the criminal advocacy group *cut50* approached Santa Clara University's Paper Prisons Initiative team to assist in developing a web application to make the procurement of government issued ID's accessible to recently released inmates.

The main challenge in developing such a tool is to implement efficient yet simple methodology for guiding users to properly navigate through the process of getting an ID. Thus the tool was developed as a short questionnaire that intelligently adapts to previously answered questions and navigates the user to the most relevant agency's relevant web page to initiate the process for receiving their *most necessary article of identification*, which is a state issued ID or driver's license for most people. This necessitated the collection and databasing of massive amounts of complex information from bureaucratic websites as well as the paraphrasing of their terminology using accessible everyday language. The development underwent multiple iterations, and at the end of each iteration, user testing was conducted. The user testing was, however, limited due to

the tool's specific target users.

Section II analyzes other attempts to provide technical guidance for getting an ID and section III explains the development process and technical methodology used in building the Reentry ID tool. Sections IV reports user testing results and updates made to the tool in relation to the user feedback. And lastly, Sections V and VI provide future steps for improving the tool and some concluding remarks, respectively.

## II. RELATED WORK

Many advocacy groups have developed different tools to help reentry court planners with their work.

### A. Basic Checklists

One type of tool reentry planners use is a checklist to see what a released offender may need right after their release [4]. These checklists include questions related to identification, benefits and finances, health care, housing, and personal care. Although these checklists give a general idea of what a reentry court planner should focus on, it's not tailored towards a state and thus, the planner needs to gather more data based on their region.

### B. Detailed Guides

Although the checklists give a general idea of what a released individual needs, they're not helpful when the released individuals are left on their own without any reentry program's support [5]. For these individuals, detailed self-study guides of all sorts have been developed. However, even though a detailed guide is a great way to help the released individuals sort out their plans after prison and get on the right track, they tend to either be too general and thus lack answers to questions for particular states, or are too detailed and try to answer many of the questions the released individuals may have, all at once before the individuals even know they may have said questions. Stated more directly, they tend to either be too scant on details to be truly useful, or too overwhelming and complicated for some individuals to go through and utilize.

### C. ID Programs

California's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation offers a CAL-ID program that provides certain state prisoners with a valid California state ID card for free, and its informative web page lists the required documents to prove eligibility for the program [6]. In order to enroll in the program, one must have their Social Security Number, an issued identification card or driver's license from the DMV within the previous 10 years, and an address with a zip code. This, however, requires those who do not have the required documents to have to go through other processes for getting each of the required documents first. Hence, one who does not already have an expired identification card or driver's license from the DMV faces another hurdle to getting a valid California state ID.

Even with the numerous details and information available, all the aforementioned are only useful for reentry program staff and court planners to use as reference. Many of the released individuals may find the guides, instructions, and whole process too overwhelming and difficult to understand and undertake especially if they cannot find an answer to their question in a few relatively simple steps. Therefore, the need for a unified tool which can direct users to where they can find the latest details for each step regardless of their state of residency, can not be further apparent.

## III. REENTRY ID

In collaboration with Dream Corps' #Cut50 initiative, an initiative to cut prison population and crime by 50 percent in the next 10 years [7], a team of Santa Clara University graduate, undergraduate, and law Students prototyped a simple proof of concept website during Santa Clara University Law School's 2019 Second Chances Empathy Hackathon [8]. In order to transform the prototype into a live tool which can be confidently used by released individuals or their advocates, over the years since, the work was continued by the Web and Tools subteam of the Paper Prisons Initiative, which has experience in developing humanitarian tools such as a tool for narrowing the Second Chance Gap [9] in support of released rehabilitated individuals. Several iterations of the tool were created and user tested until the current optimal solution which is available live on the Paper Prisons Initiative's website [10] was reached.

As any web application, the tool consists of a frontend and backend infrastructure as detailed below.

### A. Frontend

The frontend was built into a designated page of the Paper Prisons Initiative's website with the same styling and aesthetics. It consists of two views: one for users seeking information on how to obtain their IDs and another for Admins to perform maintenance and updates without having to interact with the programming of the tool directly. Both consist of questionnaires designed using Survey.js [11] which uses familiar form elements such as check-boxes, Drop-down menus, and sliders.

*1) User View:* The questionnaire was placed lower in the page as to encourage the user to read the description first and get a better understanding of the tool before proceeding. Figure 1 shows what the user sees before proceeding with the survey.

Figure 2 shows the first question in the tool which asks the user about the type of identification (Passport, Social Security Card, or State ID / Driver's License) they are looking for.

Based on the document they choose, they either get a link to a government website or are directed further down the decision process. If the user selects "State ID / Driver's License" as the document they're looking for, after selecting a state they must determine all the necessary documents they will need to take with them to the DMV for getting their State ID or Driver's License. The documents fall within three categories:

- **Proof of Identity:** a document that proves the holder of the document is a citizen (natural or naturalized) of the United States of America or a legal alien residing within the United States.
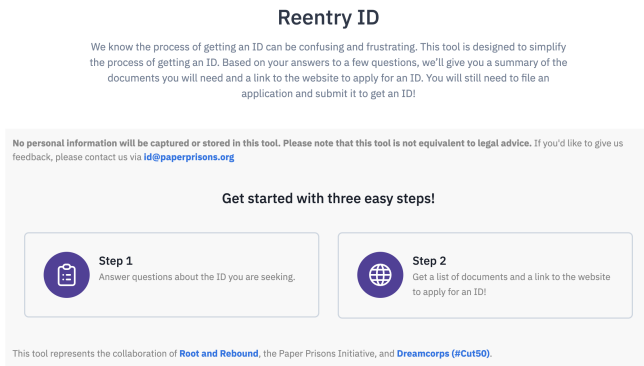
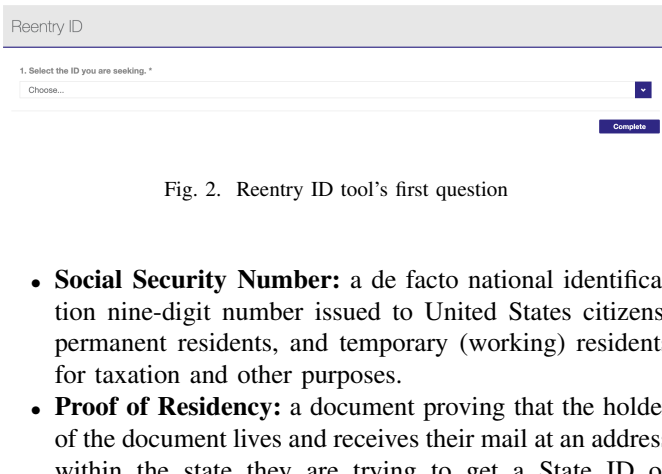Fig. 1. Reentry ID tool overview and start page



Fig. 2. Reentry ID tool's first question

- **Social Security Number:** a de facto national identification nine-digit number issued to United States citizens, permanent residents, and temporary (working) residents for taxation and other purposes.
- **Proof of Residency:** a document proving that the holder of the document lives and receives their mail at an address within the state they are trying to get a State ID or Driver's License in.

Reentry ID helps with this step by listing all of the documents the DMV will accept in the user's selected state for each of the said categories. Figure 3, shows the selections for the state of California, as an example. Reentry ID retrieves and renders these accurate and up to date lists from its manually and carefully populated backend database. The user selects the approved Proof of Identity document(s) they posses, a "Yes" or "No" for the possession of a document with their social security number, and the approved Proof of Residency document(s) they possess, and then click the "Next" button.

Based on the answers provided by the user, their results page may vary as depicted in figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 displays the successful navigation to the link for the user to get their document at their corresponding government office. From here, the user can either click the link and navigate to the said site and/or email the link to their email address so they can retain it for later usage. However, if the link provided is broken, the user can report it by clicking a button under the horizontal line at the bottom of the result page, as can also be seen in Figure 4. Administrators will be notified via email to review the link and update it as necessary.

Figure 5 displays a sample of an unsuccessful navigation to the needed link due to the user missing needed documents along with a list of what documents they can get to satisfy
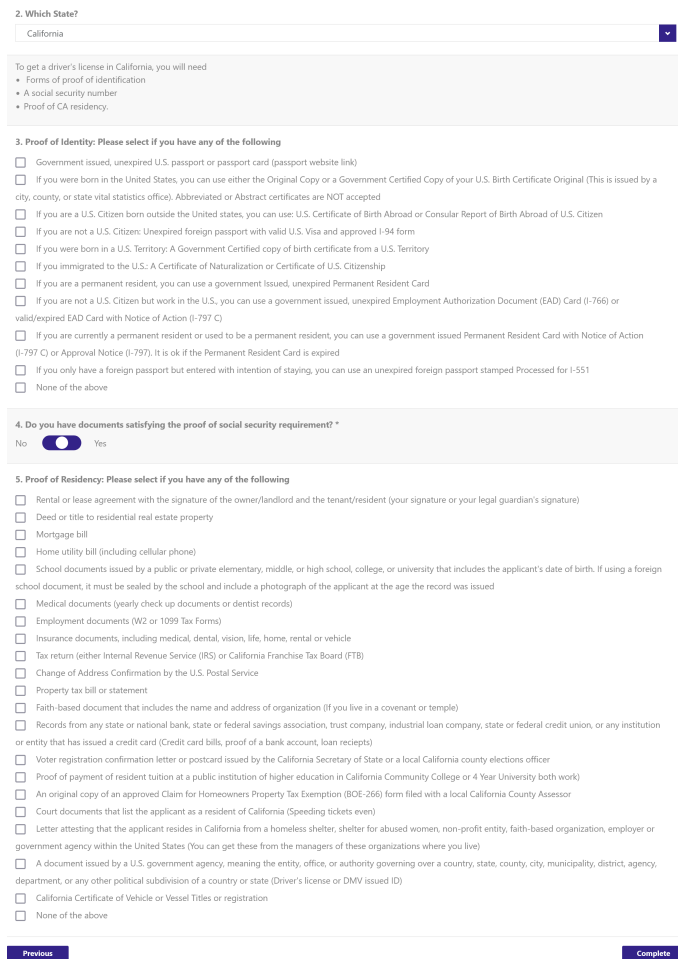


Fig. 3. Documents that qualify as Proof of Identity and Residency for obtaining a State ID or Driver's License in the State of California as seen in the Reentry ID tool
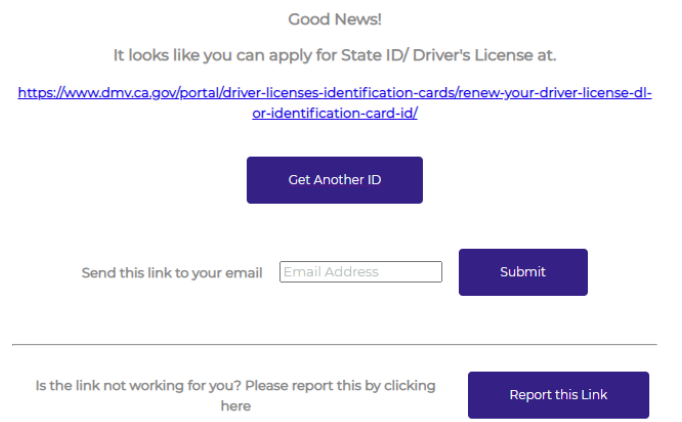


Fig. 4. Success page with link to get the State ID / Driver's License, option to send link to email, and report button for any issues encountered

that step and continue with this process.

It should be noted that the Reenty ID tool does not collect any personally identifiable data nor stores any answers given by the user that are used for navigating the decision tree. Since

**Reentry ID**

To get a driver's license in California, you will need - Forms of proof of identification, A social security number, Proof of CA residency.

You need get one of the following documents for proof of identity. Please comeback after you attain the documents.

• Government issued, unexpired U.S. passport or passport card (passport website link)
• If you were born in the United States, you can use either the Original Copy or a Government Certified Copy of your U.S. Birth Certificate Original (This is issued by a city, county, or state vital statistics office). Abbreviated or Abstract certificates are NOT accepted
• If you are a U.S. Citizen born outside the United States, you can use: U.S. Certificate of Birth Abroad or Consular Report of Birth Abroad of U.S. Citizen
• If you were born in a U.S. Territory: Unexpired foreign passport with valid U.S. Visa and approved I-94 form
• If you were born in a U.S. Territory: A Government Certified copy of birth certificate from a U.S. Territory
• If you immigrated to the U.S.: A Certificate of Naturalization or Certificate of U.S. Citizenship
• If you are a permanent resident, you can use a government issued, unexpired Permanent Resident Card
• If you are not a U.S. Citizen but work in the U.S., you can use a government issued, unexpired Employment Authorization Document (EAD) Card (I-766) or valid/expired EAD Card with Notice of Action (I-797 C)
• If you are currently a permanent resident or used to be a permanent resident, you can use a government issued Permanent Resident Card with Notice of Action (I-797 C) or Approval Notice (I-797). It is ok if the Permanent Resident Card is expired
• If you only have a foreign passport but entered with intention of staying, you can use an unexpired foreign passport stamped Processed for I-551

You need get one of the following documents for proof of residency. Please comeback after you attain the documents.

• Rental or lease agreement with the signature of the owner/landlord and the tenant/resident (your signature or your legal guardian's signature)
• Deed or title to residential real estate property
• Mortgage bill
• Home utility bill (including cellular phone)
• School documents issued by a public or private elementary, middle, or high school, college, or university that includes the applicant's date of birth. If using a foreign school document, it must be sealed by the school and include a photograph of the applicant at the age the record was issued
• Medical documents (yearly check up documents or dentist records)
• Employment documents (W2 or 1099 Tax Forms)
• Insurance documents, including medical, dental, vision, life, home, rental or vehicle
• Tax return (either Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or California Franchise Tax Board (FTB)
• Change of Address Confirmation by the U.S. Postal Service
• Property tax bill or statement
• Faith-based document that includes the name and address of organization (If you live in a covenant or temple)
• Records from any state or national bank, state or federal savings association, trust company, industrial loan company, state or federal credit union, or any institution or entity that has issued a credit card (Credit card bills, proof of a bank account, loan receipts)
• Voter registration confirmation letter or postcard issued by the California Secretary of State or a local California county elections officer
• Proof of payment of resident tuition at a public institution of higher education in California Community College or 4 Year University both work)
• An original copy of an approved Claim for Homeowners Property Tax Exemption (BOE-266) form filed with a local California County Assessor
• Court documents that list the applicant as a resident of California (Speeding tickets even)
• Letter attesting that the applicant resides in California from a homeless shelter, shelter for abused women, non-profit entity, faith-based organization, employer or government agency within the United States (You can get these from the managers of these organizations where you live)
• A document issued by a U.S. government agency, meaning the entity, office, or authority governing over a country, state, county, city, municipality, district, agency, department, or any other political subdivision of a country or state (Driver's license or DMV issued ID)
• California Certificate of Vehicle or Vessel Titles or registration

DMV Link:

https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/driver-licenses-identification-cards/renew-your-driver-license-dl-or-identification-card-id/

Fig. 5. Failure page with information about the qualifying document(s) the user needs to gather in order to successfully apply for and obtain their corresponding State Identification card or Driver's License

the tool dose not store session details either, it is expected that the users complete the survey in one session. Hence, if they exit or reload the website, they will need to start over.

*2) Admin Panel:* As state-wise rules change frequently, the data on the various government websites are updated. Some times these updates include the modification of the URLs for a particular resource on the website. Due to this, such links in the database may no longer be valid and thus need to be updated. For this purpose, the tool includes a separate panel for administrators to view and change any broken links. Administrators will receive an email notification to review reported broken or no longer accurate links which they will handle via this panel as depicted in the example in Figure 6.

**Admin Section**

State:

Vermont

Record Type:

DMV

Old URL:

https://dmv.vermont.gov/licenses/types-of-licen

New URL

New URL

Date

Date

Update

Fig. 6. Reentry ID Admin Panel

*3) Technology:* In order to deliver all the content, The frontend utilizes HTML [12], CSS [13], JavaScript [14] , and SurveyJS [11] - a JavaScript library for easy development of surveys.

*B. Backend*

The backend consists of a Flask server application [15] and MySQL [16] database hosted on the Paper Prisons Initiative's server and managed via a CPanel [17] instance - which is a web hosting platform containing a collection of automation tools that help simplify the hosting process. The Flask application uses an Apache server [18] to actively listen and respond to the HTTP requests from REST APIs defined in python, to serve client-side requests as well as interact with the database. The input data from the user is sent to the server using a POST request. These REST APIs help process the data and find relevant resources that are to be sent as a response. The resources and links are then fetched from the MySQL database and sent as a JSON [19] response to the client's web browser for visualization. Lastly, a PHPMailer [20] is used on the result page to send the retrieved link to the user's email address as well as to report broken links to the admin(s).

## IV. USER TESTING RESULTS

User testing was conducted with various groups, which included people who were either recently released from prison or who work closely or in-relation with low-level or nonviolent offenders.

*1) Specificity:* While testing an early version of the Reentry ID tool, users noted the intuitiveness and simplicity of the tool but commented on the lack of specificity in rendering results. This was due to the fact that originally, the tool would only recognize a Social Security card and U.S. passport as acceptable prerequisite proof-of-identity documents for getting a state ID or Driver's license. The users pointed out that:

(i) Getting a Passport for the purpose of providing a proof of identity to DMV is neither an affordable nor timely option for many individuals, and that they usually utilize other inexpensive options.

(ii) Even if getting a U.S. passport is an affordable option for some users, the first version of the tool would not provide appropriate guidance to those individuals who are not eligible to get a U.S. passport since there will be users who do not have U.S. birth/naturalization certificates, who are refugees, or who have green cards only.

Based on that feedback, in order to make the tool comprehensive enough to provide guidance for various groups of users, lists of all eligible proof of identity documents as recognized by each state's DMV were manually collected from each state's DMV website and properly databased. The tool was then updated to render all possible options for proof of identity approved by a user's selected state rather than social security card and passport only. Moreover, lists of state-specific eligible documents for proof-of-residency were also collected for all 50 states and added to the tool.

*2) Accessibility:* Accessibility of the tool was also tested against the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2 standards and the minim requirements of the WCAG standards was implemented within the tool in order to ensure its

inclusiveness. Reentry ID is now a one stop guide for anyone before applying for a state ID or Driver's license.

## V. Work in Progress and Future Steps

### A. Dynamic approach

Reentry ID's database is currently maintained manually. A dynamic scraper is currently under development by the team to regularly retrieve and update the database via the latest requirements and information from each state's DMV website. This is however, a long and arduous task due to a lack of uniformity among the 50 states' DMV websites. Which means that a different scraper will have to be built for each site. The scrapers will need to be scheduled to run automatically at set intervals to ensure that the database includes the latest data for each state.

### B. More user testing

As the research team partners with more related advocacy organizations, more user testing will become necessary to ensure that the easiest and most suitable user experience is provided for the actual users of the tool. It is important to note that conventional best practices for web application design are not sufficient here due to a segment of the actual users having been away from technology for decades and perhaps even before the use of the internet, let alone web applications, was common practice.

## VI. conclusion

The Reentry ID tool is a first of its kind tool for assisting released rehabilitated individuals to begin their journey into reassimilating into society. This research recognizes long standing user problems in navigating through overwhelming information and complicated processes of getting an id at bureaucratic websites. Thus the tool is implemented to provide simplified guidance to help users receive all necessary information for getting an ID in one place. As such, the development utilized easy to build, use, and maintain web technologies and draws immense power from the centralization of the various rules as well as lists of all eligible proof of identity and residency documents utilized by each of the 50 US states, into a single database. The development of Reentry ID was only possible because of the countless hours of research and databasing of these resources. After multiple iterations and corresponding user testing, the tool has been updated to deliver all necessary information in an easily accessible format and everyday language.

## Acknowledgments

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