



Office of the
Inspector General
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Gregory W. Sullivan
Inspector General

Disabled Person's
Parking Placard Abuse:
A Multi-Agency
Investigation

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Executive Summary

After receiving various complaints in the summer of 2006 about Disabled Persons Parking Identification Placard abuse, the Office of the Inspector General contacted the Registrar of Motor Vehicles and the City of Boston Transportation Department to start an investigation of placard use in downtown Boston area. The cooperation of the Registrar of Motor Vehicles and the Director of the City of Boston Transportation Department Commissioner during this investigation has proven a vital component to its success. The RMV has already initiated policies to address the abuse described below. The investigation consisted primarily of research, field work, data collection and analysis. Field work was done in the Financial District, along Newbury Street and in the area surrounding North Station. Findings from this investigation revealed rampant misuse of disability placards in the Boston area. These can be divided into four major categories

1. Fraudulent use of disability placards registered to deceased individuals;
2. Use of expired placards;
3. Altered or counterfeit placards;
4. Suspicious placard use (i.e. placard use by relatives and associates).

Disabled Persons Parking Identification Placards are issued by the Registry of Motor Vehicles to qualified individuals who need accessible parking as a result of a physical disability. A disability placard gives the privileges of a disability plate to the applicant; mainly, the ability to park in designated disability zones or parking spaces and at meters free of charge. For the purposes of this investigation, the person to whom the placard is registered is referred to as “the applicant.”

During the investigation 965 placards were seen a total of 3,819 times. The following statistics are noteworthy:

- Forty-nine placards were registered to deceased individuals. These placards were seen a total of 246 times, representing 6.5 percent of the placards observed. Of these 49 placards, nine were found to have been renewed after the applicant’s death.
- Four placards were confirmed to have expired; however, 155 placards were obstructed so that the expiration date and/or placard number were not visible. Thus, the number of expired placards in use is likely much higher than the four confirmed.
- Approximately 300 placards appeared to be in use by someone other than the applicant. This includes those placards registered to deceased individuals. These placards were used an estimated 1,200 times. In addition to those registered to

deceased persons, 50 of these placards were confirmed to be highly suspicious while the other 200 remain unconfirmed.

The Investigation

Preliminary research and fieldwork began in the spring of 2006 and was expanded in the summer of 2007. Groups of researchers were sent to designated areas five days a week between June 17, 2006 and July 17, 2006 and again between June 25, 2007 and July 05, 2007 to collect data. The designated areas were as follows:

1. The Financial District: The area bordered by State Street to the north, Broad Street to the east, High Street to the south and Washington Street to the west.
2. Newbury Street: The area bordered by Newbury Street to the west, Arlington Street to the north, Massachusetts Avenue to the south and Interstate 90 to the east.
3. North Station: The area bordered by Causeway Street to the north, Cross Street to the east, North Street to the south and Staniford Street the west.

These areas were chosen to represent the Downtown Boston parking market due to their proximity to bustling employment and commercial centers where parking availability is limited. Data collected included basic placard information (i.e. placard number and expiration date), details of the automobile in which the placard was observed (make, model, color and license plate number), as well as the location, date and time the vehicle was observed. Photographs of the placard in use were taken to document the investigation.

With the use of this data, as well as applicant information from the Registry of Motor Vehicles, the Inspector General was able to compile a database where data was stored, processed and evaluated. Currently, the database contains 965 individual placards and 3,819 instances of observation. The database contains a record for each placard observed and is divided into two categories:

1. Placard Applicant (Information regarding the placard and applicant).
2. Registered Owner (information regarding the vehicle in which the placard was observed and the registered owner of the vehicle).

In addition to the data collected from observation, the database contains personal information (address, date of birth, social security number, license number, etc.) of the applicant and registered owner. In order to create a comprehensive profile of both the applicants and operators the investigators used various data sources including Internet media, law enforcement databases as well as disability placard application records from the Registry. Using this database, the Office of the Inspector General was able to determine several prime candidates for further investigation. The investigation focused on non-applicant registered owners who were

observed repeatedly using a placard in one of the three areas. These candidates, who represent a cross-section of the various forms of abuse witnessed during the general investigation, were deemed likely repeat-offenders. In collaboration with of the Registry and the Massachusetts State Police, undercover investigators targeted and tracked these suspects, documenting the improper use of the placard and issuing them a parking citation.

The OIG investigators and Sgt. Sean Gately of the Massachusetts State Police surveyed suspected offenders between July 23, 2007 and August 09, 2007. As a result, the team confirmed 17 cases of abuse; seven involving use of a placard registered to a deceased person, and 10 involving use of a placard registered to someone other than the user. During this phase of the investigation suspected vehicles were identified, targeted and surveyed using an undercover vehicle. After the vehicle of a likely offender was found, the team observed the vehicle throughout the day until the driver appeared. If it was confirmed that the driver was not the applicant, and that the placard was not being used to transport the applicant, Sgt. Gately would approach the suspect, and issue them a \$500 citation and confiscate the placard. The entire process was documented using a combination of moving and still images as evidence of the abuse. Each of the operators cited by Sgt. Gately will also have their license suspended for 30 days, although each is entitled to appeal the suspension at a hearing.

Investigative Findings: Four Forms of Abuse

The investigation revealed widespread misuse of disability placards in the financial district, Newbury Street, and the North Station areas of the City of Boston. This abuse can be divided into four major categories: the fraudulent use of disability placards registered to deceased individuals; the use of expired placards or improperly displayed placards; the use of altered or counterfeit placards, and suspicious placard use (i.e. placard use by relatives and associates). A total of 965 placards were observed, 49 of which were found registered to deceased persons and were documented in use a total of 246 times. This represents 6.5 percent of the placards observed. Of these 49 placards, nine were found to have been renewed after the applicant's death.

A noteworthy example of this abuse includes that of a placard registered to an applicant whose date of death is listed as Nov. 29, 2003. His placard was observed on 22 separate occasions in and around Post Office Square. The placard in question was observed in multiple vehicles apparently belonging to a family, but most consistently a large Ford truck. On July, 26 2007 the suspect was documented using the placard after which he admitted that it belonged to his deceased uncle. He was issued a citation, and the placard was confiscated.

Significant among these examples of fraudulent use are those where the placard has

been renewed since the applicant's death. The case of a placard registered to an individual deceased since Nov. 1, 2002 is one such example. The placard was observed in use in by an apparent relative a total of 15 times during the investigation in the area surrounding North Station. According to Registry records this placard was renewed on Aug. 17, 2005, almost three years after the applicant's death. A more egregious example is that of a placard registered an applicant, whose date of death is recorded as Jan 15, 1998. This placard was observed in use on July 28, 2006 in an automobile registered to the applicant's son. The renewal date of the placard in question is recorded as Aug 25, 2006 so that it expires on August 25, 2011. Since permanent placards must be renewed every five years, this placard was renewed twice after the applicant's death.

Four expired placards were explicitly displayed, while 155 were blocked, turned over, or displayed so that the expiration date and placard number were obstructed. This was witnessed 385 times and represents 16 percent of the placards observed. The number of expired placards in use is likely much higher than the four confirmed. During the course of this investigation, the Office of the Inspector General received several altered and counterfeit placards confiscated by the Registry. Including these and those documented by the Inspector General, a total of 15 altered or counterfeit placards were found during the investigation. The alterations varied from altering the placard number to changing the expiration date. While many placards were altered, others were completely fabricated. One example of placard alteration is that of placard whose expiration date was altered to 2008 using cardboard. It was observed in use by the applicant in the vicinity of North Station. Information from the Registry revealed many more such cases. Registry officials said that judges frequently throw placard abuse cases out of court; this points to the need for more efficient and systematic enforcement of placard use in all levels of government.

One of the more prevalent forms of abuse, albeit more difficult to detect, is the use of a placard by someone other than the applicant. The placard user is often a relative or an associate of the applicant. Of the 965 placards observed approximately 300 are suspected to be used by someone other than the applicant. This represents 30 percent of the total placards observed. These placards were used an estimated 1,200 times, representing 30 percent of all instances witnessed. Of these 300 cases, 50 were determined to be highly suspicious while the other cases remain under suspicion. Cases of placards registered to deceased persons are also part of this category. Cases were determined to be highly suspicious when the placard in question was repeatedly observed in use by an automobile registered to someone other than the placard holder, often in the vicinity of the user's workplace. In these cases, the placard holders were often much older and resided in areas far from the location of placard use. Due to

the applicant's age and residence, often nursing homes, it was determined that their parking in these areas on a consistent basis was unlikely. This suspicious use of placards is a common form of abuse and is likely due to the mobility of the placard.

Some examples include the case of a husband and wife abusing a placard registered to the husband's mother. The wife is a dentist in the financial district, while the husband is a lawyer on Cambridge Street. Born in 1929, the applicant in question is currently 78, and resides in South Boston. However her placard was observed multiple times in a car registered to the dentist on both Federal Street and Cambridge Street, often within close proximity to their offices. The suspected vehicle was observed five times during the initial portion of the investigation and on six additional instances during the subsequent investigation. The vehicle was found by the investigative team on July 26, 2007 during which they confirmed the suspected abuse. The husband was issued a citation and the placard was confiscated. Another such example is the case of a spa on Newbury Street. The placard was observed nine times in use by a car leased to the spa and parked on Newbury Street in close proximity to the spa. The applicant is 81 and it is unlikely that she is employed at the spa. On July 25, 2007 the team confirmed the abuse. Sgt. Gately issued a citation and confiscated the placard. In a similar case, a placard registered to an applicant born in 1926, has been observed in a vehicle leased to another spa on Newbury Street on nine separate occasions. As in the previous example, the suspected vehicle was found repeatedly within close proximity to the spa and the likelihood of the applicant visiting the spa is low.

Recommendations

Disability placard abuse exists in various forms and is an increasingly large problem, particularly as disabled parking availability becomes more limited and parking rates rise. The goal of highlighting these examples is to create awareness of the problem. New solutions need to be developed to help eliminate the rampant abuse that is plaguing the system. By working in an open dialogue, the Office of the Inspector General and the Registry of Motor Vehicles have created innovative solutions to disability placard misuse that will address the problem on a systematic level. The RMV has already initiated policy and procedural changes to address the abuse. The Office of the Inspector General and the Registry offer the following recommendations as possible solutions to the problem of placard abuse, many of which have already been adopted:

1. The revision of the application for Disabled Parking Placards so that it clarifies penalties and mandates the applicant to sign under the pains and penalties of perjury. This has already been put into effect by the Registry.
2. The Registry has adopted a system that cross-references Social Security records to identify deceased persons to whom placards have been issued. The Registry's computer system now checks with the Social Security Administration monthly for persons who are deceased and marks records accordingly. The Registry is still working on a "hard stop" that will prevent the issuance of a placard.
3. The Registry should undertake a comprehensive updating of Registry databases and installation of anti-fraud software. The OIG and RMV found multiple inconsistencies within Registry medical records. According to the Registry, an automatic update system of medical professional registration numbers is part of a second phase development of RMV software.
4. Disability placards should be reformatted so that the applicant photograph is moved toward the top of the placard and the placard number brought just above the expiration date. The font should be larger so it is easier to see and the Registrar's signature should be added.
5. The Legislature should consider amending M.G.L. Chapter 90 Section 2B to allow the City of Boston Transportation department to issue the \$500 citation for placard abuse which carries an automatic 30 day license suspension for first time abusers.
6. The Legislature should consider adding of the word "Placard" to the M.G.L. Chapter 90 Section 24B so that it becomes a felony to alter the placard and therefore enable repercussions for inappropriate placard use.
7. A web-based monitoring program should be created to allow citizens to anonymously report abuse of disabled plates and placards. The Registry has implemented this program.