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FMCSA Surveys States on Severity Of Delays in CDL Skills Testing

By Eric Miller
Staff Reporter

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration earlier this month sent a survey to states asking for detailed information on the extent of delays in commercial driver license skills testing after industry stakeholders complaints that the delays are contributing to a driver shortage and slowing employment start dates for new drivers.

The agency, which failed to meet a June 1 deadline to report on the survey results to Congress, expects states to complete the survey and return it by mid-October, spokesman Duane DeBruyne said.

Don Lefevé, executive director of the Commercial Vehicle Training Association, expressed concerns that FMCSA did not meet the congressional deadline because the delays hold back newly trained drivers from using their skills to make a living.

“Skills-testing delays are a major problem,” Lefevé told TRANSPORT TOPICS. “They exacerbate the driver shortage.”

Lefevé added, “The good news is that I think more states are now finally aware that this is a problem and have been putting up resources to help combat it. Now that the survey



Luke Sharrett — Bloomberg News

A student approaches a tractor-trailer during a CDL class in Kentucky. FMCSA is asking states to answer a survey on skills-testing delays.

has gone out, we look forward to what the data has to say.”

As required by the December 2015 FAST Act, the agency is asking states to answer such questions as:

- What is the average wait time from the date an applicant requests to take a skills test to the date the applicant has the opportunity to complete the test?
- What is the average wait time from the date an applicant, upon failure of a skills test, requests a retest to the date the applicant has the opportunity to complete such retest?

- What is the actual number of qualified commercial driver’s license examiners available to test applicants?
- What is the number of testing sites available through the state department of motor vehicles and whether this number has increased or decreased from the previous year?

Lefevé estimates it will take FMCSA four months to distribute, collect, analyze the results and write the report to Congress. Although the agency did not give a reason for the delay, Lefevé believes the holdup was due reviews by the

White House Office of Management and Budget.

In an October 2016 FMCSA request for information, the agency said the FAST Act also requires that it outline for Congress what specific steps it is taking to address the skills testing delays.

In comments filed on the FMCSA website in April, the CVTA quoted a 2015 GAO report on commercial driver licensing that said 15 states reported having delay times of 15 to 21 days or longer and applicants

(See DELAYS, p. 2)

Delays

(Continued from p. 1)

seeking their CDL skills test in at least a dozen states have been significantly delayed because of the backlog of applicants scheduled to take the exam.

“Since the 2015 report, CDL applicants in New Jersey, California, Texas, Connecticut, New York and other states continue being delayed from taking the CDL skills test, in some cases up to 80 days or more,” the training association wrote.

Two states that offer a contrast in delays are Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

“Pennsylvania is one of the model states,” Lefevre said. “It’s a large state, but it’s very efficiently run.”

Pennsylvania uses a combination of state testing facilities and third-party testing locations, said Craig Yetter, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

“Currently, there are 27 state testing facilities and 117 third-party testing locations that administer CDL skills tests,” Yetter said in a statement to TT. “Pennsylvania imposes a 15-day waiting period from the issuance of a commercial learner’s permit until the applicant is eligible to take a skills test. Ap-

plicants can test once the eligibility date has been met.”

CDL applicants who fail their skills test can wait anywhere from two days to six weeks to retest, depending on availability and whether an applicant decides to test at a state or third-party testing location, Yetter said.

In New Jersey, legislation is requiring officials to develop a pilot program adding third-party testers to decrease wait times.

The current average CDL wait time in New Jersey is 46 days, said Mairin Bellack, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission. In the event of a failure,

an applicant has to wait at least two weeks, she said.

Bellack said that some of the lag in test wait times was caused by additional skills test requirements imposed by FMCSA in 2015, causing the failure rate to rise in New Jersey and nationwide.

“Right after the federal changes went out, our failure rate went up to 98%, which was consistent with other states,” Bellack said. “New Jersey has recognized that and we’ve taken actions to combat the high failure rate from an education standpoint. Today, we’ve been able to lower that failure rate to 56%.”