

Alberta driver's test delays complicate ministry for newly arrived priests

Obtaining a learner's permit was no problem for Rev. Simmy Joseph.

He had a driver's licence for 14 years in his native India, but once he arrived in Edmonton, he needed to pass a road test to get a full Alberta driver's licence – and he had to wait two months just for an appointment.

It meant that Father Joseph, a new associate pastor at St. Joseph's Basilica, had to rely on others to drive him to appointments, hospital visits or to spend time with the elderly.

"It's hard because there were a lot of constraints," said Father Joseph. "Sometimes it felt inconvenient, but I know the road tests take time."

It takes far too much time, according to the Alberta government, which announced this week that it plans to grant temporary licences to 20 private driver examiners to reduce the backlog for road tests for new drivers. In some cases – like Father Joseph's – it has meant waiting for months.

Transportation Minister Ric McIver said the delays were caused by the previous NDP government's decision to end the privatized examination system introduced in 1993.

"The previous government rushed to launch a government-run road test system and ended up with only half the required driver examiners in place to run the system when it started in March of this year," McIver said at a news conference Sept. 12. "This has led to skyrocketing wait times for road tests that Albertans have been dealing with ever since."

Father Joseph passed the knowledge test for his driver's licence in mid-June, just weeks after he arrived in Canada. But couldn't take the road test until Aug. 21. In the meantime, he had his learner's licence and had to rely on another priest to be with him in his vehicle.

Six other priests in the Archdiocese of Edmonton have been affected by the delay in obtaining road tests – four from India, one from Brazil and one from Nigeria.

It's particularly hard on a priest who is assigned to serve a rural area, where driving from town to town is a routine part of ministry. For example, Father Danial Parkash Dsouza has come from India to serve at Our Lady of the Angels Parish in Fort Saskatchewan, where the priests also celebrate Mass in Redwater, Gibbons, Skaro, St. Michael and Lamont. Another Indian arrival, Father Wilson Thankachan, has been told he can't complete his road test until November.

Father Joseph said the two-month delay he endured gave him more time to practise driving, but Alberta's new United Conservative Party government says that's too long for any driver to wait.

McIver said some residents in rural Alberta have reported the delays are affecting more than just their ability to drive. "I've heard from people who can't start their job because they are waiting weeks and weeks and weeks to get a driver's licence. This is unacceptable."

Jeff Kasbrick, a vice-president with the Alberta Motor Association, told reporters that one of its members booked a road test in Fort McMurray to avoid a wait until November for a test in Edmonton. In another case, an AMA member from Airdrie travelled 240 kilometres to Lethbridge to complete the test sooner.

At its peak, the backlog was 36,000 tests. Last week, it sat at 28,000, McIver said.

McIver said the added examiners could perform an additional 3,000 tests each month. Fort McMurray, Calgary and Edmonton have the largest backlogs, although private and government testers will be moved to areas where they can best reduce delays.

The NDP government announced the switch to a public testing system from a private one in October 2018 after reportedly receiving an average of seven complaints a day about issues with driving examiners, ranging from harassment, safety, and inconsistent pricing to unprofessional behaviour.

Chris Nielsen, the NDP Member of the Legislature for Edmonton-Decore, said the previous government's decision to improve the driver examination system was prompted by the bus crash of April 2018 in Humboldt, Sask., which killed 16 and injured 13.

Nielsen said the NDP plans to keep a close eye on the UCP government's use of private examiners to ensure standards are met.

"I've certainly heard from people that do want the wait times reduced, but that at the same time they have said don't compromise safety," Nielsen said.

The temporary examining licences will be issued for a maximum of two years. McIver said the private examiners must complete a criminal record check and have a clean driving record. He said preference will be given to applicants with experience. He couldn't say yet whether private examiners will remain part of the system permanently.