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To Meet Modern Needs, States Put Birth Records on Computers

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBUS, Ohio, Dec. 2 (AP) — The need to wait weeks to obtain a copy of a birth certificate by mail or a personal visit to a state's vital statistics office may soon change as states convert their birth records to electronic databases from stacks of paper and microfilm.

A shorter wait, however, is also likely to mean a higher cost, as states have begun increasing fees to raise money for the conversion project.

The idea is to make it easier to retrieve a copy of a birth certificate in an era of heightened national security, expanded voter identification rules, a national immigration debate and future federal identification requirements.

Doug McBride, a spokesman for the Texas Department of State Health Services, said the state began converting 48 million birth, death and marriage records to electronic files in January, a project expected to take five years. A month before the conversion began, the price of a birth certificate rose to $22 from $11.

Texas also allows birth certificates to be ordered online and paid for by credit card.

Ohio officials plan to create digital images of the state's entire birth certificate archive, dating to 1908, by 2010.

The archive includes 26 million documents on 43 million pages, and the project also includes a move into a new fire-protected headquarters.

In two years, the cost of a birth certificate in Ohio rose to $16.50 from $10. Fees in some counties, where various charges can be added, have reached $25.

Ohio began planning its digital conversion in 2000, after a fire threatened the building that housed the state's main records collection, said Jim Pearsol, assistant state director of vital statistics. Despite improvements, the average processing time had peaked at three weeks.

The current procedure in Ohio requires four people: one to receive the certificate request, either at a window, through the mail or online; one to retrieve the record; one to copy the record, and one to stamp it certified. The separate steps are considered necessary for security and safety purposes.

"We sort of maxed out as far as we could go with a paper-based system," Mr. Pearsol said. "We can take it from weeks to hours with an electronic-based system."

Most states began plotting their archive conversions after 2003, said Garland Land, executive director of the National Association for Public Health Statistics and

Information. In that year, the birth certificate form used by obstetricians, health administrators and registrars nationwide had its first post-Internet revisions.

A decision to move the birth certificate system into the electronic age seemed like a good idea until states estimated the cost: about $750,000, depending on population — or a minimum of $37.5 million for all 50 states. Only about half the states have been able to afford the project, mostly through fee increases like Ohio's, Mr. Land said.

A spokesman for the Centers for Disease Control, Bill Crews, said such statistics provided important insights for federal policymakers.

"Just like the Census, it really undergirds our entire political system," he said.

Death statistics, for example, play a role in rates charged for life insurance, and birth statistics can affect government budget decisions on Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

The Social Security Administration, which is eager to see state death records filed electronically so it can more quickly halt benefits after someone dies, is providing money for some conversion projects.

"They're saving a lot of money by cutting off benefits early, so they see it in their best interests to speed up that system," Mr. Land said. "But nobody has provided support on the birth systems, so that's why states are slow to do this."