

COMMENTARY

Lucio: Of passports and midwives

State Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr., D-Brownsville, SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

Wednesday, August 19, 2009

A midwife delivered me in the Texas border town of Brownsville on Jan. 20, 1946. This was not an uncommon happenstance, particularly at the time, when midwives delivered many a South Texas baby.

Most midwives were honest, caring women with expertise that proved invaluable to mothers. To this day, midwives continue to provide care not only along the border, but elsewhere in this country and many others.

Stories of passport denials get big media play because applicants born at home cannot produce official birth certificates. Claims of fraud whereby midwives might have falsified birth documents have compounded the problem.

Fortunately, my Catholic baptismal certificate, school records and lifelong residence in Cameron County, along with my status as an elected official, enabled me to obtain a passport without difficulty. This is not so for many.

I regularly hear horror stories from people of all ages, incomes and education levels who struggle through the maze of bureaucracy and inevitable distrust to try to obtain a passport.

In one instance, I knew of a young man who submitted seemingly endless documents and finally obtained a passport. His twin brother, who lives in Houston, which has a federal office to handle such matters, was denied one. I'm pretty sure if a twin was born on American soil, his brother should have been also.

Yet the inconsistencies, unfairness and costs continue. Denied applications must be resubmitted. An application runs from \$35 to \$100, depending on the person's age, when applying in person and a little less by mail. (Some reports indicate fees are waived or lowered when resubmitting.)

A passport facility reportedly is being considered for the Rio Grande Valley. That would be a smart move. Opening a South Texas location would eliminate the trips to Houston for many and perhaps ease the backlog at the Houston center. I also urge the federal government to streamline the passport application process and remove all barriers of discrimination against those delivered by midwives. However, cases of fraud should be fully investigated and prosecuted to the fullest.

In the meantime, we continue to hear pleas for help. At the state level, we do what we can but feel pretty helpless since passports are exclusively a federal matter.

Opening a South Texas facility to process passport applicants makes good sense. The Houston center is overworked and putting a center in South Texas would add a facility where the need for one is acute.

Lucio is chairman of the Texas Senate's International Relations and Trade Committee.