

NASCIO State IT Recognition Awards

Entry file name: **CA_ Operational Efficiency**

STATE: California

AGENCY: California Department of Motor Vehicles

CATEGORY: Operational Efficiency

PROJECT TITLE: New Auto License Plate Configuration (NALPC) Project

PROJECT DATES:

- Start Date 1/9/24
- Implementation Date 12/10/25

Executive Summary

California was months away from exhausting its supply of automobile license plates, risking a statewide halt in new vehicle registrations. To prevent this disruption to more than 261,000 monthly issuances, the DMV launched the New Auto License Plate Configuration (NALPC) Project after the 1982 plate format reached the end of its 40-year sequence.

The project required modernizing 153 legacy programs written in Assembler, COBOL, and EDL, many untouched for decades and dependent on scarce technical expertise. Despite competing priorities and a temporary reassignment of key staff, the team sustained progress through cross-training, clarified roles, coordinated resource management, and disciplined risk oversight.

All 153 programs were successfully deployed in December 2025 with only two minor defects, both resolved immediately. On January 28, 2026, the DMV began issuing plates under the new configuration at two pilot offices, producing 88 plates and confirming system accuracy and readiness ahead of statewide rollout.

The NALPC Project demonstrates the DMV's ability to modernize critical infrastructure, safeguard essential public services, and deliver complex statewide change with precision and measurable impact.

Project Description

IDEA

California's standard license plates still use a format created in 1982, which contains seven characters that follow the same sequence/pattern: a number, then three letters, followed by three more numbers. The DMV's legacy systems were built around that exact sequence, beginning with 1AAA000 and running all the way through 9ZZZ999.

California's plate format had been in use for 40 years, and rising auto sales meant the state was on track to run out of unique combinations by mid- to late-2026. Once the sequence ran out, no new standard license plates could be issued, and anyone buying a new car would have been forced to purchase specialized plates instead.

The team evaluated alternatives such as decommissioning and reusing old license plate numbers, but that approach was not cost-effective, offered uncertain long-term benefit, and introduced significant risks to law enforcement record accuracy. Temporary plate sequences were also reviewed, but because they follow different numbering structures and were never designed for large-scale, permanent use, they were not a sustainable or financially viable solution.

After internal analysis and coding, DMV teams were able to extend the format by allowing mirrored sequences beginning with 000AAA1 and ending with 999ZZZ9, eliminating the need to program another solution for a projected 30 years or more.

IMPLEMENTATION

The NALPC Project was managed using a structured waterfall approach, progressing through three sequential phases over six months, pausing for two months, and concluding with four months of testing and deployment.

Phase I focused on planning, where the team defined project needs and resources across more than 15 groups, including the Policy Division, Field Office Division, Operations Division, Investigations, and multiple IT units. Staff logged 8,351 work hours, costing \$832,106. The DMV also coordinated with external partners such as the Department of Justice to ensure law enforcement systems could recognize the new plates, and the Prison Industry Authority to confirm production equipment could support the updated design.

Phase II centered on project initiation, bringing the team together to share and develop solutions. This phase required extensive research into the existing configuration and the DMV processes it impacted. The team discovered that much of the software had been built decades earlier using obsolete code written by team members who had long since retired.

A key task was to identify and contact these former employees to bring them back as retired annuitants and provide critical expertise.

Phase III focused on execution and control, where the team built, developed, and coded the new solution. After completing this phase, the project paused for two months due to resource constraints and required redirection. Work then resumed, during which defects were identified, corrected, and successfully retested to confirm readiness for deployment.

After final testing, the team initiated the Deployment Script, rolling out the new configuration at select pilot offices before the previous sequence ran out. This ensured uninterrupted service and allowed Californians to continue receiving the license plates needed to purchase and drive new cars in the state.

IMPACT

The current plate configuration is projected to last another 30 years, but the DMV is already preparing for the future. Its upcoming Digital Experience Platform will eliminate reliance on obsolete code and decades-old configurations to ensure long-term sustainability. In the meantime, the NALPC Project protected Californians from any disruption in their ability to purchase new vehicles.