

HB 2614: End Debt-Based Driver License Suspension

Suspending driver licenses for inability to pay fines unfairly punishes low-income communities.

Overview

In Oregon, 334,338 individuals in the past decade have had their driving privileges suspended—not for highway safety reasons, but because they could not pay fines associated with non-criminal traffic violations. A system that relies on debt-based driver license suspensions punishes people in poverty for their inability to pay. This practice creates a vicious cycle of increasing debt and lost economic opportunities. Suspending a license deprives people of reliable, lawful transportation necessary to get to and from work, take children to school, keep medical appointments, care for ill or disabled family members or to meet their financial obligations.

Current Practice

ORS 809.210 allows license suspension for failure to pay traffic fines and associated fees. These fines can range from \$65 to \$2000. If the fee is not fully paid within 30 days, the court adds an additional fee of \$50-\$200. After 35 days, payment is delinquent and a notice of suspension is issued. The DMV provides a 60 day warning. Once a license is suspended, an individual must pay back the debt and an additional \$75 fee to reinstate it. If an individual is not able to pay back their debt, they will not get their license back for 20 years.

Debt-based license suspension is bad public policy:

- Debt-based license suspension does not make our roads safer; it punishes people for being poor. Not only is this unfair to people in poverty, but it wastes resources that could be used to increase public safety.
- Debt-based license suspensions disproportionately affect communities of color. Although license suspensions have significant impacts on low-income individuals, the effect falls hardest on communities of color.
- Debt-based license suspensions are an ineffective tool that does not consider ability to pay. Courts have access to the same collections methods as other creditors and do not need license suspension to pursue debt.
- Debt-based license suspensions expose individuals living in poverty to cascading consequences. Suspending driver licenses for inability to pay traps individuals in a cycle of poverty by removing their ability to get to and from their job, pursue new work opportunities or care for their family.
- Debt-based license suspensions create impossible choices for people in poverty. When a person loses driving privileges, unemployment often follows. Many jobs require driving privileges, even if driving is not a part of the job. Individuals who are unable to pay are often forced to choose between losing their job—and their ability to pay back their debt—or continue driving.

Solution

End the practice of debt-based license suspension. Oregon has worked hard to remove barriers to overcoming poverty. Suspending low-income Oregonians' driver licenses for failure to pay is unfair and ineffective. It does not improve public safety. Oregonians deserve better than to be punished for their poverty.