

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER

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April 28, 2026

TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER REGARDING:

House Bill No. 7558

ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO MOTOR AND OTHER VEHICLES -- SUSPENSION OR REVOCATION OF LICENSES -- VIOLATIONS

Chairwoman Hagan McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender **strongly supports** House Bill 7588, which would repeal section 31-11-25 of the General Laws, thus ending the suspension of licenses for failure to pay fines. We cannot overstate how important we think this bill is, and what a difference it would make not only for our clients, but also for all Rhode Islanders.

If the bill were to pass, Rhode Island would join 28 other states plus the District of Columbia, who have passed similar laws eliminating or severely reducing debt-based license suspensions: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

The policy of suspending licenses for failure to pay fines perpetuates a cycle of poverty and often insurmountable legal challenges. Without a valid driver's license, individuals may face even greater challenges in maintaining employment, meeting family responsibilities, and accessing necessary services. When faced with the choice of not driving and losing their job or risking getting caught driving without a valid license, many feel compelled to take the risk, which can lead to further financial penalties and, in some instances, even incarceration.

By eliminating license suspensions for the failure to pay fines, this proposed legislation would allow individuals to continue working, attending school, and fulfilling their responsibilities, which could help to break the cycle of poverty. Without employment, traffic debt becomes even more difficult to repay; thus, suspending licenses for nonpayment is counterproductive.

Repealing section 31-11-25 aligns with the broader goals of criminal justice reform to which the General Assembly has demonstrated a commitment with the passage of other costs-related legislation in 2022. Ending debt-based license suspensions would be another crucial step in the movement away from criminalizing poverty.

In conclusion, the Office of the Public Defender urges the Judiciary Committee to support and advance H7558.

Sincerely,

/s/ Angela M. Yingling

Angela M. Yingling

Legislative Liaison

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