

## H-7558 WRITTEN TESTIMONY

**TO:** House Committee on Judiciary

**FROM:** Professor Andrew Horwitz, Associate Dean for Experiential Education and Director of the Criminal Defense Clinic, Roger Williams Univ. School of Law (affiliation provided for identification purposes only)

**RE:** Testimony in support of H-7558

**DATE:** April 27, 2026

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My name is Andrew Horwitz, and I am presently the Associate Dean for Experiential Education and the Director of the Criminal Defense Clinic at Roger Williams University School of Law. In that capacity, I have been representing poor people in Rhode Island for over 30 years. Based upon that experience, I can tell you that the loss of a driver's license, or the inability to obtain a driver's license, can have an absolutely devastating impact upon the lives of poor people.

I've stood next to men and women in their fifties and sixties who have literally cried when I have been able to get them situated to get a valid driver's license for the first time in their lives. I've watched as clients must make the heartbreaking decision of losing their jobs and their ability to support their families or driving without a valid license, risking jail time and further destruction of their lives. It's a black hole from which many people never emerge. I'm not talking here about people who have had their licenses suspended for bad driving. I'm talking about people who have had their licenses suspended solely due to their financial inability to pay court debt.

This bill represents a very straightforward concept – that we should end the use of driver's license suspensions as a means of debt collection. Driver's licenses should be suspended because someone is not safe to be on the road, not because that person is poor.

This is not a radical or fringe idea; it is part of a growing national trend. At least 22 states have fully stopped the practice of suspending licenses for unpaid fines and costs. And by no means are these all "blue states." Ohio appears to be the most recent state to enact such legislation, joining a list that includes such diverse states as Virginia, Kentucky, Idaho, Michigan, Mississippi, and Utah.

This bill does not represent a restriction on the right of judges to suspend a driver's license based upon bad driving. Nothing about this bill would have any impact on that important judicial responsibility. This is merely about ending the use of a license suspension as a means of debt collection.

Based on data gathered in other states, passage of this bill will not result in a negative fiscal impact. The evidence strongly suggests that those who can pay their tickets do pay their tickets. There are plenty of other negative consequences that follow from non-payment, including having to deal with debt collectors, having one's tax refund attached, a negative impact on one's credit rating, and the like. And there are plenty of other means of effective debt collection for the State to use. The plain fact is that what we are talking about here is largely uncollectible debt.

Other states have studied this, finding no adverse fiscal impact. In fact, there are ways in which the State might even save money and enjoy other social benefits from the passage of this bill. Several years ago, a study in Providence revealed that Operating with a Suspended License was the number one arrest charge in the city. What results in a great deal of wasted police time and money, a great deal of wasted court time and money, cars being towed, and police officers being taken off the streets when they could be focusing on actual crime. We know from prior experience that having a valid driver's license encourages a variety of other social goods, such as having a vehicle properly inspected, registered, and insured. Let's encourage that.

We can stop the vicious cycle that we impose upon my indigent clients. Let's leave license suspensions for those who do not belong on the road and let's stop punishing poverty. I urge you to pass this bill.