



TZEDEK DC

Legal Help for People in Debt



Joint Testimony by Tzedek DC and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington to the Judicial Proceedings Committee Regarding Senate Bill 0234, Suspension of Driver's License or Registration - Unpaid Citations or Judgments (February 4, 2020)

Chairman Smith, and members and staff of the Judicial Proceedings Committee: Good afternoon, I am Ariel Levinson-Waldman, President and Director-Counsel of Tzedek DC, a non-profit legal services group organized in 2016 by leaders of the Greater Washington Jewish community. Tzedek DC's mission is to safeguard the legal rights of DC residents facing debt-related legal crises. The majority of Tzedek DC's clients are women, and nearly all are from communities of color. We are submitting this testimony jointly with our Strategic Partner the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, (JCRC), which serves as the public affairs and community relations arm of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, representing over 100 organizations and synagogues throughout DC, Maryland, and Virginia. The JCRC focuses on government relations Israel advocacy, inter-group relations, and social justice. Ashlie Bagwell is representing the JCRC in this testimony.

Thank you Chairman Smith and to this Committee for the opportunity to testify today on the proposed bill. Tzedek DC supports the efforts of Attorney General Brian Frosh and a bipartisan coalition of Maryland legislators to take steps to protect people in Maryland with lower-incomes, including thousands who drive regularly into the District of Columbia for work or personal reasons, from losing their ability to drive lawfully as a punishment for unpaid traffic debts.

Losing the right to drive can have devastating consequences for working families, and, as a result, the community as a whole. The loss of a license for unpaid debt both contributes to poverty and criminalizes poverty. The most direct consequence of losing a driver's license is decreased employment and income. Loss of a license reduces people's ability to become or stay employed, which in turn curtails their ability to generate the income necessary to repay any outstanding fines or fees. Community members may also be cut off from life necessities like healthcare, groceries, or childcare simply because they cannot afford to pay a ticket. People who lose their licenses and cannot afford to pay their debts often choose for life necessity reasons to drive, and can then be subject to criminal convictions, including jail time and/or fines, and the long-term consequences of the criminal justice system.

In 2018, with support from Tzedek DC, the JCRC, and other community organizations, the District of Columbia enacted the Traffic and Parking Ticket Penalty Amendment Act of 2018. That bill: (1) ended the suspension of driver's licenses for unpaid traffic debts or nonattendance at a traffic court hearing; and (2) restored all driver's licenses and driving privileges that had been previously suspended solely on these grounds. As a direct result of these efforts, over 65,000 people (including thousands of Maryland residents) had their driver's license or driving privileges in the District of Columbia restored. DC is one of several jurisdictions that have passed similar reforms.

Tzedek DC and the JCRC are available to serve as a resource to this Committee as the details of the bill are examined over the course of the legislative process. We thank Attorney General Frosh for his leadership and the Committee for taking up this important issue.