

# JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

## TESTIMONY IN FAVOR WITH AMENDMENTS OF HOUSE BILL 280

### **Vehicle Laws - Suspension of Driver's License or Registration - Unpaid Citations or Judgments**

TO: Hon. Luke Clippinger Chair, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Advocate

DATE: February 19, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that advocates for better jobs, skills training, and wages for low-income workers and job seekers in Maryland. We strongly support House Bill 280 as a means to ensure that we are not further pushing the poor into poverty via driver's license suspension and punitive civil judgment enforcement due to their inability to pay traffic fines and fees.

The employment opportunities for individuals with a suspended driver's license are nearly nonexistent, especially for the low-wage worker. Many of the jobs they are eligible to even apply for require a valid driver's license such as jobs in construction, plumbing, sales, and jobs that require a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). Additionally, Maryland's regional economy and lack of a regional public transit system place most residents at the mercy of mobility – the key to mobility being a valid driver's license. Almost half of working Marylanders travel to another county to work, yet many are choosing between income and safety, or even further, income and criminal penalties because their driver's license is suspended.

Currently, in Maryland, a driver's license can be suspended for a number of reasons related to unpaid traffic fines and fees. Additionally, while Maryland allows for individuals to enter into a payment plan, there must be a debt of \$300 owed to access this benefit. Therefore, low-income workers are forced to accumulate debt in order to adequately have their ability to pay assessed.

House Bill 280 seeks to address these issues, along with eliminating the suspension of driver's licenses as a punishment for unpaid fines. Across the country, national nonpartisan research has guided states away from using this highly punitive measure to ensure debt collection. This practice not only deprives residents of their ability to access jobs and maintain their employment, but it ultimately costs more than is collected due to the resources used to ensure driver's licenses are suspended. California, Washington, D.C., and Tennessee have all ushered in these reforms, to a great benefit of these states.

JOTF supports the following sponsor amendments to House Bill 280:

- **Clarify that the MVA may not suspend a license solely for failure to pay a fine**, but may suspend after 30 days' notice if a defendant fails to respond to the citation either by paying the fine in full, entering into a payment plan, or requesting a hearing/trial.
- **Offer a payment plan option for debts starting at \$150.** There should be no or minimal charges to be on a payment plan. The plan should be flexible to allow people to stay in compliance if their income decreases. This debt is often non-collectible and works in the state's interest to receive some portion of the original debt.

- Provide a mechanism to reinstate licenses and registration for those who are currently suspended due to non-payment.
- Elimination of punitive enforcement if a driver defaults on payments.
- Eliminate the reinstatement fee for drivers to secure their license after successful payment of fines and fees.

Employment barriers for low-wage workers are seemingly insurmountable. They need access to affordable higher education, consistent employment, and reliable transportation in order to meet life's demands. JOTF fully supports efforts to immediately remove barriers to employment for Marylanders struggling with volatile incomes. For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report on House Bill 280 as amended.