



*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 20:**

**Vehicle Laws - Canceled, Revoked, and Suspended Driver's Licenses - Penalties**

TO: Hon. William Smith, Chair, and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Advocate

DATE: January 27, 2021

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-skill, low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. We support Senate Bill 20 with amendments as a means to repeal the term of imprisonment and reduce the points assessed for a person convicted of displaying any canceled, revoked, or suspended license.

A 'Displaying an Invalid License' conviction in Maryland for an individual who displays a license that has been suspended, revoked, or canceled is subject to a 60-day jail term and a \$500 fine. The policy of fines or incarceration for failure to display a valid license has disproportionate and highly negative impacts on the poor. Indeed, many who find themselves in this situation may not necessarily know that they are indeed displaying an invalid license- as the MVA will often send suspension notices and cancellations to addresses that they may not reside in due to chronic housing instability- which is usually proof positive of an individual's lack of financial stability. It is a policy that further impoverishes poor people who face income and job loss as a result of their inability to drive to work and can lead to criminal charges simply due to the inability to pay flags, child support, or other motor-vehicle debts without even knowing that they are at risk.

Mobility is essential for employment, as the majority of Maryland workers must drive to reach their jobs. In this regional economy, nearly 50 percent of Marylanders travel outside of their county for employment. This makes access to vehicular transportation essential to the livelihood of nearly half of Maryland's working population. As such, Maryland's low-wage workers, oftentimes, must weigh the risks of driving without a valid license against the need to earn income.

At JOTF, we routinely encounter those who are directly impacted by Maryland's use of driver's license suspension and revocation as a debt collection practice. We encounter it through the stories of our Project JumpStart participants or from the millions of low-wage workers who we advocate for in Annapolis. In every instance, the case is the same – a debt is owed, there is no ability to pay, a driver's license is revoked or suspended – creating a cycle of lost employment, income, and even your freedom. We have also seen, repeatedly, that the motor vehicle administration routinely fails to lift suspensions for our workers who are on arrearage payment plans for child support or technological glitches that display

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redacted infractions on the individual's driving record leading to invalid licenses. Part of this is beyond the individual's control and there is little to no reason to imprison them for it.

Above this, is the \$500 fine imposed by the current state law for displaying invalid licenses. For many of our constituents, the primary reason for a suspended/revoked license lies within their inability to pay for child support or various other debts as they simply do not have the money. With multiple reports showing pre-pandemic that most Americans can't even afford a \$400 emergency expense due to bills and debt- it can be assured that most Marylanders do not have \$500 to spare for a potentially accidental motor vehicle fine. As such, we would support Senate Bill 20 with an amended fine down to \$50 with *no* risk of arrest. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report *with amendments* to Senate Bill 20.