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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1293:

Driver's Licenses - Suspension for Child Support Arrearages - Exception

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

FROM: Joseph T. Jones, Jr., Founder, CEO and President, Center for Urban Families

DATE: March 10, 2022

I am the Founder, CEO, and President of the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) in Baltimore. CFUF's mission is to strengthen urban communities by helping fathers and families achieve stability and economic success. The individuals who complete our programs go on to find stable employment with room for growth. They endeavor to support their children and play a meaningful and positive role in their lives. Yet, the child support system all too frequently acts as a wedge between these parents and their children and makes it difficult to ever regain economic stability or pay off child support debt that accrued while they were incarcerated or unemployed. The ability of the Child Support Administration to suspend an obligor's driver's license for non-payment compounds the problem by limiting or eliminating transportation to the employment needed to make payments. As a result, I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 1293 as a means of repealing the punitive practice of driver's license suspensions for lower-income obligors.

Mobility is key in Maryland's regional economy. The Census Bureau reported that [almost 50% of Marylanders travel outside of their county](#) for employment. This statistic is more pronounced for lower-income communities of color where there is a scarcity of jobs available by public transit. In fact, only [9% of jobs in the Baltimore region can be reached within one hour, one-way by public transit](#). Thus, for economic sustainability, both a valid driver's license and a vehicle are necessary.

In 2015, NPR reported that 62% of Marylanders who owe child support make less than minimum wage but owe at least \$10,000 in unpaid arrearages. They will never pay down this debt, especially when the current law magnifies the issue by crippling their mobility. [Maryland Code Ann., Fam. Law § 10-119](#) states that upon 60 days of nonpayment of child support, an obligor shall have their license or privilege to drive suspended. Beyond this, [Maryland Code Ann., Transportation §16-303](#) states that driving on an invalid license (suspended, canceled, or revoked) in Maryland is a crime punishable by up to one (1) year in jail, a \$1,000 fine, or both. As such, child support debt triggers a suspended driver's license, arrest, or hefty fines, further complicating the ability of low-wage workers to secure and retain employment and make payments.

Data suggests that this issue is racialized as well, adversely disrupting the lives of African-Americans. Although Blacks make up 31.1% of Maryland's population, [MDOT data suggests](#) that they made up to 71% of the roughly 27,000 license suspensions between 2015 and 2020. In addition, according to a March

2020 Baltimore Sun article, “At a single point in time, in September 2018, nearly 40,000 people had their driver’s license suspended by Maryland’s child support agency, according to data obtained by The Sun through the public records request. More than a third of those drivers lived in Baltimore.” If a disproportionately higher number of black Marylanders lack access to a valid driver’s license due to license suspensions and are blocked from participating in a mobile economy, it stands to reason that current state policy is actively preventing them from making payments.

House Bill 1293 ends the practice of suspending licenses for child support arrears of those making less than 300% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or \$39,000 annually. There is no evidence that suggests suspending an individual’s driver’s license improves the collection of arrears, in the long run, for persons at this income level. Suspending licenses for lower-income obligors runs counter to the stated purpose of increasing compliance with making child support payments and engagement with family, where appropriate. In fact, it cripples the primary way that the Child Support Enforcement Agency can collect (wage garnishments) by eliminating access to the employment needed to pay down arrears. Our state can and should do more to make our child support system one that advances equity and puts the family at the center of its policies rather than worsening disparities. This is an opportunity that can only be granted with your support. For this reason, CFUF humbly requests a favorable report for House Bill 1293.

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