

**HB532 - Drivers Education Assistance Program
FWA - Support With Amendments
Lori Richards, Garrett County Maryland**

My name is Lori Richards, and I help manage a community program that provides scholarships for drivers ed for students in Garrett County MD. The “*Garrett County New Drivers: Let’s Drive*” program is funded by grants, local business sponsors and donations. We initiated the scholarship program when we realized there was a serious problem that was holding young people back from being able to access jobs, education, healthcare and activities, and when we learned that local employers were having difficulty finding workers who could get to and from work. The “*Let’s Drive*” program is sponsored by Garrett County Community Action and the Garrett County Democratic Club, it’s a non-profit non-partisan community initiative.

There is a need for our program. In 2021, the first year of “*Let’s Drive*,” we provided scholarships to 11 students, then to 26 students in 2022, and in December, we had a “stretch goal” and awarded scholarships to 67 students, prioritizing students with financial need in the 12th, 11th and 10th grades.

I’m providing testimony in support of this bill that will provide grant funding for drivers ed to high schools in rural areas and with students in financial need. I’ll shed light on the problem — the lack of universal free drivers education in Maryland high schools, and the resulting impact on young people and their families in rural areas of our state. Finally, I’ll suggest ways to further and more broadly address the problem.

Background. Most of us of a certain age learned how to drive as part of the curriculum in public high schools. Maryland (and some other states) eliminated these programs due to budget constraints. Now, students and their families must pay for a private drivers education course. Maryland law requires completing a drivers ed course to be eligible for a drivers license. Private drivers ed courses cost almost \$400.

This is a serious financial obstacle for many Maryland students and families, particularly for families with multiple kids.

Impact. Eliminating universal drivers ed has had a disproportionate impact on students in rural areas that lack public transportation, and where driving a car is quite literally the only means of transportation. Garrett County, for example, is one of the most rural counties in the state, with 656 square miles of terrain in the Appalachian mountains. It’s population is dispersed, and there is no regularly-scheduled public transportation. If you don’t drive and have a car, you don’t have mobility. If you can’t get to work or school, you can’t access opportunities.

Eliminating universal drivers ed has also had a disproportionate impact on families with financial need. From my personal experience with the “*Let’s Drive*” scholarship program, I know the stories of many of these families. They’re all kinds of families — hardworking single-parent households, households where both parents have more than one job to support the family, households with parent(s) that are disabled or have a serious medical condition, foster households — every kind of family.

The students I have been privileged to know through “*Let’s Drive*” are incredibly inspiring — each is starting to plan for their future. Various, to be a firefighter, welder, nurse, diplomat, miner, coast guard officer, diesel mechanic, diplomat, farmer, teacher, hairdresser, lawyer, photographer, and more. For each, getting a drivers license is their first step to adulthood and to access opportunities. And, getting a drivers license helps them to see that they can become independent and plan their future course.

It is disheartening to know that some Maryland students graduate from high school but don’t have a license to drive, and that many employers require a job applicant to have a license.

Solutions. I support this bill. It will assist students in rural counties and with financial need learn to drive. I appreciate that it’s a *start* to address the problems I’ve outlined above. But I also suggest broader steps:

- *Drivers ed could be returned to high school campuses* — provided by private licensed drivers ed companies, at no or low-cost to students, paid by state funding. Existing drivers ed schools are licensed by the state to instruct students on safe driving. Having their courses on high school campuses would provide access for students who need school bus transportation and/or who lack internet access to take a course on-line.
- *Universal free drivers ed could be funded by adding a small fee to traffic tickets.*
- *Drivers testing should be easy to access.* In Garrett County for example, students must find a way to travel to Cumberland (an hour away) to take a drivers test. Every county should have a local DMV office where people can take their drivers test, even if it’s available periodically in each rural county.

Thank you Delegate Vogel and Committee members for your focus on this issue. And thank you to our local representatives and political leaders who share our commitment to people in rural Maryland.
