

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 856

Before the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee March 4, 2026

Brendan Hellweg Co-author, Abell Foundation Report: *License to Work: Reducing Driver's License Barriers to Employment in Baltimore*

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 856.

My name is Brendan Hellweg. I co-authored a report published this week by the Abell Foundation examining how driver's license barriers affect employment in Baltimore. I'm here to share what we found and why this bill matters.

Maryland's provisional licensing system was enacted in 1998 through House Bill 527 to reduce crash risk among teen drivers. That was sound policy then, and SB 856 preserves it. What SB 856 addresses is the unintended consequence of applying the same 18-month provisional requirement to adults, a population the original legislation was never primarily designed to protect.

Let me share three facts that frame why this matters.

First, Maryland's licensing requirements are among the strictest in the nation, but our roads are not proportionally safer. Maryland requires 30 hours of classroom instruction and 60 hours of supervised driving for all new drivers regardless of age — requirements that exceed most states. Yet Maryland's fatality rate of 1.08 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled is close to the national average of 1.26. More concerning, Maryland's traffic fatalities have risen 31 percent over the last decade, compared to 20 percent nationally, and the fatality rate per VMT rose 31 percent versus 11 percent nationally over the same period. The factors driving those numbers — impaired driving, urban traffic density, and some of the longest average commute times in the country — have nothing to do with whether a 20-year-old has held a provisional license for 12 months or 18. Maryland's fatalities actually declined from 582 to 480 between 2024 and 2025, a period in which the provisional system did not change. What did change was enforcement, infrastructure investment, and impaired driving prevention. These are the levers safety advocates should focus on.

Second, the provisional requirement creates a direct barrier to employment. Employers in HVAC, automotive services, logistics, and commercial transportation require a full unrestricted license for insurance purposes. A provisional license — even though it permits legal driving — does not satisfy those requirements. The National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, which trains 250 adults a year in Baltimore for skilled trades, documented 25 graduates in the past 12 months who were denied employment solely because of provisional status — that's ten percent

of trainees excluded from gainful employment. These are adults who completed their training, passed their road test, and are ready to work in jobs paying \$18 to \$30 an hour. This Committee will hear from several of them today.

Third, the burden falls disproportionately on the communities that can least afford it. Our Abell Foundation report found that driver's licensure carries the widest racial disparity of any employment barrier measured in the Baltimore region — out of 29 categories. One in five Black jobseekers cited it as a direct barrier, compared to one in eleven white respondents. Only 8.5 percent of Baltimore-region jobs are reachable by transit within an hour, and 86 percent of projected new jobs through 2030 will be located outside the city. For residents who need to drive to work, the 18-month provisional period is not a safety measure — it is a waiting period with no demonstrated benefit that delays economic participation.

SB 856 is a measured reform. It preserves every element of teen graduated licensing. It preserves driver education requirements, supervised practice hours, and road testing. It maintains 18-month penalties for drunk driving violations and license suspensions. What it does is allow adults who have met every competency standard the state requires to receive a full license and begin working.

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have about our research or the policy landscape in other states.

Key Sources

- IIHS, Fatality Facts 2023 — State by State: [iihs.org](https://www.iihs.org)
- TRIP/NHTSA, Addressing America's Traffic Safety Crisis — Maryland (2025): tripnet.org
- Maryland Highway Safety Office / Zero Deaths MD: zerodeathsmd.gov
- IIHS, Graduated Licensing Laws by State: [iihs.org](https://www.iihs.org)
- Abell Foundation, *License to Work: Reducing Driver's License Barriers to Employment in Baltimore* (2026)
- Maryland General Assembly, House Bill 527 / Chapter 483 (1998)