

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 12, 2008

The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General of the United States
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Strong local economies depend on access to reliable, affordable transportation. While a strong public transit system is important, in many communities--urban, rural, and suburban--access to an automobile is essential for economic mobility and the ability to obtain and retain employment. Yet, for low-wage workers, there are numerous barriers to acquiring reliable transportation. The cost of an automobile and state fees pose financial barriers for low-income individuals seeking private transportation. License suspension policies for non-driving offenses in many states increasingly pose a formidable barrier. For workers without a license, jobs may be inaccessible because the license is a prerequisite, or because a car is the only means to access a job far from home.

According to a 2005 study by the Brookings Institution, states suspend, or threaten to suspend, driver's licenses for a number of reasons, including unpaid child support or failure to pay a fine or appear in court. Due to their limited savings and tight finances, low-wage workers are more likely to be affected by such policies compared to their neighbors. A Brookings Institution review of academic literature concludes that there is a strong correlation between employment, earnings, and hours worked, and car ownership and possession of a valid license (Waller 2005). A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report came to the same conclusion: "...owning a car or having access to one increases the likelihood that low-income individuals...find a job." (See GAO-07-153).

Federal law does contain numerous mandates requiring states to develop policies for license suspensions. For example, the Social Security Act requires states to implement policies for suspending and/or restricting driver's licenses for non-custodial parents who have failed to pay child support. However, in recent years many states have greatly increased the number of offenses that may result in a suspended license. Driver's license suspension can be a useful and sometimes necessary tool for enforcing child support and encouraging action on other state or local policy goals. We are, however, interested in the best approach for balancing the need to enforce parental and other responsibilities with efforts to account for and mitigate negative impacts on economic mobility for low-wage workers. We are concerned that state suspension policies for non-driving offenses carried out without safeguards may have a disproportionate impact on the economic mobility of low-wage workers, their families, and communities.

In light of these concerns, we ask that GAO conduct a study to determine the impact that driver's license suspension policies for non-driving offenses around the country have on the economic mobility of low-income individuals, the extent to which various state policies seek to diminish the negative effects of license suspension on economic mobility, and what role the federal government can play in moving states towards practices that promote economic mobility. More specifically, we would like GAO to determine:

1. The existing information regarding the range of circumstances that may result in license suspensions, and scope of suspensions for these reasons,
2. The existing information and data regarding the economic impact and effect on mobility of license suspension policies on low-income individuals,
3. The existing information and data concerning the effectiveness of license suspension policies and practices, particularly for non-payment of child support, in ensuring compliance with state laws and policies,
4. State "best practices" that take into account the potential economic consequences of license suspensions and seek to minimize barriers to employment,
5. The federal government's role in influencing and/or dictating license suspension policy, and
6. The potential federal role in supporting state adoption of "best practices" aimed at improving economic consequences for low-income populations and ensuring consistency and fairness in state policies.

Thank you for considering this request. Should you require additional information please contact Jeff Hild (x55065) with Congressman Stark, Sean Hughes (x53106) with Congressman McDermott, or Judy Burmaster (x54572) with Congresswoman Moore.

Warmest Regards,



Pete Stark
Member of Congress



Jim McDermott
Member of Congress



Gwen Moore
Member of Congress