

- Economy
- Health care
- Investing
- Workplace
- More...

ENTERTAINMENT

- Entertainment
- Main Page
- Dining
- Movies
- Festivals
- Music and Nightlife
- Performing Arts
- Visual Arts
- TV and Radio
- Books
- Calendars

FEATURES

- Lifestyle
- Advice Columns
- Homes
 - » Neighborhoods
 - » Remodeling
 - » Gardening
- Food/Cooking
- Personal
- Technology
- Health/Science
- Religion
- Cars
- Travel

AP COVERAGE

- National
- World
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment

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The end of their roads

No license a roadblock to work

By GREGORY STANFORD

Posted: Jan. 19, 2008

Voided licenses have reached epidemic proportions in Milwaukee County. A whopping 90,000 residents have license suspensions or revocations. Many didn't even hold licenses to begin with. What's more, in most instances, bad driving didn't lead to the yanking of licenses. The most common cause is failure to pay fines - even fines for offenses that had nothing to do with motor vehicles.

Yes, many of the poor have had brushes with the law and made other poor decisions in their lives, but the lack of a valid driver's license remains a huge pothole in their path to work.

Today, the Journal Sentinel Editorial Board examines this problem through the eyes of three people who lost their licenses but got back on the road again legally with the help of a unique program at MATC.

Jettie Moore had driven with a suspended license for years - to her astonishment.

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Her story begins on a foggy evening in 2003 on her commute from her warehouse job in New Berlin to her home on Milwaukee's north side. Suddenly, on Sunny Slope Road in Brookfield, drivers in front of her slammed on their brakes. She slammed on hers, too, tapping the car immediately in front of her. Hers was the last car of a four-car accident. The first two cars were damaged, she says.

After a police officer arrived, she showed him her driver's license and insurance card. Advising her to call her insurance agent when she got home, the officer sent Moore on her way. She went home and called the agent, telling him that neither she nor the motorist in front of her was injured and that their cars were not damaged.

That was that. Or so she thought. About three months later, she got a letter from the state asking her to send a copy of her auto insurance policy to the Department of Transportation. She complied.

Then she got what she dismissed as little more than a crank call, from the woman who identified herself as the driver of the first car in the accident. She claimed that Moore started the accident. The caller claimed that the chain reaction began with Moore's car - opposite of the way Moore saw it.

Moore, 66, says the caller wanted her insurance information and asked other questions. Moore refused to answer.

The accident faded from her mind, until April, when a Wauwatosa police officer stopped her as she was commuting home. The officer told her she was going 40 miles per hour in a 25 mph zone.

When the officer checked her driver's license, he found it was suspended. She urged the officer to double-check the information. He did and found that the suspension stemmed from an accident in 2003. She apparently lacked insurance, he said. She protested that she did have insurance. The officer ticketed her for speeding but let her drive home.

Moore had heard about the Center for Driver's License Recovery and Employability at Milwaukee Area Technical College's downtown campus through her church and on the radio. She went there for help.

Her insurance company claimed it had no record of a Jettie Moore as a client. Moore produced canceled checks and receipts showing that she was a longtime customer, including at the time of the accident. But the insurance company declined to have that evidence faxed to it.

A Roadblock to Work



Photo/Benny Sieu

After a long wait, Trey Ducksworth finally has a driver's license. Because of a truancy ticket, his license was suspended before he even had one.

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[Buy a link here](#) After a few weeks of tussle, the insurance company relented, according to the center, which corroborated Moore's story. It had found Moore's records. The insurer paid a \$1,500 claim a driver had made against Moore, though Moore was stuck with paying fees to reinstate her license and to show that the damage claim had been satisfied.

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Unpaid truancy ticket quickly snowballed

Ordinarily, Trey Ducksworth didn't play hooky from Milwaukee's Custer High School. But it was the fourth hour, he was 16, wanderlust struck, and, as he says now, "I guess I was a knucklehead back then."

Ducksworth was spotted by police officers on the lookout for truants. He darted down an alley and thought he had evaded the cops only to find them waiting for him as he stepped into the open. They gave him a truancy ticket.

The effects of that single ticket, which he didn't bother to pay, snowballed. His license was suspended, even though he didn't yet *have* a license.

Ducksworth, now 22, was in a hole - and he needed money that he didn't have to climb out of it. He wanted to work, but could only find jobs in areas only accessible by car. So he drove without a license.

"I was just constantly getting pulled over," he says. "I was just constantly getting tickets. . . . They actually took me to jail a couple of times until a fine was paid."

Police cited him for driving without a license. And because he never paid the tickets, his nonexistent license was suspended and revoked several times. It was a legal morass as confusing as a Picasso painting.

And adding to the mess was that the revocations had triggered something known as an "SR-22." That's a state requirement that he file proof of auto insurance.

Wisconsin is one of only two states that doesn't ordinarily require proof of insurance, explained Nichole Yunk, director of the driver's license recovery center at MATC. Requiring it for suspensions places a disproportionately heavy financial burden on the poor, because they are more likely to have suspended licenses. The insurance they're required to get is typically high-risk and thus more expensive than normal insurance.

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If they don't maintain the insurance, their licenses get suspended, Yunk says, adding that SR-22 is a major stumbling block for the center's clients.

"That really made me feel like I've got to pay them per month to keep a license," Ducksworth says. "I really couldn't afford that."

And he found that just about every job he applied for demanded a driver's license - even jobs that didn't require driving.

"It was a situation where, like, I had to find a job," said the father of two. It was difficult to get from Point A to Point B on a bus. "I couldn't even go look for a job."

Ducksworth even took carpentry at Milwaukee Area Technical College, finishing almost all the course work. But he realized that, to succeed in that line of work, he needed a driver's license to get to jobs.

Finally, in 2007, he sought help, and got it at the George M. Sanders Fathers Resource Center at the Martin Luther King Center, 1531 W. Vliet St., which sent him to the license recovery center.

A consortium of agencies staffs the center. It includes Justice 2000, which helps ex-offenders reintegrate into the community, and Legal Action of Wisconsin, which provides legal services for the poor.

Lawyers at the center sorted through Ducksworth's file. They got some old cases reopened and penalties lowered. Ducksworth notes, with amazement, that one attorney - Jim Gramling, a former municipal judge - even drove him out to a Waukesha County court to settle legal matters there. The attorneys got the SR-22 lifted.

Finally, he was able to apply for a license. He passed the road test in September and got his license. He had yet to find a job at the time of his interview. But he appreciates the difference a license makes.

Now, he's relaxed behind the wheel when he sees a police car. Before, it was "like I had eaten a hot pepper."

Anxious moments without a license

Gerard Johnson wears a sweat shirt that says "STRONG" - a gift from his daughter as a tribute to his habit of biking up to 40 miles a day in fair weather and foul.

Car troubles helped spur him to "go green," as he puts it. But tickets that piled up on his car - tickets he couldn't afford to pay - led to the suspension of his driver's license. Then, in 2006, his car was stolen.

Johnson, 55, had held a license since leaving high school. In fact, for a while, he earned his livelihood behind the wheel. His best years were as a driver for Brink's. But Brink's lost a major contract, he says, and let him go.

"From that point on," he says, "the quality of my jobs went down hill. I'm one of what you call the working poor."

When his old car flunked the emissions test two years ago, he lacked the money to make the necessary repairs. He drove anyway and was ticketed for driving with expired license plates. Failure to pay eventually led to suspension of his license.

"Every police car that's in front of you, beside you, behind you - you're in a constant state of anxiety," he says. "It can be overwhelming, especially if your income isn't such that you could go (use) a credit card and take care of it."

By the time he sought help, he owed hundreds of dollars in fines in Milwaukee and Ozaukee counties.

He was at the Martin Luther King Center when he ran into an official from the Sanders Center, who asked Johnson whether he had a license. Johnson replied that it was suspended. The official referred him to the driver's license recovery center, where social workers and lawyers helped him to straighten out his legal affairs and reclaim his license.

*This special report was reported and written by **Gregory Stanford** for the Editorial Board.*

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