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- Racine
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 - » No Quarter
- Editorials
- Crossroads
- Traffic
- Education
- Obituaries
- SPORTS**
- Main Page
- Packers/NFL
- Packer Insider**
 - Bucks/NBA
 - Brewers/MLB
 - Badgers
 - » Football
 - » Basketball
 - Golden Eagles
 - Panthers
 - Preps
 - Golf
 - Outdoors
 - Wave/Soccer
 - Admirals/Hockey
 - Racing
- BUSINESS**
- Main Page
- News

Editorial: Stranded in Milwaukee

City officials are right to push for more jobs in the central city, but why do they make thousands of residents less employable by taking away their driver's licenses?

From the Journal Sentinel

Posted: July 26, 2007

With one hand, City Hall is striving to boost employment in job-starved Milwaukee. With the other, it is making thousands of residents less employable.

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City Hall policies are leading to the suspension and revocation of driver's licenses for non-driving offenses by the droves. Research shows that the absence of a valid license is the No. 1 barrier to a job here - an even bigger problem than the lack of education.

The city should stop compounding the problem. The Common Council and Mayor Tom Barrett should:

- Rescind the ordinance allowing municipal judges to suspend driver's licenses for failure to pay fines.
- End the policy of charging residents to park overnight on the street in front of their homes - a policy that leads to parking tickets, which lead to the suspensions of vehicle licenses, which lead to the suspensions of driver's licenses.

Suburban courts, where poor city residents often wind up, also should stop suspending licenses for failure to pay fines.

Does that mean violators of municipal ordinances should get off scot-free? Of course not. We believe strongly in the principle that judicially determined penalties should be paid. At the same time, judges must keep in mind that poverty is often the reason for non-payment.

Courts should use alternative penalties, as some judges already do. The alternatives include sentencing defendants to community service, setting up payment plans and intercepting state income tax refunds.

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In Milwaukee County, one of every eight residents age 15 or older holds a suspended or revoked driver's license,

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- Dining
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- Performing Arts
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- Books
- Calendars

mostly for non-driving offenses. Voiding licenses for driving violations makes sense. Doing so for other reasons has serious unintended consequences, which public officials should avoid.

As for overnight parking on public thoroughfares, Milwaukee may be the only major American city that charges for that privilege - a policy that serves no public purpose we can ascertain other than to enrich city coffers. The policy has staying power because the city is used to the income.

While it affects all areas of town, it has a disproportionate impact on lower-income people in the dense inner city, where there often are not enough driveways.

It amounts to a regressive tax, which also helps to clog the courts. The city should end this unfair tax and find another way to make up the income - perhaps by raising fines for legitimate parking tickets.

What's disheartening is that neither the mayor nor any aldermen have taken the lead on this issue. Political leaders can't clamor for jobs while ignoring the No. 1 personal barrier to employment - especially when the city has helped to erect that barrier.

"No license: A roadblock to work" is an occasional series by the Editorial Board. To comment, send a letter to: [Journal Sentinel editorial department](#)

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