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Editorial: Unfair suspensions leave workers idling

Revoking or suspending driver's licenses in Wisconsin has made it all that much harder for low-income residents to obtain and retain employment.

From the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Jan. 19, 2008

Officials are acting much too slowly on a pressing problem: the epidemic of suspended or revoked driver's licenses in Wisconsin. The problem is wreaking havoc in Milwaukee County and elsewhere in the state.

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By grounding workers, the problem slows the economy and exacerbates poverty. By punishing being broke more than bad driving - the single biggest reason for voided licenses is failure to pay fines - the suspensions betray American ideals. What's more, the glut of suspensions is clogging the courts and undermining respect for the law, particularly in Milwaukee's inner city, where the voided licenses are rife.

Lawmakers must end this epidemic by voiding the many laws that mandate or permit the suspension or revocation of driver's licenses for offenses unrelated to bad driving.

In Milwaukee County, suspended or revoked licenses saddle one of every eight driving-age residents, more than half of whom never held real licenses to begin with. The state voids even nonexistent licenses - which hampers getting a real one.

State lawmakers and Gov. Jim Doyle must do the following:

Opt out of a federal law that requires at least a six-month suspension of driver's licenses for all drug offenses. This law is likely making Wisconsin more dangerous than it would be otherwise by thinning the already slim chances of former drug offenders of obtaining work. According to the New York City-based Legal Action Center, 27 states already have opted out of the law.

Require the courts to grant indigent or low-income defendants reasonable installment payment plans in lieu of the automatic suspension of their licenses. The statute should permit defendants with licenses already suspended to reopen their cases and to pay by installment.

Allow state courts to do as municipal courts are now allowed to do: sentence indigent defendants to community service in non-criminal traffic offenses.

Encourage courts to collect overdue fines through holds on income tax refunds. Even poor people get such refunds, through the earned income tax credit - that is, if they're allowed to get to their jobs.

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The Center for Driver's License Recovery and Employability is a program of Justice 2000 Inc.

-  **Location:** MATC Downtown Campus, 700 W. State St., 8th floor.
-  **Phone:** (414) 297-6407
-  **Web site:** www.justice-2000.org/drivers.html
-  **Important to know:** Appointments are by referral only, through more than 30 agencies in Milwaukee County; no walk-ins. The program offers case management and legal services to help drivers with suspended or revoked licenses obtain their driving privileges. The program does not pay fines.

Reinstitute universal driver's education in the public schools. This will better enable poor kids to obtain driver's licenses. The program could be paid for by a surcharge on drunken driving convictions. Besides teaching motoring skills, driver's ed instills such values as the importance of maintaining a valid driver's license.

Bar courts from charging fees to reopen driver's license cases. Perhaps peg fines to ability to pay, as some other

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Step up funding for agencies helping poor residents gain valid licenses, such as the Center for Driver's License Recovery and Employability, housed at the Milwaukee Area Technical College's downtown campus.

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Public and private agencies should take these steps:

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Agencies involved in boosting employment should milk driver's license data to identify participants who need help in getting valid licenses, as advocated by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Employment & Training Institute. The lack of such a license is the No. 1 barrier to employment, even bigger than the lack of a high school diploma or of day care.

The state Department of Workforce Development should require that Wisconsin Works agencies aggressively seek to help their clients repair any driver's license problems.

An ETI study showed that only 7% of released inmates had valid licenses, and most have license suspensions or revocations. The Department of Corrections should help its population to obtain valid driver's licenses upon release.

Local governments should take these steps:

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They should forbid the use of driver's license suspension for non-payment of fines.

Yes, needy offenders must be held accountable - but through installment plans, community service or tax holds. The Milwaukee Common Council must take action, but that alone won't be enough.

Suburban police are stopping many Milwaukee residents who lack driver's licenses. So suburban governments should adopt this policy, too.

The Milwaukee Common Council should end the quaint practice of requiring residents to pay for the privilege of parking in front of their homes - a practice that disadvantages both the upscale east side and the poverty-stricken inner city, where off-street parking is relatively scarce.

Yes, such fees, and the parking tickets that result from failure to pay, are a lucrative source of city income. But they're also an unfair tax because of the burden they put on the poor. Failure to pay tickets can result in the suspension of a vehicle's registration. And driving with such a suspension can lead to the suspension of driver's licenses.

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Finally, private employers have a role to play. For some reason, more and more employers seem to require a driver's license for prospective employees whose jobs don't entail driving. Employers should require a license only if it's related to the job.

Unfortunately, in the 1980s and '90s, politicians turned to the suspension of driver's licenses to punish all manner of wrongdoing not related to driving. The result was an explosion in such suspensions.

The suspensions may be achieving their intended effect in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. But they are certainly not working in poor communities. Instead, they are blocking access to a possible escape hatch from poverty: jobs.

What reforms, if any, do you favor to help the poor maintain valid driver's licenses? Send a letter to: [Journal Sentinel editorial department](#)

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