

The Honorable Charles. E. Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Republican Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard J. Durbin
Senate Majority Whip
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Thune
Senate Republican Whip
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Sep 12, 2023

Dear Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Whip Durbin and Whip Thune:

The undersigned organizations endorse the Driving for Opportunity Act of 2023, as shown in the quotes that follow, and recognize the urgency of addressing debt-based driver's license suspension. We all agree that suspensions and restrictions of driver's licenses for unpaid court fines and fees fail to improve public safety and restrict economic opportunity for millions of Americans. The Driving for Opportunity Act of 2023, a bipartisan bill sponsored by U.S. Senators Chris Coons and Roger Wicker, recognizes the unintended harms of this counterproductive practice and supports communities transitioning away from this strategy.

[One in three American families are impacted by fines and fees](#) that are imposed as a result of a criminal or traffic offense. Unpaid fines and fees can lead to a driver's license suspension or other restrictions on driving. Driving a vehicle is essential for finding and keeping a good job, pursuing education, accessing child care, and obtaining other foundations for a stable and productive life. As Americans struggle to make ends meet, debt-based license suspensions are making it significantly more difficult for families to achieve critical financial stability.

Millions of Americans have a suspended or revoked driver's license solely because of unpaid court debt rather than unsafe driving. Such "debt-based suspension" is a means through which governments try to compel payment. This system is inherently faulty: someone who cannot drive will likely have a difficult time securing access to work, especially in rural and low-income communities where public transportation is limited, making debt repayment even more difficult or impossible.

Suspensions and revocations of driver's licenses for non-driving related conduct may harm public safety. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judges lose countless hours enforcing these laws at the expense of responding to more pressing issues in their communities on and off the road. In addition, having a suspended license exposes drivers to additional fines, arrest, incarceration, or other entanglements with the criminal legal

system. Half the states, ranging from Texas to New York, have amended their own policies to eliminate or restrict driver's license suspensions for unpaid court debt.

The Driving for Opportunity Act of 2023 authorizes federal funding to support states that are choosing to end debt-based driver's license suspensions. Under this legislation, state governments would receive limited federal assistance to manage some of the costs associated with eliminating debt-based suspensions and reinstating licenses. Passage of the Driving for Opportunity Act presents an opportunity for Congress to lift up a data-backed, widely supported policy reform and provide modest support for state governments that are embracing this common sense measure.

The undersigned organizations have different reasons for joining in support of this legislation, which they state in their own words below. All agree that suspensions and revocations of driver's licenses for unpaid court fines and fees should be discouraged, and that:

Debt-based license suspensions enable mass criminalization and surveillance, particularly in low-income communities that already experience racial profiling and excessive policing. Passing the Driving for Opportunity Act is a necessary step toward creating a more legitimate legal system that values civil rights and liberties over profit. — **Emily Reina Dindial, Senior Policy Counsel at the ACLU's Justice Division.**

"Suspending licenses limits people's ability to access work, groceries, education and health care services but it does not increase safety, and AASHTO and state DOTs believe our focus should always be on safety. We very much appreciate the leadership of Senators Coons and Wicker to improve access to opportunities." — **Jim Tymon, Executive Director, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.**

"Suspending drivers' licenses for non-public safety reasons such as unpaid fines and fees creates unnecessary hardships for those with limited means and is counterintuitive to its intended goal. A driver's license could be the difference between maintaining a job or falling deeper into financial trouble, thereby making it more difficult to pay the court obligations in the first place. This bill will help states move towards a better system where drivers' licenses are suspended only when they have a substantial nexus to public safety, rather than as a misguided stick." — **Mark Holden, Chairman of Americans for Prosperity.**

"No one should be denied the privilege of driving a car because of an unpaid fine or fee. Denying a person a driver's license because they owe money creates a modern version of the debtors' prison - you cannot leave your house until you pay your debts, but you cannot pay your debt if you cannot go to work. This is wrong." — **Grover Norquist, President of Americans for Tax Reform.**

"The suspension of an individual driver's license for not paying fines and fees is an archaic practice that needs to end. The Driving for Opportunity Act incentivizes states to make the smart choice for fairness and come up with alternative means for payment of this debt. This bill has even greater impact today as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Allowing

people to drive their own vehicles, rather than take public transportation that is now both scarce and potentially dangerous, is a far better option.” — **Shana O’Toole, President of the Due Process Institute.**

“Suspending driver’s licenses for unpaid court debt is not about safety; it’s a failed experiment in generating government revenue from low-income communities. The current system is forcing millions of people across the United States to make an impossible choice: stop driving—and lose access to work and other basic necessities—or keep driving, and risk jail time and more unaffordable fines. For our economy to flourish, we must end the cruel and counterproductive practice of debt-based driver’s license suspensions.” — **Joanna Weiss and Lisa Foster, Co-Directors of the Fines and Fees Justice Center.**

“Our communities are safest when everyone has the opportunity to provide for their family and pursue their potential. The inability to pay fines and fees for minor mistakes and technical violations should never stand in the way of someone getting back and forth to work, or being able to get their children to school. Transitioning communities away from debt-based drivers license suspensions is good for both public safety and the economy.” — **Inimai Chettiar, Deputy Director of Justice Action Network.**

“Debt-based driver’s license suspension is a terribly misguided policy because it makes it virtually impossible for anyone trying to work to repay their debt to society. Instead of making it harder for folks to get right with the law, we should be making it easier so that they can contribute positively in their local community. This bill will take an important step towards that goal. We are proud to support this legislation because our organization exists to empower the U.S. Hispanic community so it can thrive and contribute to a more prosperous America.” — **Daniel Garza, President of The LIBRE Initiative.**

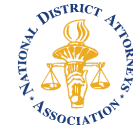
“The Major County Sheriffs of America commends Senator Coons and Senator Wicker for introducing the Driving for Opportunity Act. Our member Sheriffs are committed to building and maintaining trust in our communities. Providing an incentive for states to choose to update their laws to end debt-based driver’s license suspensions fosters community resiliency and helps those with past violations move forward in a positive direction.” — **Megan Noland, Executive Director of Major County Sheriffs of America.**

“For most Americans, maintaining a driver’s license is essential to fulfilling family responsibilities and maintaining employment. The burden of debt-based driver’s license suspension is not borne evenly throughout the nation: driver’s license suspensions trap poor people in a cycle of escalating debt, diminished employment opportunities and family hardship, and disproportionately impact people of color. Faced with the Hobson’s choice of risking arrest or sacrificing their families’ basic needs, many choose to drive on a suspended license and incur arrest, diverting public safety resources and overwhelming criminal courts and court actors with these low-level cases. Furthermore, there is no rational nexus between the failure to pay a debt and the right to drive. This is a flawed, irrational, and costly policy.” — **Lisa M. Wayne, Executive Director of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.**

"Our commitment to justice calls for a balance that protects public safety while understanding the economic realities many Americans face. The Driving for Opportunity Act embodies this principle, striking a balance between public safety and economic hardship. It puts public safety front and center, not debt collection, and fosters a system that respects the accused, supports victims, and serves our whole community. This bipartisan effort underscores our shared goals for a fair, effective, and compassionate justice system." — **Nelson Bunn, Executive Director of the National District Attorneys Association.**

"Driver license suspensions for pending court fines and fees are crippling to those struggling in poverty, a group of people the Bible calls us to protect. We want people to provide for their families, make amends, and actually pay off financial sanctions. Taking away the ability to drive, especially for those already struggling financially, is counterproductive to these goals. By cosponsoring and passing the Driving for Opportunity Act, federal lawmakers can advance a more restorative approach to justice." — **Heather Rice-Minus, Executive Vice President of Strategic Initiatives at Prison Fellowship.**

"In more than two-thirds of states, individuals can lose their driver's license over unpaid fines or fees. This counter-productive practice contributes to a perpetual cycle of punishment for the inability to pay debt. Driver's license suspensions can have devastating effects that can cost Americans their livelihoods and limit opportunities for businesses and their employees. For businesses, employees can't get to work, goods and services can't be transported, and the workforce talent pool may be limited. Challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled and diverse workforce due to debt-based suspensions could limit productivity and ultimately affect a company's success." — **Neil Bradley, Executive Vice President and Chief Policy Officer for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.**



U.S. Chamber of Commerce

CC: Senator Chris Coons
Senator Roger Wicker