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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 25-H 5931, RELATING TO SUSPENSION OR REVOCATION OF LICENSES - VIOLATIONS March 11, 2025

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this legislation, which would make clear that individuals could not lose their driver's licenses solely because of their failure to pay traffic fines. Many residents who get these fines can often face a true Catch-22 situation: they lose their license because they can't pay the fines, they lose their ability to work because they can't drive, and their loss of a job means that they are not making money that might allow them to pay the fines.

Over 20 states have recognized this situation and passed legislation similar to this, realizing that in the overwhelming majority of cases, the individuals are simply unable to afford to pay the fines and that it is better to have them driving with a license and insurance than without. Courts have also been aware of the impact of these license suspension laws on poorer residents, and the constitutional concerns it raises. As a federal court in Tennessee noted:

“[T]he ability to drive is crucial to the debtor's ability to actually establish the economic self-sufficiency that is necessary to be able to pay the relevant obligations. [The plaintiffs] have previewed substantial evidence demonstrating the necessity of driving to the ability to earn a living in Tennessee, but one needs only to observe the details of ordinary life to understand that an individual who cannot drive is at an extraordinary disadvantage in both earning and maintaining material resources. Suspending a driver's license is therefore not merely out of proportion to the underlying purpose of ensuring payment, but affirmatively destructive of that end.” *Robinson v. Purkey*, 2017 WL 4418134 (M.D. Tenn. 2017).

The ACLU urges the Committee's passage of this legislation.