

Opinion Community Voices

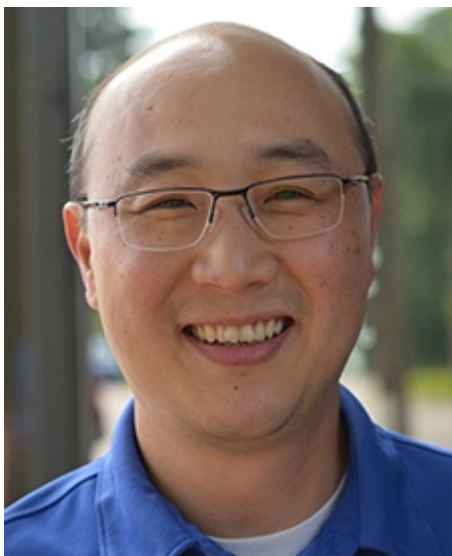
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Now is the time for Minnesota to end driver's license suspensions for unpaid fees

Driver's license suspensions should be reserved for the sole purpose of ensuring safe roads, not demanding payment from people who may be struggling to meet their families' basic needs.

By John Choi, Karin Sonneman and James Backstrom

May 7, 2020 More than 80,000 Minnesotans currently have their driver's license suspended for unpaid traffic tickets. Suspending licenses hasn't worked as an enforcement tool. It's time we acknowledge that and stop doing it. Driver's license suspensions should be reserved for the sole purpose of ensuring safe roads, not demanding payment from people who may be struggling to meet their families' basic needs.



John Choi

That's why the Minnesota County Attorneys Association is advocating for the Legislature to pass a bipartisan bill co-authored by Democratic Rep. John Lesch ([HF 1061](#)) and Republican Sen. Dan Hall ([SF 1376](#)) to end that practice. It doesn't change driver's license suspensions for dangerous driving violations, such as DUI or reckless driving. It leaves in place the collections process for unpaid traffic tickets, so people are held accountable for the cost of their ticket. It also leaves in place the habitual violator law – if a person racks up more than three tickets in 12 months or more than four tickets in 24 months, they will receive a suspension, regardless of payment status.

Suspensions often cause loss of a job

Driver's license suspensions make life difficult for those on the receiving end. Because more than 85% of Americans drive to work and many jobs require a driver's license, suspensions frequently cost people their jobs. More than 60% of people with low incomes who lose their driver's licenses also lose their job. Add to that the numbers of people with higher incomes who lose their jobs, and we're talking about a significant impact, not only to those individuals and their families, but to our economy. In addition, suspending someone's license comes with another unintended consequence: It prevents people from getting insurance, so this practice actually increases the numbers of uninsured drivers on our roads, which impacts us all as accidents occur and people lack sufficient resources to cover the damage.

Karin Sonneman

Without a driver's license, it makes it difficult or impossible for people to work, travel to the grocery store, take their kids to school, or get the health care they need for themselves and their families, especially in Greater Minnesota, which has limited transportation options. Because so many of us rely on our cars to meet our needs, many people with a suspended license continue driving, risking a criminal conviction, more fines and fees and incarceration.

In 2009, our state created a driving diversion program to provide drivers with suspended licenses due to unpaid fines and fees a path to reinstating their license that includes financial education, a payment plan and provisional license to stem the tide of mounting fines and fees. That helped people trapped in the cycle of tickets and fees, but this bill will prevent thousands of people from getting into this situation in the first place.

Many states are taking action

Recognizing how ineffective suspensions are, lawmakers across the country are taking action. In the past two years, Montana, Texas, Virginia, Mississippi, California, Idaho, Maine, and the District of Columbia have enacted legislative reforms to tackle debt-based suspension. It appears to be working. The California Judicial Council reported a 9% increase in collections on newly issued traffic tickets in the fiscal year after they stopped suspending licenses for unpaid traffic tickets, citing fewer suspensions as a contributing factor, likely because suspensions so often lead to job loss and financial crisis, especially for people with low incomes.

James Backstrom

In addition to bipartisan chief authors, this bill has the support of organizations all along the political continuum, including Americans for Prosperity – Minnesota, the ACLU of Minnesota, Justice Action Network, Minnesota Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Second Chance Coalition, Catholic Charities, Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, Voices for Racial Justice, Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, Minnesota Justice Research Center, and the American Legislative Exchange Council. The Southern Poverty Law Center and the Fines and Fees Justice Center support this concept as well.

It's time, Minnesota, to do right by the people of our state and pass HF 1061/SF 1376 to stop the practice of suspending driver's licenses due to unpaid traffic tickets, along with the unintended consequences of people losing their jobs, further taxing already strained law enforcement and prosecution resources, and having more uninsured drivers on the road, and reserve suspensions solely for dangerous driving offenses that require people to stay off the road to ensure our safety.

John Choi is the Ramsey County Attorney. Karin Sonneman is the Winona County Attorney. James Backstrom is the Dakota County Attorney. Also supporting the content of this commentary are: State Public Defender Bill Ward, Minneapolis & Saint Paul City Attorney's Offices, St. Louis County Attorney Mark Rubin, Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman, Stevens County Attorney Aaron Jordan, Carver County Attorney Mark Metz, McLeod County Attorney Michael Junge, Anoka County Attorney

Tony Palumbo, Olmsted County Attorney Mark Ostrem, Nicollet County Attorney Michelle Zehnder Fischer, Rice County Attorney John Fossum, and Washington County Attorney Pete Orput.

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