

Testimony in Support for Senate Bill 275

House Transportation Committee

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Marilyn Harp

Executive Director

Kansas Legal Services, Inc

Kansas Legal Services has worked on behalf of our low income clients to reduce the burdens that being poor has placed on their lives. One of significant burdens is traffic fines. Because the law sets a standard fine, without regard to the income of the person being fined, the impact is much greater on a low income person. When the low income person can't fully and promptly pay the fine, they face the further consequence of an immediate driver's license suspension. About 71% of driver's license suspensions are for not paying fines and fees assessed by courts.

Driving without a valid license results in further fines and reinstatement fees. But not driving leads to job loss and eviction. It is a terrible choice to ask people to make. These aren't people who "just forget" to pay the fines. These are people who live paycheck to paycheck and for whom the additional burden of a debt for traffic fines can be a crushing blow.

The most important part of this bill is that it opens up the restricted license program to persons who have been ticketed and found guilty for driving which suspended. This program is working for many who can now drive to work, school, medical appointments and court-ordered activities. But, another group is left out by the current restriction of this conviction. Removing this barrier will significantly improve the program and allow many new people to participate. They will be able to drive to work and support their families.

Kansas Legal Services maintains an interactive interview to allow people to learn more about this program. We began this before the Department of Revenue made information available on its website. We continue to promote the program and share it with Kansans. In 2019, we had 5,295 people view this page on the website. There is a lot of interest in this program, but many people who would benefit cannot participate. This bill would change that.

When the suspended to restricted program was first introduced, the idea was to get people working, so that fines and fees could be paid off. No group needs this opportunity more than the people who have been convicted of driving while suspended. Allow them to have a restricted license, participate in this program and work toward the day when they have no restrictions on their driving privilege. For those who think a "penalty" must be paid, the limitation to driving only to the specified activities is a penalty.

This could be a huge benefit to employers in Kansas as it expands the available workforce. The beneficiaries of this bill will be able to take jobs outside of areas served by buses and at times outside the bus schedule. That means second and third shift work will be open to these workers. This would be good news for employers seeking to fill jobs.

Kansas Legal Services (KLS), a statewide non-profit corporation, is devoted to helping low income Kansans meet their basic needs through the provision of important legal and mediation services. KLS is legal aid in Kansas, providing equal access to justice for the most vulnerable Kansans. KLS served more than 18,500 persons in all 105 counties last year through eleven legal services offices and two mediation offices across the state.