Fact Sheet on Debt-Based License Suspension

- **Debt-Based License Suspension Affects Millions of Families.** Each year, millions of Americans lose their driver’s licenses because they are too poor to pay a fee, fine, tax, or debt. This means that millions of people—including 977,000 Virginians and 1.8 million people in Texas alone—become unable to keep their jobs, visit loved ones, go to the doctor, attend church, take care of their children and otherwise participate in daily life.¹ Research suggests that 40% of license suspensions are for unpaid traffic tickets, unpaid child support, or drug offenses.² In Florida failure to pay fees was the cause of 77% of license suspensions between 2012 and 2015.³

- **Debt-Based License Suspension Reduces Public Safety.** When we suspend driver’s licenses for unpaid debts, we make our communities less safe. Every moment that we spend arresting and prosecuting the poor for unpaid debt is a moment spent consuming State resources without any beneficial effect on public safety.

- **Debt-Based License Suspension Hinders Employment.** Many jobs require driver’s licenses—whether because driving is needed, such as for a delivery person, or because the worksite is not accessible via public transportation. Many employers require driver’s licenses even for jobs that do not require operating a motor vehicle. In New Jersey, 42% of drivers lost their jobs after their driving privileges were suspended.⁴ Of those drivers, nearly half could not find new employment.⁵ And, of those that did, nearly 9 in 10 reported a loss in income.⁶

- **Debt-Based License Suspension Ensnares People in the Criminal System.** Studies show that 75% of individuals continue driving even after their licenses have been suspended.⁷ This means that each year, debt-based license suspensions expose millions to cascading consequences that include jail time and more debt from fees. In Cook County, people arrested because they drove on a suspended license spent, on average, 14 days in jail.⁸

- **Many Types of Debt Prompt License Suspension—Even Student Loan Debt.** All kinds of debts can trigger license suspension, including moneys owed from traffic fines, court costs and child support. As of 2017, 20 States even revoked State-issued licenses over student loans.⁹ In South Dakota, nearly 1,000 residents cannot hold a driver’s license because they owe money to State universities.¹⁰

- **Debt-Based License Suspension Particularly Affects Communities of Color.** Communities of color are hit the hardest by driver’s license suspensions. In one Milwaukee neighborhood, 2 of every 3 working-age African Americans do not have a license.¹¹

- **Very Few States Prevent Debt-Based License Suspension.** As of September 2018, 40 States suspend driving privileges over court debts that have gone unpaid—and in 40% of States, suspension is automatic.¹² Just four States ask whether a debtor can actually pay the debt.¹³
1 Mario Salas & Angela Ciolfi, DRIVEN BY DOLLARS A State-By-State Analysis of Driver’s License Suspension Laws for Failure to Pay Court Debt, Legal Aid Justice Center, September 2017 (at 1, don’t know where that would go in the citation); also see Rosalind Adams, In Florida, failure to pay fees can result in suspended license — and then more fees, THE MIAMI HERALD, August 10, 2015.
3 Adams, supra note 1, at 2.
5 See id.
6 See id.
7 American Association, supra note 4, at 4.
8 Cook County Jail Staff Calculation in American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, HB 5340 License to Work Act: Fact Sheet, March 15, 2018.
10 See id.
11 Eaglin, supra note 2, at 1.
12 Salas, supra note 1, at 2.
13 See id.