Reducing Fees and Fines on Minor Traffic Violations

The ability to build assets and a financial safety net is key for low-income households to weather challenges ranging from necessary car repairs to a medical crisis. An unexpected cost or fee, though manageable for some households, can be insurmountable for low-income Minnesotans.

Every traffic violation in the state of Minnesota comes with a $75 state surcharge, in addition to a local fine. Minnesota law allows a judge to waive or reduce the local (city or county) fine if someone is indigent or if paying the fine would create undue hardship for them or their immediate family. Courts may also require community service in lieu of all or a portion of the local fine. Unfortunately, current law does not allow waiver or reduction of the state surcharge. For low income Minnesotans, the choice between paying a ticket and paying for other necessities such as food, housing, or medical expenses is a difficult one; many are unable to pay the fees and fines associated with a minor traffic ticket.

These charges may compound over time, becoming increasingly difficult to pay. And as a result of unpaid fines, a person’s driver’s license can be suspended. Unlike many license suspensions, these are not a result of reckless conduct, but instead financial stress. Due to work and familial obligations, many people continue to drive with a suspended license. This can lead to arrests and jail time.

The JRLC will be advocating for a change. First, we support extending judicial authority to the state surcharge, allowing waiver, reduction or community service in lieu of this surcharge. Second, we support eliminating automatic license revocation for failure (in many cases, inability) to pay these fines. Any unpaid tickets or citations will continue to be turned over to the Department of Revenue for collection. Finally, we support efforts to make eligible Minnesotans aware of the option to seek waiver or reduction of a fine.

A 2010 comprehensive report from the ACLU led to increased nationwide attention to this issue. The report tracked micro and macro level data in states across the US and found that many people living in poverty face lifelong debts and battles with the system over what started as a comparatively minor traffic violation. We will be working with the Minnesota Asset Building Coalition to address this issue.