

TO: Joint Interim Committee on the First Special Session of 2020
FROM: Matt Newell-Ching, Public Policy Manager, Oregon Food Bank
RE: Support for HB 4210 - End Debt-Based Driver License Suspensions
DATE: June 24, 2020



Since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of Oregonians facing hunger has doubled.

Oregon State University estimates that 900,000 people – **one in five Oregonians** – are now food insecure. Our shared task is to lead our state through this public health and economic crisis so that we may emerge stronger on the other side.

Access to transportation is foundational in helping to ensure Oregonians have enough food on the table to feed their families. Policies that make it harder for our community members to access transportation make it more difficult to succeed and carry out the basics of daily living. Debt-based licensed suspension is one such policy and should be eliminated.

Ending Debt-Based Driver License Suspensions is Especially Urgent Due to COVID-19

We have supported the effort to end debt-based driver license suspensions over the past two sessions because we believe it is unfair and counterproductive to take away a person’s driver license based on a person’s inability to pay. It’s unfair because it disproportionately hurts workers with lower wages, including many essential workers. It’s counterproductive because it’s harder to keep a job and pay off debt if access to your method of transportation is taken away.

Debt-based driver license suspensions trap Oregonians in a cycle of poverty. There is a direct line from these suspensions to the racial disparity seen in police citation data for driving while suspended, specifically for Black Oregonians. Ending this practice is a first step towards stopping the harm caused by an unjust fines and fees system made worse by the pandemic.

COVID-19 has heightened the urgency of fixing this. If your license is suspended solely because of unpaid fees, tasks like going to the grocery store are even harder. Even if you have access to public transportation, bus routes are more limited and buses running have limited capacity.

By now you have seen news reports of cars lining up for blocks to access emergency food. Indeed, at the five Oregon Food Bank branches, twice as many households are requesting food from our network of agencies. Oregonians whose licenses have been suspended because of debt face impossible choices between getting food and driving with a suspended license.

Debt-based driver license suspensions don’t make our roads safer - they make it more expensive to be poor. We urge the legislature to join states including Idaho, Montana, California, and Mississippi in ending this practice by passing HB 4210.

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