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Testimony in Support of HB 285
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Senate Local Government, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs Committee
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Chair Manning, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Maharath, and members of the Senate Local Government, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs Committee, my name is Megan O'Dell, and I am an attorney at the Ohio Poverty Law Center. The Ohio Poverty Law Center advocates for evidence-based policies that protect and expand the rights of low-income Ohioans. We are a non-profit law firm working closely with Ohio's legal aid community, serving Ohioans who are living, working, and raising their families in poverty. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 285, to establish a driver's license reinstatement fee debt reduction program.

In Ohio, the state can suspend an individual's license for more than 30 reasons, and there are over three million suspensions on Ohio driver's licenses. Most of these suspensions are for offenses unrelated to safe and responsible vehicle operation. To reinstate a driver's license, an individual must pay a fee that is associated with each suspension. These range from \$15 to \$650 per suspension. It is not uncommon for an individual to have multiple suspensions and owe hundreds or thousands of dollars to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV). These fees owed to the BMV and those available to be waived or reduced under House Bill 285 are separate from the court fines an individual may owe for court cases related to traffic offenses.

House Bill 336 from the 132nd General Assembly created the six-month Reinstatement Fee Amnesty Initiative to address these issues, which allowed the BMV to waive or reduce reinstatement fees on eligible suspensions. House Bill 285 is similar to House Bill 336 with some changes. House Bill 285 expands indigency eligibility requirements for those receiving a waiver of reinstatement fees to individuals receiving Medicaid, Ohio Works First, Supplemental Security Income, and Veteran's Affairs benefits in addition to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Expanding eligibility means that more individuals who are indigent will benefit from the program, reducing the barriers to getting a valid driver's license.

During the six month pilot program, the Amnesty Initiative had an incredible effect on individuals with driver's license suspensions. Nearly 77,000 individuals were assisted, saving \$63 million dollars. The BMV also collected \$3.6 million in reinstatement fees from the program, an amount that the BMV may have never collected in the first place. When individuals have their fees reduced or waived, they are given a new sense of possibility, and many were able to pay the remainder of their fees. Legal clinics were held statewide, partnering legal aid offices, the BMV, local courts, job and family services offices, child support agencies, and insurance companies. As a result of this collaboration, individuals had license suspensions shortened, started making child support payments, purchased car insurance,

and were steps closer to getting a valid driver's license. At a three-day clinic in Franklin County, applicants saved \$373,000 in reinstatement fees. Chris, who attended that clinic, stated that the clinic gave him a second chance at life. After most of his fees were waived, he paid the remaining \$300, took his driver's license test, and now has a license. In Delaware County, the BMV waived \$2,500 in reinstatement fees. Adam, who attended the clinic, received full driving privileges and stated that he had a lifechanging experience.

Another change in this bill compared to House Bill 336 is that the Department of Public Safety will send a notice to all individuals with at least one eligible suspension on their driver's license 18 months after their court ordered suspension ends. We appreciate the opportunity this will create in ensuring more Ohioans are aware of the program. However, we want to make sure that individuals with a suspended license begin participating in the program at the appropriate time for their situation, since they are only able to apply for the program one time. In Ohio, a suspended driver has an average of three suspensions on their driver's license. It does not make sense for them to begin participating in the program when their first period of suspension ordered by the court ends when they still have other active suspensions that will likely be more expensive, losing their opportunity in the future to address those fees as well. We understand there is language coming to correct this concern and look forward to those changes.

Because most Ohioans drive themselves to work, particularly in rural areas of our state, a valid driver's license is a necessity. However, when an individual cannot afford to reinstate their license, they are forced to risk driving without a license or lose their job. The six-month pilot of the Amnesty Initiative has proven to be beneficial not only for Ohio drivers, but also for the BMV, families receiving child support, and the state. Although so many individuals were assisted through the pilot program, there are hundreds of thousands more who were unable to take advantage of the program. Making the program permanent would allow more low-income drivers to get back on the road and back to work. Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.