

Testimony in Support of SB 37
Sondra O. Bryson
House Homeland Security Committee
December 9, 2024

Chairman Ghanbari, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Homeland Security Committee, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony to this committee in support of Senate Bill 37. My name is Sondra Bryson, and I am a bankruptcy attorney at Legal Aid of Southeast and Central Ohio. For the last eight years, I have been helping impoverished rural clients reinstate suspended driver's licenses by filing bankruptcy. Bankruptcy is an extreme, intrusive, and often expensive remedy. Although it is a critical tool, bankruptcy cannot be used to reinstate a driver's license that is suspended because of past due court fines.

In rural Ohio, a driver's license is as essential as having a safe place to live. Without a license, people cannot access decent jobs, school, medical care, or take care of their family members. They do not have a way to participate fully in the economy and community and can become very isolated. In most of the rural counties we serve, there is extremely limited public transportation, so people must drive 30, 60, or even 90 minutes or more to work. Ride-sharing services like Uber or Lyft or taxi services are incredibly expensive or just unavailable. Having a valid driver's license is a life-line that gives especially rural Ohioans the opportunity to work, care for their families, and seek treatment for medical and mental health conditions.

To best illustrate this, I'd like to tell you about my client John. John first came to LASCO in the spring of 2023 hoping to file bankruptcy so he could get his driver's license reinstated. Like over 250,000 Ohioans, John had License Forfeiture suspensions for outstanding court fines and costs, mostly related to misdemeanor criminal cases. In addition, he also had a large judgment suspension from an accident he was involved in where he did not have car insurance. I told John that a bankruptcy would solve only his judgment suspension and that he would have to find a way to pay the several thousand he owed in court fines before he would be able to have his license reinstated. John started to work on gathering the information I needed to prepare his bankruptcy papers, but it was very difficult for him. He was working through a drug recovery program and had a hard time remembering various pieces of information crucial to his bankruptcy case. He had moved several times and had almost no belongings, including paperwork and documents I needed to review or have available for the bankruptcy court. John was really struggling to get me the information I needed to be able to help him when for an unknown

reason, the creditor who had the judgment suspension against his license released the judgment and the suspension. John was no longer in need of bankruptcy to get reinstated, but had to figure out how to pay the several thousand dollars in license forfeitures without a job.

During this time, John was working very hard to get back on his feet. On his own, he sought the help of a rehabilitation facility to get treatment for his substance use disorder. He found it difficult to get to his counseling sessions because he always had to find someone to take him. John also suffers from type 2 diabetes and had times where he could not find transportation to get to the doctor or to the pharmacy to pick up his medication. He was trying to find a job to pay toward his court fines, but it was impossible to find a job without a driver's license, especially one that would allow him enough time to work around his counseling appointments and 12-step meetings.

Somehow, even with these barriers, John completed 120 hours of community service that paid off about \$1200 of the debt he owed, but not all courts allow community service as an alternative to payment. John continued to contact the various courts where he had outstanding fines and costs and managed to set up payment plans by borrowing money from friends and family to get started. Just last week, John sent me a picture of himself holding up his newly obtained temporary driver's license, excited for the job opportunities he has now that he can drive.

Unfortunately, John's story is not rare. I often see clients who are in active substance use recovery, trying to get back to work as part of their rehabilitation, but can't due to debt related suspensions. These are folks who are working hard to get jobs, obtain housing, and maintain their sobriety. I end up turning away those who only have license forfeitures because bankruptcy isn't going to do much to help them get their license back.

Imagine how much easier it would be for people to get their lives back on track if Senate Bill 37 passes. Imagine how much easier it would be for courts to get paid if the people who owed them money had transportation to get to work so they could earn enough to pay off their court debts. In John's case, once the judgment suspension issue was fixed, he could have expedited his recovery by getting to his medical and counseling appointments without having to rely on someone else to get him there. He could have started a new job 6 months ago and started paying off his court debt without having to impose on his friends and family. Many people in John's situation don't even have friends or family from whom they can borrow.

SB 37 would not only make a tremendous difference to those over 250,000 Ohioans with license forfeiture suspensions, but also to the courts who are trying to collect those fines and fees. Ironically, license forfeiture suspensions prevent people from being able to pay their court debt by making it harder for them to get to work or forcing them to take lower paying jobs closer to their homes, or by making it impossible to get to work without the

possibility of getting caught for driving under suspension. The removal of license forfeiture suspensions does not remove the accountability for the debt that is owed, but it does make the person more able to fulfill their obligations. SB 37 is a tool that can help Ohioans climb out of debt and poverty as well as help courts recover money they are owed.

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