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Testimony in Support of HB 285
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Southeastern Ohio Legal Services
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 Ann Roche, and I am an attorney at Southeastern Ohio Legal Services, or SEOLS. SEOLS is civil legal aid, representing low-income Ohioans in legal issues related to 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.

Because SEOLS serves 30 rural counties, we see how lack of transportation is a barrier to individuals in poverty. Some rural areas have very limited public transportation and job opportunities, so employees travel to work outside the county where they live. Not having a valid driver's license makes it hard for people to consistently get to good-paying jobs, school, childcare, and medical appointments. So, Ohio legal aids jumped at the opportunity that the original amnesty bill created for our clients to get a fresh start.

In 2019, SEOLS and our sister program Legal Aid Society of Columbus (LASC) worked with courts and agencies to provide license reinstatement clinics in twelve counties: Franklin, Perry, Meigs, Athens, Licking, Muskingum, Lawrence, Scioto, Jefferson, Delaware, Fairfield, and Marion. Through collaborating with the BMV, municipal courts and clerks, Job & Family Services, Child Support, Ohio Access to Justice Foundation, prosecutors and public defenders, OSBA, volunteer attorneys, insurance companies, and driving schools, we served over 1,900 clients. I'm very proud of how the amnesty program spurred us all to collaborate in helping individuals understand their reinstatement steps, reduce their BMV and court debts, apply for limited driving privileges, resolve blocks on their license and child support issues, receive bankruptcy consultations, and connect with Job & Family Services, the VA, insurance companies, and driving schools. For example, because of the amnesty program and our partners' work, I had a client in Licking County who was a single mom having to use Uber to get to work every day. She was able to leave the clinic with over \$2,000 in old BMV fees waived, 6 cases of fines and holds from the Court waived, and ready to retest for her license once she took her remedial driving course. She's now able to spend that money on insurance, bills, and her kids.

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However, there is much more to be done, in terms of Ohioans we have not yet reached, and in ways to make the system less confusing and burdensome.

Many if not most of our license reinstatement clinic clients are eligible for SNAP (food stamps). However, there are multiple reasons some people who are eligible for SNAP are not currently enrolled, including stigma. This bill better reflects what poverty really looks like by expanding the indigency definition to include receipt of SSI, Medicaid, Ohio Works First, cash assistance, and Veterans benefits, so more Ohioans in need can benefit from the fee waiver.

I will briefly note my concern with implementation of the new notice procedures in this bill. I appreciate the attempt to make more Ohioans aware of the amnesty program. However, under this iteration, it appears BMV would notify individuals as soon as they have one case that is eligible for a fee waiver or reduction. The best time for individuals to apply for amnesty varies case by case, so a one-size-all solution may not be as effective. Often individuals have multiple suspensions, so if they use their one chance to apply for amnesty as soon as their first eligible suspension is ready for the program, they could be missing a chance to save much more money in the future. Most of my clients live paycheck to paycheck, so they need to not leave money on the table when they could be using it to provide for their families. I understand there is work being done in other amendments that would address that issue and welcome that.

Again, the BMV reinstatement fee amnesty program has been a tool for many Ohioans to reduce unpayable debt, buy car insurance, pay their bills, drive to work, school, and medical appointments, and get better jobs. All of these things stabilize and improve not only individual lives, but families, employers, other drivers, and our communities as a whole. Thank you to this Committee for allowing me to give this testimony, and for working to reduce the burden on low income Ohioans seeking more stable lives through license reinstatement. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.