

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF OHIO SB 37 FOR  
CONSIDERATION BEFORE THE OHIO SENATE JUDICIARY  
COMMITTEE, CHAIRMAN MANNING, VICE-CHAIR REYNOLDS AND  
COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

**PREPARED BY JILL RIZIKA, PRESIDENT & CEO, TOWARDS  
EMPLOYMENT**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB37.

Towards Employment is a 47-year-old community-based workforce development organization based in Cleveland. Our mission is to champion the potential of every person to succeed in a rewarding career today, while working to create an equitable and inclusive workforce for tomorrow. Towards Employment helps job seekers connect to careers, changing people's lives, advancing businesses, and strengthening community. Using the WorkAdvance model as a solution, we increase Clevelanders' economic mobility by providing skill development for in-demand jobs, comprehensive supports that address the social determinants of work, extended career coaching, and direct connections to employers. This rigorously evaluated model showed a \$2 ROI for every \$1 invested. Every year, TE serves 1800 people/year with a range of employment and career building activities, with 400-500 starting jobs for the first time, and others preparing for jobs or getting coaching and support while working entry level jobs and seeking to advance in their career. In 2023, 85% of everyone served was a person of color, 60% had some

criminal justice involvement, 50% are parents, and all were experiencing economic hardship and came to Towards Employment looking for a way to improve their lives. We partner with over 300 employers—such as University Hospitals, Lincoln Electric and Hilton Hotels, helping them meet their talent needs and supporting entry-level workers succeed on the job.

Debt-related driver's license suspensions are a major barrier to employment experienced by approximately a third of our participants annually. Suspending a driver's license for debt related reasons, rather than limiting this sanction to unsafe driving practices, hurts both job seekers and Ohio's employers. Not being able to drive severely limits access to opportunity to get to good paying jobs in need of workers. For instance, to get to work in Solon, the region's fastest growing job hub with living-wage, accessible manufacturing jobs, bus passengers from Cleveland neighborhoods face a commute of 90 minutes and two transfers—each way. This same commute by car takes roughly 25 minutes. Even when workers endure long commutes and multiple transfers on public transportation, spending so much time traveling to work and back is highly correlated with high turnover, because it extends the workday for hours, and makes it nearly impossible to fulfill other family duties, such as dropping off children at childcare. Opportunities created by the skill-building and career coaching provided by Towards Employment are not fully realized if trainees can't get to a job interview, let alone

their job. You cannot pay your fines because you can't drive to work with a suspended license, truly a catch 22.

To address this challenge, Towards Employment applied for and received an innovation grant from a local foundation to directly pay off fees and fines of parents with minor children, and then monitored the impact on the recipients' ability to connect to work and improve their ability to care for their families. 33 people received grant-provided relief from \$36,000 in fees and fines, removing 80 distinct barriers to employment. For example, SJ is a single father with a 7-year-old daughter. Without a valid license, he struggled to get his daughter to school as well as get to work himself. With our support, SJ was able to pay off his fines, retake his driving exam and regain a valid driver's license, with valid insurance. He was able to find a better job and purchase a used car. He and his daughter are now regularly on time for both school and work. If it becomes law, SB37 will short circuit these kinds of obstacles for hundreds of thousands of Ohioans.

SH engaged initially with Towards Employment while still incarcerated. Upon her release in May, she found that her license had been suspended while she was incarcerated due to outstanding court fees and an Ohio Attorney General Collections suspension. With the help of the TE support fund, she was able to pay her court fees, and reinstatement costs. She now has a valid driver's license, and has reached 143 days on her new job, and can have visits with her daughter. She

would not have been able to take this job however, if Towards Employment had not paid down her fines and fees so that she could get her license back. This is obviously not a viable option for most Ohioans who face such debts.

The number of Ohioans who find themselves in the same situation as SJ and SH is staggering. The Cleveland Legal Aid Society reports that from 2016 through 2020 there were over 16 million suspensions. The collective debt in fees and fines that triggered these suspensions reached roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a billion dollars by the end of 2020, with little hope that it will be paid off.

Our participants' experience mirror the state-wide statistics: debt-related suspensions disproportionately impact residents of poor communities and communities of color who simply don't have the means to pay off the debt. The policy creates hardship and makes it more difficult for these Ohioans to access needed jobs to pay the debt and care for their families. The impact on these communities goes far beyond the difficulty of getting a job without a driver's license. In Cleveland's zip code 44104, 53 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and access to grocery stores is restricted. Imagine not having a license when you need groceries, diapers, or medicine. You don't have to imagine the impact on Ohioans living in the 44104 zip code. In that neighborhood, there are as many license suspensions as driving age residents.

Enacting SB37 is a crucial step towards ending the current catch 22 system that ensnares millions of Ohioans. A person's ability to pay a fine or a fee should not determine whether they are free to drive. Suspended licenses prevent them from getting to work, applying for jobs, shopping for groceries, getting to school, and caring for their families.

Thank you for this opportunity to express my support for SB37.