

A Call to Action: DLS Reform

Vermonters Want Changes to the Current System

Hundreds of Vermonters have been participating in “Driver Restoration Day” events to pay what they can in order to get back on the roads safely, legally, and affordably. The demand for the program has been overwhelming. Vermont Legal Aid and many other advocates are asking the legislature to reform the existing system to make it easier for low-income Vermonters to become fully compliant with motor vehicle laws and regulations.

Zia’s Story

Zia Gbau is 33 years old and lives in Colchester, Vermont. He is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He came to Vermont as a refugee after his father sought asylum in 2003. He has had permanent resident status since 2007 and hopes to apply for citizenship someday soon. Zia’s long work history was interrupted suddenly in 2015 when he suffered a serious stroke. As a result, he was temporarily unable to work. After he lost his job, he applied for unemployment benefits, but because he was not immediately able to work as a result of his health condition his claim for benefits was denied. A lack of income made making ends meet very difficult.

After some months of recovery, Zia is able to work again. However, as a result of his loss of income he did not have the money to pay for car repairs and an inspection sticker. He received a ticket for driving with an uninspected vehicle. Because he had no income and no benefits he could not pay it. Shortly after, he received a second ticket for the same reason. Again, unable to pay the ticket languished. After he failed to pay he received notice that his license is suspended and will not be reinstated unless or until he pays the outstanding tickets. Zia hopes that lawmakers will make satisfying a traffic ticket more affordable.

Helana’s Story

Helana Martin is 27 years old and lives in Cambridge, Vermont. When Helana was just 13 she was cited for possession of tobacco. Her parents declined to pay the fine, deciding instead that it would teach Helana individual responsibility. Unfortunately, Helana at 13 did not have the money to pay the fine and it remained unpaid for years.

Later, when she went to apply for her driver’s license she was told she would be unable to do so because of the failure to pay the outstanding tobacco fine. Helana is the mother of three young children and used to be a Reach Up participant, but now works about 30 hours a week. Not having transportation makes it difficult. Coming up with money to pay for fines and suspensions resulting from a decades old fine is not easily done on a tight budget. Not having a driver’s license makes finding and keeping work and meeting other responsibilities incredibly difficult. Helana hopes lawmakers will ensure the young people caught for non-public safety reasons (like possession of tobacco) are not at risk of losing or being denied their drivers’ licenses, and that fines for young people who may not even be working or have income be reduced or eliminated in favor of community service.